

Death and Those Beyond

ed. by Tiziano Tosolini



DEATH AND THOSE BEYOND

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Introduction

S. TARGA, F. TOSOLINI

The thought of death may induce feelings of fear, uneasiness, apprehension, the desire to flee to a safe haven or to attempt a solution to what is generally perceived as the problem of human existence. Since dead people usually do not speak, from time immemorial cultures have attempted to raise the veil of the mystery that shrouds this ominous experience often seen either as a crossing or as an abyss, a threshold or a wall...

The following papers join a long series of attempts and try to highlight different aspects of death and related issues as they present themselves in the five Asian countries where the authors live. It goes without saying that a few pages are not enough to offer a satisfactory overview of such a complex and somewhat thorny issue. Indeed, the papers cannot offer a neatly articulated synoptical analysis of the subject, whose complexity is also compounded by the great variety of religious believes, worldviews and practices of the Asian reality. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of different cultural answers by itself invites the reader to discover,

in the material offered here, farther levels of interpretation. That is, each of the five papers deals with a set of arguments related to death: funerary rituals, care or cult of the dead, familial and social dimensions of death, cosmological and mythological backgrounds, roles and functions of intermediaries in the process. However, beyond a simply phenomenological level other aspects loom of the ways the different cultural environments cope with death. Apparently, the dead person represents a liminal reality which might nourish opposite attitudes towards the living ranging from relative benevolence (Taiwan, Japan, Philippines) to utter enmity (Bangladesh and possibly Indonesia), before acquiring the stage of an ancestor, and even as after becoming an ancestor. Consequently, rituality is generally devised to compensate for the liminality of the deceased and establish a new correct relationship where a kind of positive mutuality is maintained and where overstepping borders between the living and the dead is controlled.

The ritual has a power of its own. The correct performance of the ritual overlaps the realm of ethics and is able to atone for sins—a sign of the key role culture plays in establishing the overall structure of interactions between life and death. In this frame, food emerges as a strategic and necessary device that alone is able to appease the dead and thus reduce tensions by creating harmony between the two worlds. Both the living and the dead need food. This highlights the fact that even the dead are perceived as maintaining a sort of corporeity of which the living should take care of. In turn, social, economic and political conditions impinge on the worldview of communities and peoples as well. They determine or influence the overall cosmological and mythological frameworks according to which the dead are incorporated into the world of ancestors.

To enter into this world entails a process of depersonalization which is more visible in the cultures influenced by the Indian civilization (Bangladesh and Indonesia), more centered on cosmologic views. Whereas, in cultures more influenced by Chinese tradition (Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines) familial and social dimensions of ancestral veneration come to the fore. This in turn creates the problem of the relationship between honoring ancestors and their disappearance as objects of veneration either because they are lost in astral anonymity or because of rebirth—and this in presence of the recognizable remains of their bodies. Surprisingly enough, behind the thick layer of rituals, transcendence and interpersonal relationships fade away and become lost in their automatisms. Impersonal forces such as mythopoeic traditions appear to rule the whole process and establish themselves as unquestionable sources of meaning. In this sense, the shift from family or lineage to city and state rituality appears to obey to the same principle of self-referentiality. With all this, as the asymptotic point where every single person discovers his or her own limits and goes beyond them, death remains a mystery.

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Death and Those Beyond

BANGLADESH*

SERGIO TARGA

Death is one of those human experiences whose metabolization has always required the deployment of considerable resources, cultural and otherwise. To cope with death and the apparent ruptures it produces at all levels of human experience, man has often devised complex religious rituals and related systems of symbolic meanings. It was true for the past; it is true for the present: what has changed along the centuries is the means, the tools through which sense is produced. Thus, ancient civilizations may have relied heavily on religio-magical formulas, modern ones might have banked more on philosophical explanations, and contemporary, so-called, advanced societies would count instead on scientific and technological visions, altogether aiming not at metabolizing death but

* The many italicised words found in the text are an approximate English transliteration of Bengali words. The transliteration has attempted to preserve as far as possible Bengali pronunciation and sound. The Sanskrit spelling is reported only for names of texts or genres of literature.

at eliminating it *tout court*. To eliminate the question of death is itself a way of dealing with it, no matter the success or failure of such an operation.

Indeed religions in general may be conceived, or better, interpreted as particular ways or technologies to deal with death. No wonder, then, if people, their cultures and religions, employ significant resources to make sense of such a common yet extraordinary event: to answer the question of death or to give it meaning was and is the same as to answer the question of life itself.

Bangladesh is part of an ancient land which has housed within its reduced boundaries peoples of different races and cultures. The end result is a fairly homogeneous Bengali nation, the product of millennia of interactions. Today's Bangladeshi people profess in their greatest majority their faith in Islam (88%); a still significant 10% professes instead its allegiance to Hinduism while the remnant is divided between tiny Christian and Buddhist populations. To be mentioned, nearly all the Bangladeshi Buddhists are non-Bengali, belonging instead to the different tribal communities making up more than 1% of the total population of the country. Similarly, roughly half of the Christian minority is composed of tribal people. However, leaving aside the non-Bengali element of Bangladesh, my direct field experience leads me to speculate that more than religious specificity it is Bengali culture which provides Bengalis with the tools to conceptualise and digest death and many other fundamental experiences.¹

Be that as it may, the scope of this paper cannot allow such a vast ambit of enquiry. Nonetheless it wishes to deal with the way Hindus in general and the Rishi in particular conceive of and cope with death. This choice has been determined by the consideration that Hinduism is supposedly the most ancient religio-cultural strata of the whole Indian subcontinent, influencing, one way or the other, every successive cultural transformation thereafter. Secondly, Hinduism is the reference point of the complex religious experience of the Rishi people as far as death is concerned (but not only death). Belonging to a former untouchable caste, traditionally employed in leather work, the Rishi, although taking on in the main the Brahmanical standard of death rituals, manifest a decisively independent way of interpreting the same rituals, differing considerably from the received orthodox system of meanings. Eventually, it will hopefully be shown that the Rishi reinterpretation of death goes in the direction of a very pragmatic, non-philosophical and very little religious conception.

It remains to be seen if this decisively agnostic if not atheistic stance of the Rishi comprehension of what life and death are, is the result of their independent conviction as against the oppressive religious and theistic social system which has marginalised them for centuries or if even this is just the outcome of Rishi submission and oppression: they

1. For instance, Therese Blanchet while studying the notion of ritual pollution as applied to women in Bengali Muslim society has pinpointed three levels of meanings. She speaks of an ancient primitive Tribal level, a Hindu level and eventually a Muslim level. See T. Blanchet, *Meanings and Rituals of Birth in Rural Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1987), 61–2.

have been so excluded from mainstream society that not even religion has been allowed to take roots in the Rishi environment and *Weltanschauung*. The paper will adopt a decidedly phenomenological stance.

THE HINDU CONCEPTUALIZATION AND RITUALIZATION OF DEATH

While Hinduism has never approached the grandeur of mortuary art of other ancient civilizations, it has indeed produced a relatively unified and old interpretation and hence ritualization of death. Thus in the Laws of Manu² we find perhaps one of the most ancient references to Hindu funerary institutions while it is in somewhat later texts, called *puranas*,³ where we find detailed elaborations of Hindu funerary rites.

The relatively unifying ideology behind the “death complex” in Hinduism has to do with a conception of the world and indeed the universe as a system of appearances or illusions. What generally speaking is perceived by individual experience as real is in fact *maya* (illusion). Death in this context becomes the door which opens the way to true reality. Death transcends this world of opposites, by showing the unreality and illusory nature of our individual and social worlds as against the unspeakable and unthinkable eternal and undifferentiated reality of *brahman*. Ritual itself is part and parcel of this world of appearances and as such “it attempts to reconstruct order in the face of irreality and locates the individual within this on-going reality.”⁴

Contradictorily, ritual tries to reiterate the world of appearances, the world which death forcibly compels to recognise as transient and illusory in nature. This apparent contradiction between philosophy and ritual becomes the source for another more complex form of inconsistency, as it were. Hindu funeral rites, as we shall see below, are concentrated in the main towards transforming dead people into ancestors. Somehow they are devised so as to allow the passage from the world of the living to that of the dead. This of course does not seem to go hand in hand with the Hindu philosophical conceptions of *karma*, rebirth and *moksa* (final liberation). In fact, *karmic* law ensures a sort of amoral retribution so that one is always the result of previous lives, the outcome of *dharmic* or non-*dharmic* acts. It is then through progressive spiritual developments operated over a countless number of reincarnations that one, realizing the illusory nature of this world, conceives of the oneness of his personal soul (*atma*) and *brahman*. *Moksa* is this fathomless realization.

2. See ch. III. W. Doniger, B. K. Smith eds., *The Laws of Manu* (London: Penguin Books, 1991). The Laws of Manu or *Manava Dharma Shastra* is variously dated between the II century BC and the II century AD.

3. *Puranas* are a class of texts in the *itihasha* (history) genre. They collect narrations often with a mythological slant. The *puranas* which are often used and followed in funerary rites and conceptualizations are the *Markandeya Purana* (written approximately between 400 AD–800 AD) and especially the *Garuda Purana*, a medieval text.

4. M. Kaushik, “The Symbolic Representation of Death.” In *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (ns), 1976, 10: 267.

Here the contradiction lies between the end and the means to that end. The quasi mechanistic operation of the law of *karma* seems to contradict the fairly effortless way in which one becomes an ancestor through the exact implementation of ritual demands. What is more, the ritual answers to and the philosophical conceptualization of death appear to muddle things up further: how can the conception of rebirth be reconciled with that of a heaven where supposedly ancestors may be located? Students of things Indian have obviously attempted explanations. For Bayly this apparent contradiction refers to a historical accretion. He thinks that the idea of heaven and of ancestors may come out of an ancient tribal cultural stratum which was maintained alongside a more recent and sophisticated philosophical element, that referring to *karma* and reincarnation. The latter would be “the spinal cord of the mature Hindu cosmological system.”⁵

From an altogether different perspective Inden and Nicholas dissolve the apparent contradiction by hierarchizing the terms of the question. Thus they speak of penultimate goals and ultimate goal. Among the former, Inden and Nicholas list the attainment of heaven (*svarga*), rebirth (*punar janma*) in a higher caste or becoming a proper ancestor (*pitri*). Obviously, the ultimate goal would represent final liberation (*mukti* or *moksa*), that is, the end of rebirth and the fusion, as it were, of *atman* into *brahman*.⁶ From a different perspective still, Pocock attempts to explain the apparent eschatological contradiction in Hindu thought by referring to it as to a “necessary” one. The contradiction is necessary because of the time we are in. According to the Hindu theory of time the *Kali yuga* is the last and most degenerate of the four time periods;⁷ it is because of this intrinsic degeneration (moral and material) of present time “that ultimately the good death is a bad one, ordinary death extraordinary and the natural conclusion of life also an accident of the evil times.”⁸

Despite inconsistencies, the Hindu conceptualization of death and its whereabouts remains fairly symphonic and this against great geographical and anthropological differentiations. As Parry says, “the challenge, then, is to make it possible to follow the melody without drowning out the discordant voices.”⁹ And this is what I am going to attempt in what follows.

5. C. A. Bayly, “From Ritual to Ceremony: Death Ritual and Society in Hindu North India since 1600.” In J. Whaley ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London: Europa Publications, 1981), 156.

6. R. B. Inden and R. W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 37.

7. *Kali* is the last and the most degenerate of four *yugas* (eras) comprising *Satya*, *Treta* and *Dwapar*. This is what we may call high Hindu conception of cyclical time. From *Satya* to *Kali* there is a progressive deterioration of *dharma* and of social hierarchies. The *Kali yuga* is often represented as the period in which *dharma* walks on one leg only and where *Sudras* and women lord it over Brahmins and men respectively. Each *yuga* lasts hundreds of thousands of years.

8. D. F. Pocock, “The Point of Death: A Comparative Anthropological Approach.” In *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (NS), 2010, 44: 368.

9. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2.

Hindu Funerary Rites

As already hinted at above, Hindu funerary rites are fairly homogeneous in their main structure. There may certainly be regional and caste specific elements, yet it is amazing to notice how the funeral rites of a South Indian Brahmin are very similar to those of a North Indian former Untouchable or Dalit. The differences, as will be shown later on, reside instead in the conceptualization and the apportioning of symbolic meaning to basically the same rituals.

As death approaches or if already approached, the body of the dying or of the dead is taken out into the open, usually in front of his/her house. He or she is laid on a piece of ground previously purified, usually by employing *durba* grass and other substances, i.e. water, cow dung etc. The corpse is to be oriented according to a North-South direction, that is, feet towards the South and the head to the North, facing the South. According to Hindu belief the South is the direction of death represented by Yama or Jam in Bengali, the Vedic god of death. While being put into position, mourners and particularly the chief one, the son of the deceased, should chant *mantras* of different kinds. This is particularly important when the person is still alive: he or she should depart listening to the name of god, looking at his images etc. At the time of death high caste Hindus may require the presence of a priest, a Brahman to whom they offer gifts and so facilitate the dead person's purification, ascension to heaven, etc. Gifts (*dan*) are also offered to facilitate the dying person's crossing of the terrifying river Vaitrani.¹⁰

Usually within twentyfour hours of death, the corpse is taken to the cremation ground (*smosan*). The timespan in-between death and cremation is the time allowed for relatives and friends to reach the deceased. Before this final journey, the corpse is properly washed and dressed by relatives of the same sex. The body is purified and cleansed of all residual dirt, that is, faecal matter and hair. This last operation is generally carried out by the family barber. Afterwards, the orifices of the corpse should be sealed either with pieces of gold or with leaves of the *tulshi* tree (basil) or even with *ghee* (clarified butter). In practice more often than not nowadays only a leaf of basil is put on the mouth thus symbolically closing all the orifices of the body. A white shroud is then used to cover the deceased.

According to the identity, social status etc. of the deceased and to the circumstances of his/her death¹¹ the corpse is decorated and honoured in particular ways. For instance, if the dead person is a woman who has predeceased her husband, she is usually dressed in red and adorned like a bride. If the deceased is a male, his widow is somehow considered

10. The departed, on his way to the kingdom of Yama, driven forward by Yamdut (the angel of death and its messenger) must cross the Vaitarni (the spelling of this name is variously given) river, "which is described as flowing with pus and blood, has banks of unscalable bone, mud of flesh and gore, entrances congested by hair." Ibid., 200. This description is taken from the Garuda Purana ch. 11,15–17. The full text of the Garuda Purana translated by Ernest Wood and S.V. Subrahmanyam may be found at <<http://www.hinduwebsite.com/sacredscripts/puranas/gp/gp.asp>>.

11. I am referring here to the so called "good death" (*sumaran*) and "bad death" (*okal mrityu*) with which I will deal later on in the paper.

inauspicious and responsible for her husband's death. Before the corpse is carried to the cremation ground, his widow will have to rub away the vermilion on her hair and break the bangles on her wrists, both being the symbols of her married status. Incense sticks, (*agorbati*), sandalwood, flowers etc. are offered to the deceased and put on his/her body.

While relatives arrive and offer their obsequies to the departed other men build the bier with bamboos. This ladder-like kind of stretcher will be used to carry the corpse to the cremation ground. Eventually the procession to the cremation starts after the chief mourners circumambulate the corpse. The funerary procession is usually led by bandsmen, usually from untouchable communities. During the journey to the cremation ground the sons of the deceased should shoulder, even for only a few paces, the bier.

Along the route the chief mourner may offer two or three times *pindas*, particularly in the proximity of road crossings and intersections. These *pindas* are a kind of rice-balls; however they could be prepared also with other sorts of food-stuffs. Once at the cremation ground the pyre is properly arranged. The latter should be prepared with sacred wood; however for economic reasons, it is recommended that at least some *chandan* (sandalwood) be in it. The chief mourner then has a bath and is shaved by the barber. He then sprinkles the pyre with water and *durba* grass. At this point the corpse is lifted from the bier and laid onto the pyre in the North-South direction. Preparing to light the pyre, the chief mourner circumambulates it a number of times, each time touching the mouth (*mukh agni*) of the deceased with the fire being held in his right hand. Brahmans often bring the fire to be used to light the pyre from their domestic hearth. After these circumambulations the chief mourner eventually lights the pyre from the side of the head. During cremation, *ghee* and resins are thrown into the fire to facilitate combustion. Half-way into the cremation, the chief mourner strikes the skull of the corpse with a bamboo stick (*kapala kriya*).

At the end of cremation, the chief mourner holding an earthen pot on his left shoulder, and showing his back to the cremation spot allows the pot to fall on it. Without looking back he may now leave. All the friends and relatives, who participated at the cremation, chief mourner first, are required to have a bath soon afterwards. Before going back to their houses some practices are required of them like the touching of iron utensils, chewing leaves of the *nim* tree (margosa tree) together with red chilli or black pepper and the like. If the cremation takes place in a town it is very probable that it may be arranged and managed by specialised people like the Doms, a former untouchable group whose traditional expertise has to do with the disposal of corpses and management of cremation grounds. If instead the cremation is done in a rural setting it is highly probable that the whole ritual is managed by the relatives of the deceased themselves. After the cremation, the chief mourner is charged with the disposal of the remnants of cremation. He thus collects the fragments of bones (*asthisancay*) and throws them into the Ganges.¹² After

12. Any stream of water during cremation is analogically assimilated to the Ganges. See D. F. Pocock, "The Point of Death: A Comparative Anthropological Approach," op. cit., 367.

cremation, weeping is no longer allowed. It should be mentioned that during the various phases leading up to final cremation, sanskritic *mantras* and the names of gods, particularly those related to the deceased, are chanted.¹³ The funerary rites, however, do not end with cremation. There are in fact a number of post-cremation rites which go under the collective name of *sraddha*. According to caste status, these rites take place after a number of days from cremation. For Brahmans *sraddha* starts after ten days from cremation; for a Ksatriya after twelve days; for a Vaisya after fifteenth days and for a Sudra after thirty days, the rule being that the higher the caste the shorter the mourning period.¹⁴

The mourning period affects relatives and friends of the deceased in a different manner. First of all, death causes full impurity (*purna asauc*) and thus incapacitation to *sapinda* (of the same body i.e. agnatic) relatives only. The latter are those with “the same body” of the deceased, that is, are related to him through one of his seven direct ancestors.¹⁵ Other *asapinda* relatives¹⁶ incur only a partial impurity (*khanda asauc*). This latter modality differs only in length but not in kind. Undoubtedly, the chief mourner and the widow are those who suffer the most incapacitating kind of impurity. For this reason during the time intervening between cremation and *sraddha* they must observe quite strict observances. “The chief mourner is subject to a number of dietary taboos. He is also prescribed to abstain from sex, prayer, filial duty, and must sleep on the ground, not shave, bathe or oil himself.”¹⁷ Moreover, the length of the incapacitating period varies according to other criteria also, among which sex of the deceased, his or her preparation, age, initiation etc. In general the rule seems to be this: the older and the greater the number of life cycle rites (*samskara*) received the longer the period of impurity caused. For Sudras and women of all castes marriage seems to be the discriminant between periods of full or partial impurity for selected kind of relatives. Interestingly, a married female ceases to be a *sapinda* of her father and becomes instead a *sapinda* to her husband and his family. In general females cause shorter impurity periods than males.¹⁸

On the tenth day after cremation the chief mourner bathes and wears the clothes he wore at the time of cremation. In the presence of a priest he performs *pindadan*, the gift

13. This short description of Hindu funerary rites is taken in the main from J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 172–78 and M. Kaushik, “The Symbolic Representation of Death,” op. cit., 276–78.

14. D. P. Mines, “Hindu Periods of Death ‘Impurities.’” In *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (ns), 1989, 23: 105–7.

15. A girl, however, is considered to be less closely related to her paternal family than her brother. This is why her paternal *sapindas* are said to extend only 3 generations rather than seven. See R. W. Nicholas, “*Sraddha*, Impurity and Relations between the Living and the Dead.” In *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (ns), 1981, 15: 372.

16. It is to be noted that in the category *asapinda* are included or may be included also people who are not related at all. These may include friends, disciples, teachers etc. For the discussion on the different degree of impurity I have heavily relied on R. B. Inden and R. W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, op. cit., 102–7.

17. M. Kaushik, “The Symbolic Representation of Death,” op. cit., 278.

18. For the whole question of death impurity, its length and the way it affects different people see also R. W. Nicholas, “*Sraddha*, Impurity and Relations between the Living and the Dead,” op. cit., 367–79.

of *pindas*. These are ten round balls of food made out of the same kind of grain. They are sprinkled with water and then offered to the ancestors by the chief mourner through immersing them in the river. Gifts (*dan*) are eventually offered to the officiating priest. Afterwards, the chief mourner bathes once again, shaves and wears new clothes. This signals his partial reintegration into the social world and the full reintegration of the other mourners. In theory the ten *pindas* should be offered one each day after the cremation. However, nowadays they are offered altogether during *pindadan* after ten days from cremation.¹⁹

The second important part of the *sraddha* is represented by the *sapindikaran* (to make a *sapinda* or of the same body) ritual. The latter should be performed on the first anniversary of the relative's demise; in practice, more often than not, it is performed on the twelfth day after cremation. The ritual consists of the feeding of *kir* (a sweet preparation of milk and rice) to a number of Brahmans²⁰ who, for the occasion, represent the *pret* (the spirit of the father), his three lineal ascendants (the chief mourner's grandfather, the great grandfather and the father of the great grandfather) and the *Vishadevas* (vaguely, some sort of divinised older ancestors). The apex of the ritual is reached when the *pindas* are offered to the ancestors (the *pitri*). The *pinda* reserved to the *pret* is cut into three pieces each of which is then made to merge with the *pindas* of the three ascendant ancestors. In so doing, the deceased is finally incorporated (made into the same body, i.e. *sapindikaran*) into the benevolent and auspicious category of the ancestors. After the accomplishment of *sapindikaran* the chief mourner offers *dan* to the priest. Utensils, dress, bedding etc. belonging to the deceased or used during the mortuary rites are discarded and become either the property of those who served during the rituals i.e. the barber, the Doms etc. or are just immersed in the river or abandoned nearby. A communal meal symbolizing the resumption of ordinary life and the full reintegration of the chief mourner within his social world follows.

Hindu Conceptualization of Death

The Hindu funerary rites which I have sketchily depicted above attempt to bridge the anomic gap opened in the social world by the disrupting irruption of death. This is accomplished by conjoining the social-profane world with the cosmic-sacred world through the creation of symbolic meanings embodied in the rituals. The threat to social order and meaning brought about by death is thus neutralised, as it were, with reference to a higher, all-encompassing cosmic order.

Hindu funerary rites centre on cremation which is the keystone of the symbolic construction mentioned above. It is through death intended as a cosmogonic event that its socially disrupting potential is not only defused but also transformed into "an act of

19. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 195.

20. Parry speaks of five Brahmans (see *ibid.*, 204) while Kaushik speaks of three Brahmans only (see M. Kaushik, "The Symbolic Representation of Death," op. cit., 279).

cosmic regeneration,”²¹ something fostering life. Parry develops the argument with reference to Varanasi or Kashi and to the cremations taking place there. However, I do believe that analogically what he says of cremation in the holy city of Varanasi may be applied elsewhere and to cremation in general. Thus, cremation is a cosmogonic event because it enacts the original process through which the cosmos came into being.

In Hindu conceptualization, Varanasi is the place where destruction (*pralay*) and recreation of the universe take place. Fire is the means of both destruction and regeneration: while it is Shiva's austerities (*tapasya*) which cause the destruction of the cosmos at the end of the four *yugas*, it is Vishnu's asceticism (*tapasya*) which regenerates it. Because of the homology existing between the body and the cosmos,²² in Varanasi destruction and regeneration happen continually in a sort of eternal present. The burning pyres become the necessary prelude to the regeneration of life. What is more, the analogy between the fire of cosmic destruction and the fire of cremation is further reinforced by another element. *Pralay* is traditionally conceived as consisting of two stages: conflagration and deluge. While the former is assimilated to the fire of cremation, the latter is paralleled by the immersion of ashes after cremation.

The same cosmogonic interpretation of death, and specifically, of cremation may be reached if we consider cremation as such as a sacrifice.²³ The starting point of this analysis is the word *antyeshti* which is used for cremation and whose literal meaning is “last sacrifice.”²⁴ The manuals of mortuary practice explicitly identify this “last sacrifice” with the “fire sacrifice.” Both cremation and fire sacrifice are then shown as causing rebirth.²⁵

It is this conceptualization of death as a cosmogonic sacrifice which affords us a powerful interpretive key able to shed light on the symbolic meaning of the death rituals described above. Now, for a sacrifice in order to accomplish its regenerative aims “not only must the offering itself—the sacrificer's own person—be worthy, but his renunciation of it must be complete, for the essence of sacrifice is the sacrificer's *tyag*, his act of renunciation or abandonment.”²⁶ Indeed, that which is sacrificed must be worthy and fit is a *conditio sine qua non* of any sacrifice. In our instance, it is obvious that the fitness of the

21. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 13.

22. Veena Das rightly extends the homology of the body also to the social world. See V. Das, *Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual* (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperback, 2000), 126.

23. The Rig Veda in the famous hymn *Purusha Sukta* refers to the universe as the resultant of the sacrifice of Maha Purusha (the great primeval or cosmic man). Obviously, cremation as *tapasya* and cremation as sacrifice refer to two different accounts of creation. It is however quite evident that the symbolic meaning coming out of the two stories is exactly the same.

24. Interestingly, the word *antyeshti*, although not really used in normal parlance, has been assimilated by the Bengali Catholic ritual for funerals, where it has come to mean funeral in general, even though, generally speaking, “funeral” nearly always refers to burial. See The Bengali Liturgical Service Center, *Sankhipta Sanskar Paddhati Sangraha*. (Kolkata: Kristopujon Prakasani, 1983), 195–227.

25. For the question of cremation as sacrifice see J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 30–2. See also J. P. Parry, “Death and Cosmogony in Kashi.” In *Contribution to Indian Sociology* (ns), 1981, 15: 337–65.

26. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 158.

deceased is brought out right from the moment of his/her death. Thus the body must first be placed in the open, laid on a clear and sanctified spot. It is then washed, shaved, even anointed and eventually dressed in new clothes. In so doing the body more than being purified, it seems, is being separated, made sacred. The various circumambulations of the deceased before his/her last journey to the cremation ground and of the funeral pyre at the cremation ground later on accomplish exactly that. Furthermore, the body is made the object of obeisance, veneration and offerings. Often garlanded and decorated with flowers, the deceased is readied to be offered to the gods through *agni* (the fire god). I do not think it an exaggeration to say that the body is nearly divinised.²⁷ Yet, the worthiness of a body to function as a sacrificial object relies also and particularly on what we have already called above, a good death as opposed to a bad one, respectively, *sumaran* and *okal mrityu*.

In theory “a ‘good death’ occurs after a full and complete life having lived to see the marriages of one’s son’s sons, when one is still in full command of one’s faculties, and in the presence of all one’s close family.”²⁸ *Okal mrityu*, (literally, a death occurred at the wrong time), instead comes to signify unfulfilment, imprecation, sin etc. In this category death by accidents, by sudden circumstances in general, by certain illnesses (i.e. leprosy), by violence etc. are all considered *okal mrityu*.

The victims of *okal mrityu*, as may already be envisaged, should not be cremated but immersed because unworthy or unfit to become sacrificial objects.²⁹ It appears then that what discriminates between a good and a bad death is the idea that the latter does not safeguard the principle of “voluntary relinquishment of one’s own body” (*tyag*). This is generally helped and induced by the recitation of the name of god, by showing one of its images, by listening to scriptural passages. All this should help the departing person to concentrate on god and extinguish his/her desire of and attachment to this world of *maya*. Indeed, the border between good and bad death is not always at all clear to discern. However, since either of the two kinds of death is bound to reproduce itself in the same family, it is often on the fruits of one’s death that that death is eventually considered good or bad.³⁰

The regeneration of life at individual, social and cosmic levels which the funerary rites seem to accomplish, allows us to infer with Nicholas that “on both practical and theoretical grounds, birth is given first place in the Hindu order of things; the other bodily rites (*samskaras*) of the life cycle, including even the transitional rites for the departed..., are

27. In Bengali and perhaps in other North Indian languages, during the funeral rites the mourners play with the words *sab* (i.e. corpse) and *Sib* (i.e. the god Shiva). For the divinization of the body see V. Das, *Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual*, op. cit., 123.

28. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 158.

29. Yet it must be considered that those who are immersed in Varanasi need to go through a “mock” cremation in which a doll representing them is cremated in their stead. In these cases the imperfection of the true body is replaced by the perfection of a doll. See J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 186–87.

30. See *ibid.*, 166.

modelled after birth.”³¹ To fully appreciate such a statement it is perhaps necessary to refer briefly to the Hindu conception of the human body. Accordingly, the latter is constituted by a gross body (*sthula sarir*) which is combined to a subtle one (*sukhma sarir*). While the former is made of gross unrefined matter, the latter is made of subtle substance; this comprises the mind, the five sense organs of knowledge (*jnanendriya*, i.e. eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin), the five organs of action (*karmendriya* i.e. voice, hands, feet, anus and genitals) and the conscious self (*atman*).³² Apparently, the distinction between these two bodies does not correspond to the Western and Christian conception of body and spirit/soul.

At death it is the gross body which dies and at cremation it is that which is being burnt. The subtle body surviving the ordeal of the funeral pyre is what is called the *pret* or disembodied departed.³³ This *pret* wanders around in a dangerous (for the living) state. The task of the chief mourner in particular is that of appeasing it by feeding it. This is what is done through the *pindadan* ceremony. The ten days of feeding are then put in analogy with the ten lunar months of gestation. Literally, this offering of food stuff becomes the building of some sort of gross body for the departed. As in a true parturition, the *pret* before its new birth must cross the Vaitarni river, traditionally filled with blood and residual gross matter. Eventually, at the apex of *sraddha* rituals (i.e. *sapindikaran*), the *pret* is reborn as an ancestor (*pitri*). Birth is undoubtedly the template on which death rituals are modelled. “In the *sraddhas*, the son gives birth to a new body for his father, nourishes it and fosters it as one does the body of an infant, until it is out of danger and prepared to join the society of the benevolent ancestors.”³⁴

If death and particularly cremation are to be read as cosmogonic sacrifice and rebirth, this appears to be pretty much in contradiction with the general understanding according to which death and the corpse are impure. The question is that similarly to birth, death implies impurity and pollution not because of bodily processes and substances involved (i.e. blood, faeces etc.) but because both events imply separation.³⁵ Impurity becomes thus the effect of the disjunction occurring at the level of both the social and cosmic worlds. The fact is that this disjunction and ensuing impurity set in not at the moment of physiological death but when the body is cremated and the *pret* is eventually released. *In passing*, this comes to add a farther element to what has already been said before on what is meant by the controlled and willed release of life in a “good death:” physiological death with its unpredictable character is here tamed and socially controlled, and thus deprived

31. R. W. Nicholas, “*Sraddha*, Impurity and Relations between the Living and the Dead,” op. cit., 376.

32. This description relies heavily on R. B. Inden and R. W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, op. cit., 62–3.

33. It will be noted that here I refrain from calling the *pret* spirit or disembodied spirit. In fact the *pret* is a *sarira* (a body), the *sukhma sarira* mentioned above.

34. R. W. Nicholas, “*Sraddha*, Impurity and Relations between the Living and the Dead,” op. cit., 378.

35. Both birth and death imply bodily separation and transformation of bodily relationships. See among others R. B. Inden and R. W. Nicholas, *Kinship in Bengali Culture*, op. cit., 102.

of its disrupting quality. Likewise at birth, separation occurs not at the event of parturition proper but only when the umbilical cord is severed.³⁶

The category of “separation” may also be paradigmatic to further understand the impurity and incapacitation that affect, in different degrees, the mourners. The starting point is the consideration that “degrees of bodily connectedness determine the degree of bodily pollution, and hence the duration of mourning...”³⁷ The simplicity of this statement hides however the reality that birth into a particular group is not a sufficient condition or, indeed, a necessary one, to guarantee, as it were, the necessary degree of bodily connection engendering pollution. The classical example is the death of an infant which as a matter of course maintains the strongest possible degree of bodily connection with his/her parents, yet the latter are only marginally touched by the pollution caused by his/her death. The bodily connections referred to here may be explained with reference to the transactional model of Mines’ Substantive Sociology.³⁸

Without entering the complexity of such an elaboration, suffice it to say that the universe and the social world are constituted by the continuous transactional activities of the three *gunas* (strands): *sattva* (essentiality and goodness), *rajas* (passion, energy, external activity) and *tamas* (darkness, inertia and disorder). For our purpose it is important to remark that at the level of humans the three *gunas* not only constitute humans’ bio-genetic hereditary material but also their moral imprint and code of behaviour. What is more, their bio-genetic cum moral material quality turns out to be modifiable both by conduct and substantive exchanges, particularly of food. This may reveal the meaning of *dan* (gift) and of feasting of Brahmans and/or people in general during the different phases of Hindu mortuary rites, particularly during *sraddha*. This ritual giving of the bereaved family, apart from accruing religious merit (*punya*), in a way corresponds to the giving out of the substance of the dead person (i.e. his bio-genetic cum moral material) in atonement.

The chief mourner, who identifies with the deceased, as will be shown below, while giving gifts and feasting the Brahmans actually functions as the dead person himself, thus continuing through the ritual the last transactional activity which may bring about his rebirth. The fact then that requests of gifts tend to be exorbitant subscribes to the conception that *dan* in this context is dangerous for its recipient.³⁹ Without entering into further details, it is obvious that such anthropology also provides the basis for the rank-

36. See *ibid.*, 103. Other authors say that the *pret* or vital breath leaves the body at *kapala kriya*, that is, at the moment when the chief mourner hits the charred skull of the deceased with a bamboo thus allowing the *pret* to leave its gross body. See J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 180–81.

37. *Ibid.*, 218.

38. D. P. Mines, “Hindu Periods of Death ‘Impurities,’” op. cit., 103–30.

39. With *dan* the Brahman priest receives the deceased person’s sins (*tamasik* substances) which remains with him afterwards. “*Dan*... is held to contain and transmit the sins of the donor to the priestly recipient, who is likened to a ‘sewer’ or ‘drain’ through which the moral filth of his patrons is passed.” J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 123.

ing of the four *varnas* or castes. Thus in the Brahman caste the preponderant substantive category is *sattva* while in the Sudra one *tamas* is instead the dominant *guna*. Hence, the bodily connectedness mentioned above, actually refers to bodily connections fashioned and refashioned through a lifetime of exchanges. These exchanges are however meticulously regulated so that the higher the caste the less its dependence on lower castes and hence transactionally they give out more than they receive (i.e. they are less or not at all conditioned by external connectedness). Conversely, the lower the caste the greater their dependence on higher castes since they are transactionally bound on the receiving end only.

Nicholas, using a different language, explicates how “closeness of kinship” (our “degrees of bodily connectedness”) is constituted and determined. He thus lists closeness of common ancestors, difference of sex, stage of development, quality of action and house as both the modifiers and constituents of one’s closeness to a deceased person.⁴⁰ It is worth noting how all these modifiers affect, that is, build bodily relationships and not spiritual ones. In short “bodily connectedness is not immutably given at birth, but can be diminished, enhanced or even created by one’s actions.”⁴¹ The transactional network which a life of every human being is can be seen as the space where a shared body is built and rehearsed, a body which scriptures, as we already know, refer to as *sapinda*. The separation which death engenders, causes pollution and incapacitation to all those who share the body of the deceased, its substance. Partial or full impurity is explained by the degree of bodily connection with that dead substance. In a funeral, it has already been seen, the chief mourner, who should theoretically be the eldest son of the deceased, is the most affected by death pollution. In his case he is so closely connected with the deceased to be identified with it *tout court*. This is indeed in the logic of sacrifice itself where “the victim stands in for the person of the sacrificer who is reborn through the death of a surrogate.”⁴²

Indeed, the ten days in which the chief mourner is to live according to a very strict dietary and behavioural regime cut him out from ordinary life, and assimilate him to the liminal category of the *pret*. The *sraddha* rituals then, recomposing the bodily fracture caused by death,⁴³ by reconstituting a *sarir* for the *pret* (through the *pindadan*) eventually reincorporate the *pret* into the ancestral body of the *pitris* through the *sapindikaran*. In so doing the chief mourner also is reborn once again to social life. Thus, that a dead infant causes less pollution to his parents or to his *sapindas* should not puzzle the reader. That dead infant in fact has not had the time to partake and build the transactional network of

40. See R. W. Nicholas, “*Sraddha*, Impurity and Relations between the Living and the Dead,” op. cit., 371–73.

41. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 218. This principle seems to contradict a certain view of castes as immutable. Indeed, such a principle appears to contradict also the law of *karma* and retribution.

42. Ibid., 184.

43. The body which is being rebuilt and “cured” of the fracture of death is a sort of “astral” body which connects ancestors, the living and those who will descend from the living.

substantive elements, by giving out and particularly taking in (*sattvik*, *rajasik* or *tamasik*) particles from outside interactions and bodies.

A final important consideration: caste superiority means also progressive independence from *tamasik* elements which are supposed to be preponderant among low castes. This somehow explains why the time of mourning and hence of impurity is longer for low caste people and shorter for higher ones.⁴⁴ Having said this it remains true that Hindu funeral rites as much as any other sort of rite for that matter, do maintain and foster the hierarchical principles on which Hindu society is built. The time of mourning different for the different castes is just one such example. But for our argument this can be farther seen in the way, for instance, the expression of grief is structured. Undoubtedly, women are here the main actors. "Women weep. They refuse to bow to the inevitable separation of death. Like the *pret*-ghost itself, they try to hang on to the corpse."⁴⁵ On the other hand, the male mourners, and particularly the chief mourner, are commanded restraint all along. This gendered manifestation of grief comes to reinforce one simple truth: women are inferior and men are their superior.

Women, no matter their caste belonging, are generally assimilated to the Sudra in terms of ranking and purity. Their wailing, which is after all required, comes to confirm their *tamasik* and thus inferior, Sudra-like constitution. In the same vein it may be mentioned that usually women should not go to the cremation ground, and even when they do, they should go by a different route or separated from the *sabjatra* (funeral procession). If present at the time of cremation, they are forbidden to cry: wailing is seen as a distraction and bondage for the departed who might be kept behind by the weeping of his/her womenfolk. Conversely, men and particularly, the chief mourner are instead enjoined to maximum restraint. This on the one hand should facilitate the departure of the deceased; on the other, it shows the detachment towards this ephemeral world (*maya*), which actually reinforces and practically demonstrates male superiority and supremacy over women.

If, as Bayly says, "ritual can be seen as a dramatic embodiment of caste,"⁴⁶ and, I should add, of other socially accepted principles, it may also become the space where caste and gender are contested, negotiated and differently reproduced. The remainder of the paper will verify such an eventuality taking up the funerary rituals and their meanings of a formerly untouchable caste, the Rishi.⁴⁷

44. For a detailed explanation of the different times of mourning on the basis of caste, see D. P. Mines, "Hindu Periods of Death 'Impurities,'" op. cit., 124–27.

45. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 155.

46. C. A. Bayly, "From Ritual to Ceremony: Death Ritual and Society in Hindu North India since 1600," op. cit., 157.

47. Whenever I talk of the Rishi, I exclusively refer to the Rishi located in the South West of Bangladesh. I am well aware of the sometimes remarkable differences with the Rishi of other parts of Bangladesh itself or of West Bengal.

THE RISHI'S CONCEPTUALIZATION AND RITUALIZATION OF DEATH

The Rishi's conceptualization and ritualization of death must be seen within the wider context of Dalit⁴⁸ history and struggle. While it is generally true that "their beliefs regarding Soul, Salvation and Rebirth follow the common traditions of the Hindu masses,"⁴⁹ it is also true that "there is a great distance between Brahmins and Untouchables... and their religious worlds are clearly separated."⁵⁰ These two apparently contradicting statements reflect well the ambiguous situation in which historically the Dalits have found themselves. On the one hand, Dalits as such do not have a place within orthodox Hindu tradition. They are in a very specific sense "out caste," that is, they do not belong to any of the four castes as fixed in *dharmasastras*. This of course determines a series of religious disabilities among which the most striking and at the same time highly symbolic is the prohibition to enter temples.⁵¹

Their permanent polluted status in fact seriously incapacitates Dalits themselves from approaching the gods while their mere presence at a place of worship may incapacitate other "caste Hindus" from doing the same.⁵² On the other hand, however, Dalits are required to accomplish a series of functions which, low as they may be deemed, are nevertheless religious in nature. Thus, Dalits may be polluted and polluting, they might not belong fully to the Hindu fold yet they are necessary to carry out all those rituals connected with death and the removal of pollution in general. Without their services "caste Hindus" themselves would be hampered in the accomplishment of their religious duties.

This, what we may call liminal, position of Dalits *vis à vis* Hindu religious orthodoxy explains on the one hand that Dalits are traditionally Hindus and on the other hand that their Hinduism has been somehow modified. Preclusion from entering temples has excluded in fact Dalits from the full worship of standard caste Hindus' gods and goddesses. Not surprisingly, most Dalit communities maintain particular veneration and have developed particular religious allegiance towards regional and local deities. What is more, the fact that no Brahman worthy of the name would officiate at a religious ceremony of Dalit people, explains also the theological divergence or, often, complete ignorance that Dalits maintain about major Hindu religious tenets. *In passim*, it may be noted that this liminality of Dalits with regard to Hindu society in general in the past has had

48. The word *Dalit* comes from Sanskrit and does not exist in Bengali. Used first in the nineteenth century to indicate untouchable castes, and their struggle it has gained currency, particularly in India, from the '70s. Literally the word means, broken, grounded to pieces and maintains a strong political connotation.

49. S. Paswan, P. Jaideva, *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2002), vol. 1: 57.

50. R. Deliege, *The Untouchables of India* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999), 94.

51. This statement refers to the theory of untouchability and is not a statement on the present situation. This prohibition to enter places of cult has been legally abolished everywhere and mostly overcome, yet there still persist in places a number of restrictions which are no longer legal but more socio-psychological in nature.

52. See *ibid.*, 91.

political consequences of a certain magnitude. During the national liberation movement of India the Dalit question emerged as a central one in the political struggle between Bhim Rao Baba Saheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. While in the 1930s Baba Saheb Ambedkar fought for a separate electorate for Untouchables on the basis of their diversity from caste Hindus, Gandhi put forward instead an inclusivist political agenda apt to reinsert Harijans into the Hindu fold.⁵³

The Rishi of Bangladesh are not that different from what has been said of Dalits in general. If asked about their religious affiliation the Rishi will refer unhesitatingly to the *Sanatan Dharma* (eternal religion, i.e. Hinduism), and this despite the fact that “for the Rishi, as for other Untouchables, it was not permitted to have any knowledge of *dharma*, to read the sacred texts, to perform religious ceremonies, to be served by Brahmans, or, in a word, to get closer to the divine...”⁵⁴ Nevertheless, one of the differences with the neighbouring Indian Dalits is that the Rishi of Bangladesh live in a state which is no longer Hindu dominated but definitely and unquestionably Muslim. This, of course, has brought about important changes in the way the Rishi conceptualise their identity and in the way others see them. If it is generally true that “the pattern for the last two thousand years at least has been for Brahmanic rituals to come to serve as a reference point for the lower castes and tribal peoples,”⁵⁵ that same pattern has had a strong acceleration for the Rishi of Bangladesh in the last sixty years or so, particularly because of the new political situation the Rishi found themselves in the new Bangladeshi polity.

The fact that in Bangladesh the Hindu element has been reduced to a social minority has caused this same community to overcome, willingly or not, ideological and social barriers which historically have divided the Hindus. On the one hand, for the sake of political expediency former Untouchable groups have often been incorporated in the Hindu fold both sociologically and religiously. Traditionally excluded from caste Hindus’ worship, the Rishi in many places are today allowed to participate fully or, more often, partly in festivals and social functions.⁵⁶ This has of course increased the sense of belonging of the Rishi to the Hindu fold. On the other hand, the diminished influence or better, the end of the Hindu hold on the new polity of Bangladesh has determined, to my understanding, a curious phenomenon.

53. The word *Harijan* (sons of God, i.e. Vishnu) itself which Gandhi used to refer to Untouchables, reflects his Hindu inclusivist perspective. It may be remembered that in the “two nations theory” which ended up with the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, Congress Hindu elites were wary of a possible alliance between Untouchables and Muslims. For the political question related to Dalits in the 1930s and on see, among others, O. Mendelson & M. Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty, and the State in Modern India* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 77–117.

54. C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 75.

55. C. A. Bayly, “From Ritual to Ceremony: Death Ritual and Society in Hindu North India since 1600,” op. cit., 157. The pattern being talked about here is better known as “process of sanskritization.”

56. C. Zene, *The Rishi of Bangladesh*, op. cit., 78. As Zene clearly puts it, the religious and social integration of the Rishi in the wider Hindu community of Bangladesh (not everywhere, though) responds to the political pragmatism of a community which finds itself overwhelmed by an ocean of Islam.

While in a Hindu set up, as was the reality of British India previously or of India today, the Rishi or Dalits in general were somehow “forced” as it were, to follow rules which determined their religious, socio-economic and political marginalization, in the socio-political arrangements of the new Bangladeshi polity, the Rishi felt free to reinterpret their new-found religious freedom, this time supported by formal democratic laws and, particularly, by a de-hinduised society. This has caused interesting changes (i.e. sanskritization) to take place. For our argument, it must be noticed how the Rishi, for instance, used to bury their dead, usually, along river banks, under half a metre of soil.⁵⁷ It is very alive in the memory of many informants, Rishi and non-Rishi alike, that up until thirty years ago it was relatively common to see corpses floating along rivers. In fact, the rivers during high tide used to wash them out from their shallow graves.

While informants refer to Rishi indigence and particularly to their lack of land as the reasons behind their change from burial to cremation at present, I suspect that other reasons, more religious and socio-ideological in nature, might have prompted the burial custom in the past. In fact, poverty and landlessness continue to be, even today, two of the main characteristics of Rishi life, yet the Rishi, in their great majority,⁵⁸ have changed the practice of burial by using the standard Hindu custom of cremation. As a matter of speculation, I see in this change a possible Rishi religious statement about their worthiness as human beings. Indeed, if what we said above about the sacrificial nature of Hindu cremation holds true, it is quite unthinkable to consider a Rishi corpse as a fit sacrificial offering, something capable of engendering a cosmogonic event able to renew the universe.⁵⁹

Further research is indeed needed but I would speculate that a Rishi corpse might have been considered, according to orthodox Hindu ideology, as an unfit offering to be associated with all the unfit ones like those originating, for instance, in death caused by leprosy. Such deaths, as we already know, are unworthy of cremation.⁶⁰ I wonder if such a change from burial to cremation would have happened so quickly, had Bangladesh been socio-politically and culturally a Hindu dominated country. But let us now start out where we had left off.

57. The “burial tradition” of the Rishi has been confirmed to me by old Rishi people of all the Rishi hamlets I visited to gather data for the present paper.

58. Of the Rishi hamlets I visited, only in Komlapur on the way to Sriula (Asasuni, Satkhira) the Rishi have a small cemetery where they bury their dead. However, this particular hamlet (*para*) has a very long history of association with the Borodol Catholic Mission. Despite their having remained Hindu, I suspect that their long-standing relationship with the Mission in Borodol might have influenced the retention of the custom of burial.

59. Yet Parry reports that all who die in Kashi (i.e. Varanasi) will be liberated be they Brahmans or Chandals (see J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 27); and that “the disposal of the dead in Banaras has as much significance for untouchables as for other Hindus” (ibid., 67). This seemingly equalitarian attitude in treatment might be determined by the especially holy location where these cremations take place, Varanasi or Kashi.

60. See ibid., 163.

Rishi Funerary Rites

We may well start this section with the by now expected restatement that today there are not indeed great differences between the funerary rites of caste Hindus and those of Rishi people.⁶¹ Or if there are, they are not more remarkable than the differences found between the funerary rites of one Rishi *para* as compared to those of another. Thus before death, if it is understood that the sick person is going to die shortly, his/her relatives start singing “*Hare Krishna Hare Rama*.” When eventually death occurs, the deceased is taken out of the house and laid in the usual North-South position (*uttorsitan*), in the space in front of the house (*uthan*). The corpse is then washed and cleaned properly using soap and hot water by people of the same sex. It must be said however, that this arrangement as a matter of fact does not prevent a certain degree of confusion so that often everybody can see everything.

It is noteworthy that the detail of the hot water to be used to bathe the corpse had been remarked upon by all informants of all the Rishi hamlets visited. The meaning of this detail unfortunately escapes my understanding.⁶² After bathing, the corpse is dressed and perfumed with “rose water” a sort of cheap and common perfume used in funerals. If the deceased is a married woman, she is made to wear *sindur* (vermilion) in the parting of her hair and her feet are painted with *alta* (red colour), in what clearly appears to be a bridal ornamentation.⁶³ If the deceased is instead a married man, the widow’s *sakas* (sort of conch shell made bracelets worn by married Hindu women) are broken by her elder son. The same elder son, who is also the chief mourner, will rub away from the hair of his mother the vermilion (another symbol of marriage worn by Hindu women). He will do so by using a toe of his dead father’s foot.

The corpse is then garlanded with a wreath of flowers. In the middle of the feet of the deceased, a hole is excavated in the ground and a *Tulshi gach* (plant of basil) is planted. Only the Rishi of Godaipur remarked that in the place of the *Tulshi* a banana or a *Kochu gach* (an esculent edible root) may be planted instead.

This tree must be watered each day until the *sraddha* ceremonies are performed.⁶⁴ The planting of a *Tulshi* (generally sacred to Hindu tradition in general and particularly to Vaishnavites), apparently a novelty as compared to standard Hindu funerary rites, does not however seem to be a Rishi ritual innovation. In fact the same ritual is found also in

61. What I will be writing from this point forward is the result of recorded interviews in several Rishi hamlets. These include Kearnati Rishi Para, Khajra Rishi Para, Godaipur Rishi Para, Asasuni Rishi Para and Komlapur Rishi Para all in the Satkhira district and Bemberia Rishi Para in the Khulna district. I acknowledge a debt of gratitude to all the people and particularly to the women of these hamlets.

62. A partial explanation is attempted below, though. See footnote no. 66.

63. Interestingly, the woman informant from Asasuni while describing this decoration eventually concludes her description saying: “As the Hindus do” indirectly acknowledging the gap between Hindus and the Rishi.

64. A Rishi friend from the village of Sabdia (Jessore district), quite far from the Rishi area I surveyed for this paper, informed me that in her village the *Tulshi* is planted not between the feet of the deceased but close to his/her head. Kanchon Rani Das, personal communication, Sabdia 7–5–2011.

the funerary practices of local Hindus.⁶⁵ Be that as it may, the feet of the deceased are then washed again and anointed with a soft paste of turmeric (*hollud*) and oil. The water used to do so is then poured on the *tulshi* tree.

Obeisances are offered by the mourners by touching with the same hand first the feet of the deceased and one's own head soon after (*pronam*). *Agorbati* (perfumed incense sticks) are then lighted. Drums are used and "*Hare Krishna Hare Rama*" is chanted again and again. As soon as the relatives and friends of the deceased have arrived the *sabjatra* to the cremation ground starts out. This is led by the drummers, themselves Rishi, usually from the same village of the deceased.

Along the way the procession stops 3 times and puffed rice and small denomination coins are thrown about. During the stops the corpse is lowered to the ground and "*Bolo Hari, Hari Bol*" (say *Hari* i.e. Vishnu, *Hari* only) chanted several times. Once at the cremation ground, often an unmarked spot on the bank of a river or of a pool of water, the corpse is lowered to the ground and farther summarily washed by throwing at it seven *kolshi* (traditional Bengali water containers) of river water which, the informant relates, is cold.⁶⁶

The informant from Bemberia village specified that this water is the water of the Ganges. Afterwards, the corpse is laid on the funeral pyre and the chief mourner circumambulates it several times while repeating the "*Bolo Hari, Hari Bol*" *mantra*. At this point my informants are quite at odds with each other. Some say that three *pindas* (rice balls) must be offered at the *smasan* (cremation ground) before cremation. Some other says that *pinda* are offered only after cremation until the time of *sraddha*. Noticeably, the difference of opinion is between men and women. The latter, coming from different places, obviously refer to practices in their villages of provenience. The chief mourner, usually the elder son, then eventually lights the pyre from the side of the head. Before lighting the wood, fire is lowered on the corpse's face saying "*agni nao*" (receive the fire).⁶⁷

Apparently the Rishi do not actually appear to be strict in observing the rules. While they are aware that a *sapinda* relative should light the funeral pyre, in his absence they accept any kind of relative, even a *kutumbi* (non-blood relative) which does not certainly satisfy the requirements of the *sapinda* category.⁶⁸

While the fire starts instead of *ghee* mixed with honey as prescribed, Rishi use, less poetically, kerosene to increment and sustain it. After the fire has extinguished itself, the chief mourner holding a *kolshi* full of river water on his shoulder and without watching

65. I am referring here to the Paundra Kshatrya or popularly Pod, a low caste of cultivators quite numerous in the South-West of Bangladesh, particularly in the South-Western upazilas of the Satkhira district.

66. Indeed there may be a specular relationship between the "hot water" of the first bathing and the "cold water" of this last bathing. Kaushik says that "the opposition between hot and cold as used in Hindu systems of thought, brings to the fore a classificatory system which associates life with heat and death with cold." M. Kaushik, "The Symbolic Representation of Death," op. cit., 283.

67. Chaina Rani Das, personal communication, Toaddanga 1-6-2011.

68. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 184.

the place where the cremation took place, pours water on the ashes and lets the *kolshi* fall and smash on the ground. The remaining ashes are then washed away in the river. Interestingly, what the Rishi call the *navi* (umbilici)⁶⁹ is collected and buried close by.

It appears that the Rishi I have interviewed do not hold in high consideration the *kapala kriya*, that is, the hitting of the skull of the deceased with a bamboo stick half way into cremation.⁷⁰ Only the villages of Keargati and Khajra referred to it explicitly. For a cremation between seven and eight *mon* (each *mon* corresponds to circa 40 kilograms) of wood are necessary. The expenditure involved is so substantial⁷¹ that one of my informants of Bemberia village disparagingly said: “*Gorib manush, morleo shanti nei!*”⁷²

Before returning back to their houses, the mourners and all who were present at the cremation ground are required to bathe. A Rishi friend from Maltia (Khulna district) said that a bath is required also after having just visited a deceased person in his/her own place.⁷³ This purificatory bath is carried out at the place of cremation itself or at a suitable water reservoir nearby. The stretcher, the shroud or anything else used for the funeral, either before or after cremation, are left at the place of cremation or thrown into the river.⁷⁴

After the *sabdaho* (cremation) and the purificatory bath the mourners are to touch a fire prepared for the occasion and have to chew leaves of the *nim gach* (margosa tree or *Azadirachta Indica*) along with grains of rice. During the unfolding of the whole ritual, it appears that men and women do not absolve to gender specific roles and functions. Unlike caste Hindus, Rishi mourners, male and female, are quite free to manifest their grief. They may just start crying anywhere and anytime, particularly during cremation. The ritual itself does not require any specialist, a priest or barber as the case may be. The Rishi perform by themselves all the steps of the ritual, from the moment of death to the burying of the *navi*. Not surprisingly, in some places such as Bemberia the Rishi are not allowed to use the same cremation ground used by caste Hindus.

The way in which Rishi people, often women, have described to me the funerary ritual appears to be quite ideal. In reality, a Rishi funeral is pretty confused and confusing with people crying and shouting at each other, the males busy with deciding the ritual procedure to follow, and which is not always clear before it has actually been implemented.

69. On my enquiring about this *navi* which, according to my Rishi informants, does not burn and must be buried on the river bank, they referred confusedly to birth and the umbilical cord without being able to elaborate farther.

70. One of my informants in the village of Keargati, Chobita Rani Das, was so disgusted by the practice of *kapala kriya* that she wanted me to promise her that when she dies she will be buried in the Christian cemetery nearby.

71. Each *mon* of wood may cost around 100 taka average.

72. Bengali: “For a poor person not even in death there is peace!”

73. Subhodra Rani Das, personal communication, Maltia 7–5–2011.

74. I do believe that the general indigence of the Rishi may induce them to use cheap things particularly in view of the fact that they will be discarded soon after their use.

Perhaps astonishingly, the corpse is made the object of veneration only during the ritual and not before, or so it appeared to me.⁷⁵

The *sraddha* rituals appear to be the most important phase of the Rishi funeral. Even here the different Rishi villages produced different data as to the exact moment at which it has to be performed. In Keargati and Komlapur the *sraddha* is supposed to take place after eleven days from cremation. In Khajra and Godaipur the *sraddha* is said to take place after thirteen days from cremation. In Asasuni instead my informant spoke of eleven-twelve days after cremation.

Whatever the number of days separating cremation from the *sraddha*, the chief mourner and other *sapinda* relatives are required to follow a particular code of conduct all along. This includes sleeping on a mat, possibly in the open; wearing a simple white loin cloth (*dhuti*); avoiding hot and spicy food, eating instead bland, unsalted, vegetarian and cold food. During this time of mourning, the chief mourner will not cut or comb his hair or cut his nails.

Generally speaking, he will have to follow a self-induced marginalization from ordinary social life. Every day he will have to water the *tulshi* tree planted at the time of death, give it *batosha*⁷⁶ and even milk. Many Rishi together with these libations would offer a *pinda*⁷⁷ also for each of the days before the *sraddha*. Others would offer ten-twelve *pindas* altogether at the time of the *sraddha*. This plant may become, during the time before the *sraddha*, the focus of particular veneration and prayer. So in the evening people in general and not only the mourners, may gather around it, light *agorbat*i or incense sticks, play the drum, sing *kirton* songs and offer *puja* (obeisance to the gods).⁷⁸

After the mourning period, the *sraddha* or as many Rishi referred to it, the *sot kaj* (the true, authentic work) takes place. This time all the Rishi interviewed admit to the necessity of a *Thakur* or *Baun* (priest) to carry out the *sraddha* rituals. This is interesting because one of the ways by means of which in the past the different Rishi groups were ranked higher or lower on the hierarchical scale was the presence or absence among them of a *Baun*.⁷⁹ Accordingly, I would have expected to find some Rishi groups not requiring the services of a *Baun*. Apparently, sanskritization has made obsolete those old divisions.

The *Baun* or *Thakur* present for the Rishi *sraddha* comes either from the same Rishi

75. At a funeral where I was present in the village of Cancai (Kaligonj, Satkhira), while people were busy arranging for her funeral, the deceased old lady was left alone, covered with a rag, lying on a shaky wooden bed, in one of the corners of the ground in front of the house.

76. A kind of ball made of sugar used by Hindus at the time of *puja*.

77. Not all the Rishi would identify the daily offer of food with the word *pinda*.

78. It must be remembered that there are sensitive differences from one place to another. The description of the mourning time related here comes basically from data collected in Godaipur Rishi *para*.

79. See the distinction among the Rishi of *Nirbauni*, *Bauni*, *Nijbauni* and *Porbauni* in L. Paggi, *I Muci di Khulna e Satkhira* (Khulna: Unpublished Manuscript, 1991), 12–4. The highest ranking Rishi was the *Porbauni*, that is, the group of Rishi who availed the religious services of a priest coming from outside their group. *Por* in Bengali means “other.”

group or, more often, from different castes, usually low ones though. Caste Brahmins⁸⁰ do not usually come.⁸¹ For instance, in Keargati and in Toaddanga the *Baun* is a Nomosudra;⁸² in Maltia he is a Rishi and in Asasuni he is a Pod. Usually just a day before the actual *sraddha*, the Rishi perform another ritual called *ghat sraddha*.⁸³ On this day, the chief mourner and his wife go if possible to the cremation ground and once there they have their hair (the man only) and nails cut either by a Rishi person or by the barber (*paramanik* caste). Sometimes this operation is carried out at home and then both hair and nails are brought to the *ghat* and thrown into the water. The whole ritual is concluded by an immersion (only for the male mourners) in the water of the river. Obviously if the operation is performed by a *paramanik* specialist this enhances quite a lot the prestige and social status of that family and the Rishi group they belong to.

After this,⁸⁴ relatives cook rice in a new *malsha* (a piece of earthenware used as pan). The rice so prepared is then left on a banana leaf and offered to the deceased. Either at the *ghat* or once back home, three *pindas* (a combination of raw rice, banana and milk) are offered on the river bank. The *Baun* present says some *mantras* and then eventually all leave the place. Apparently, this ritual may correspond to the *sapindikaran* ceremony⁸⁵ seen above. The day after actually has no particular religious significance,⁸⁶ the religious rituals having been performed at the *ghat sraddha* the day before. This day, also called *adyo sraddha* (initial, original, first *sraddha*)⁸⁷ is devolved to a great feast in which rela-

80. The word “*Baun*” appears to be a corrupt form of the standard word “*Brahman*.” See *ibid.*, 12.

81. In Khajra, however, I am told that a caste Brahmin performs the *sraddha* rituals of the Rishi. See Krishno Das, Personal Communication, Khajra 2–6–2011. In Borodol, a Brahmin from Kaligonj comes incognito, and pretends, so I was told, not to know that those for whom he provides religious services are Rishi. See Sankar Das, Personal Communication, Borodol 22–5–2011. I speculate that the small number of Hindus around and the raging poverty of many of these priests just overcome centuries of ideological barriers. It remains also to verify the true identities of these Brahmins: in today’s Bangladesh the surnames are no longer true to their caste origins.

82. Nomosudra are a caste of “clean” untouchable agriculturists who managed to raise their social status, at least in Bangladesh.

83. The word “*ghat*” here signifies the cremation ground. But it may point also to any water streams or reservoir. The two *sraddhas* may be observed on the same day to lessen the financial strain on the family involved.

84. A friend in Borodol village informed me of another ritual he saw performed. After the immersion, the chief mourner, prepares a sort of small funeral pyre on which he then burns some hair that he had previously taken and preserved from the deceased’s head. After the burning, the *Baun* present at the *ghat* hands him over a *kolshi* of river water with which he washes away the remnants of combustion. Sankar Das, personal communication, Borodol 22–5–2011. It appears that the whole rite represents a re-enactment of cremation itself.

85. None of the Rishi people I have interviewed appear to know what the word *sapindikaran* is or means though.

86. Again, it must be considered that there are noticeable variations from one place to another. In Bemberia, for instance, it is in the morning of the day in which the feast will occur that seven *pindas* are offered to the ancestors by the chief mourner and thrown into the river. See Rekha Gain, personal communication, Mosjitkur 2–6–2011.

87. The name *adyo* refers to the first of a number of *sraddhas* which are supposed to take place on death anniversaries. See below.

tives, friends, village representatives and all those who took part at the funeral are treated with meat and fish, according to the economic possibilities of the family. Before the feast all the things, cloths and the *tulshi gach*⁸⁸ itself are thrown away, usually in the river because of their inherent pollution. The *Baun* will sprinkle “Ganges water”⁸⁹ on the house of the deceased and thus purify it. The chief mourner will ask forgiveness to the deceased and to the people and invite them to eat together.

During the feast a place will be reserved for the ancestors who will be offered the same food given to the invitees. The *Baun* will not be usually present at the feast. He will leave after the *ghat sraddha* and after having sprinkled water on the deceased’s house. Before the *Baun* starts the *sapindikaran* ceremony, he is given *dan* (gifts). The latter consists of several different things according to the economic possibility of the chief mourner. Thus, husked and unhusked rice, *supari* (betel nut), bananas, coconuts, *panchamisti* (five kinds of sweets), an umbrella, a blanket, a towel, a *sari* or *lungi*, money etc. are given. On top of that even *dakshina* (service fee) must be provided. I was told that no *Baun* would accept to perform *sraddha* rituals for less than 500 taka.

Despite the fact that all my informants were quite uncertain about the benefits of performing *sraddha*, they were absolutely clear and convinced of its necessity. My objections related to the consistent expenditure incurred by normally very poor Rishi people were met with fatalistic resignation. According to them, even in the case of a really poor person, he should at least offer a *sraddha* inviting one single person only, even begging if necessary. For the Rishi to feed the Brahmans does not seem to hold any particular meaning.⁹⁰ And indeed, apart from receiving *dan*, they do not appear to share Rishi commensality, either ritual or social.

The communal feast might actually be repeated on the death anniversary for the next three consecutive years. In general we may say that compared perhaps to caste Hindu funerals, Rishi ones look like being more disorganised and confused. In the past, I was told, Rishi *sraddha* often ended with heavy use of alcoholic drinks and by smoking *ganja*.⁹¹ Now it is no longer the case.⁹²

88. As far as the *Tulshi* tree is concerned, not all the Rishi villages follow the same procedure. Many nowadays, perhaps following the tradition of nearby caste Hindus, preserve the tree which becomes a sort of living temple of the deceased, a place of obeisance and prayer. This is done, for instance, in Bemberia. In Khajra, I was instead informed that the *Tulshi* tree at the time of the *sraddha* is uprooted and replanted anew on the river bank where the *ghat sraddha* took place. In Asasuni again the Rishi throw the *Tulshi* tree away in the river as soon as the *sraddha* is over. In this last instance it is clear that the tree is thought to be loaded with death pollution.

89. Often people referred to this water as to *shantir jol*, that is, the water of peace.

90. M. Kaushik, “The Symbolic Representation of Death,” op. cit., 276.

91. J. Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal* (London: Her Majesty’s Printer, Harrison and Sons, 1883), 163. See also J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 155.

92. It may curiously be noted that some among the Borodol Christians who come from a Rishi background, although strongly discouraged, are still in the habit of heavy drinking after the conclusion of a funeral.

Rishi Conceptualization of Death

In the same way in which Kaushik reported⁹³ that there is no real difference between the Brahmins' funerary rites and those of the Doms⁹⁴ in Varanasi, we may say that there is no real difference in the funerary rituals of the Rishi and in that of caste Hindus in general. Obviously differences are there, yet they refer to marginal elements, such as the use of Sanskrit and vernacular Bengali for caste Hindus and Rishi respectively. As I have already hinted at, differences are often found between the Hindus and the Rishi of one region as compared to the same practices of Rishi and Hindus of a different region. Thus it appears that these rituals are not caste specific⁹⁵ since they are all the result of the adoption and transformation of the same Brahmanic ritual.⁹⁶

Differences indeed are not so much in the ritual but in the meanings the Rishi give to it. As a general statement it may be said that the Rishi are very flexible, to say the least, about the actual development and actuation of the ritual. This accounts for the many descriptions of the same ritual I had to listen to in the different villages. Eventually, it turned out to be nearly impossible, for instance, to produce a sequence of actions which may be agreed upon and accepted by all the people I have interviewed. In particular, the ritual and its meanings become further complicated and muddled in the description of the religious ceremonies within the *sraddha*. Here I have found the greatest number of variations. Significantly, these are also the sections of the funerary ritual which are the exclusive prerogative of the *Baun*.

Apparently, the Rishi understanding of death and of its accompanying rituals is very pragmatic and down to earth, completely free from the philosophical speculation of Hindu ideology. The Rishi do not maintain any notion of death and particularly of cremation as a cosmogonic sacrifice whatsoever. Rishi experience death as a fracture in their familial and social life. The cosmos and its order do not enter their purview or perspective. Death is a danger for a Rishi family, both financially and religiously. The danger is financial because the person who died may be that family's bread winner. His death may usher his family into poverty. It may also be a danger even because for a poor family a death and related circumstances, including the funeral, are quite expensive. A death then is religiously dangerous because the dead, as will be shown below, represents an enemy who must be properly appeased.

The ritual we have attempted to describe above, tries to accomplish exactly that. Indeed, the Rishi do not appear to be worried about or concerned in the least with heaven

93. M. Kaushik, "The Symbolic Representation of Death," op. cit., 267.

94. The *Dom* are a former untouchable caste to be found all over north India and also in Bangladesh. *Doms* are traditionally the specialists of the cremation ground.

95. The reader may recollect that in the footnote no. 46 above, quoting Bayly, I stated that ritual is "a dramatic embodiment of caste..." That does not contradict what is being said here. The ritual is an embodiment of caste when ordained and regulated by Brahmanic law givers. The way in which then this ritual is received and practised is totally a different question.

96. M. Kaushik, "The Symbolic Representation of Death," op. cit., 267.

and hell, reincarnation, *moksha* or the ancestors but simply and only with the *pret* or with what they more easily name as *bhut* (ghost).

What is more, the Rishi not only are unconcerned with what we may call eschatology, they also seem uninterested in knowing about it. If asked about heaven and hell and the like most Rishi would answer, as I happened to hear a hundred times over, that they do not know, adding “*amra, ki kore janbo?*”⁹⁷ Often again the same question would be answered by introducing it with an “*ami sunechi je...*”⁹⁸ Both kinds of answers similarly revealing the detachment of the Rishi from the question itself. It is simply not their concern!

Thus only one young woman of Keargati, Puspo Rani Das, heard that heaven is a garden full of flowers, and that one is sure to go there if, during cremation, rings of smoke are seen to go high into the sky. When the same woman was asked if in heaven Rishi and Brahmans stay in the same place, she, after a few seconds of silence, replied rhetorically: “*Muci ar Baun ki eksathe thakte pare?*”⁹⁹

Clearly projecting into heaven what her experience was on earth, Puspo spontaneously built her knowledge of heavenly things. When I then asked Puspo how she might keep together the “going to heaven” and the Hindu tenet of reincarnation and rebirth, which she actually vaguely knew about, she and all the onlookers dropped into deep silence, breaking it only to say: “*amra ki bolte pari?*”¹⁰⁰

Indeed, as a matter of fact, I have realised that the Rishi are generally unaware of the meanings behind most of the rites (*dharma kriyas*) they perform. While all of my informants were adamant in saying that the corpse must be positioned according to the North-South direction, nobody was able to tell me anything about the reasons behind it. At most, like the informant in Godaipur, people would say that Hindus do things this way and this was sufficient reason for the Rishi to repeat the gesture.

But Rishi pragmatism comes out clearly when they are asked about cremation and pollution. For instance, when I asked Krishno Das of Khajra the reasons behind the smashing of the skull (*kapala kriya*) half way into cremation, he quite naturally answered that this is done simply to facilitate the incineration of the head, a notoriously difficult thing to accomplish.¹⁰¹ Everywhere when I asked about the why of the choice of cremation as against burial, as they used to do in the past, most of those interviewed referred to the lack of burial ground. They did not provide any religious explanation or differentiation. Even here they referred to the fact that it is traditional for Hindus to be burned

97. Bengali: “How can we know?”. Deliege met with a similar attitude while carrying out his research: “The lower castes usually claim that they have no idea of what happens after death; my persistent questions on the subject were invariably answered by, ‘How could we know?’” R. Deliege, *The Untouchables of India*, op. cit., 72.

98. Bengali: “I heard that...”

99. Bengali: “Can Rishi and Brahmans stay together?”

100. Bengali: “How can we say?”

101. Krishno Das, personal communication, Khajra 2–6–2011.

as it is traditional for Christians to be buried.¹⁰² Current practices become self-justifying and self-referential. The following case study may perhaps clearly bring out the neutral attitude of the Rishi towards cremation.

Around the middle of January 2011 a certain Binod Das, aged approximately 60, dies after a short struggle with cancer. Binod is of Keargati village. After cremation and the *sraddha* rituals, I happen to pass by and interview the widow, Sukhi Rani Das. It was February the 4th. The widow quite clearly was feeling somehow guilty because her husband Binod had expressed the desire not to be burned but to be buried. It happened, however, that his *jamai* (son in law)¹⁰³ came and wanted instead to cremate the body of his father in law. And so it was done. Sukhi, the widow, said to me while crying that the body would not burn and the fire had to be dosed several times with kerosene. This was interpreted by the widow and by all the villagers as the result of having contradicted the will of the deceased.

In Bemberia, my principal informant, Gita Rani Das, while stating that there was no theological difference between burning and burying, eventually added the following interesting remarks. Referring to Hindu society as her authenticating agency, she said that burying a corpse it rots little by little. This apparently causes the soul (*atma*) to suffer more and to delay its liberation from the dead body. If instead a body is cremated, the body is destroyed immediately, causing simultaneously less suffering to the soul and its speedy journey to heaven.

Gita, nevertheless, while relating this “Hindu” explanation eventually again stated that in practice there was no difference between cremation and burial. To stress the point she was making, Gita finally added that it was better before when the Rishi used to bury their dead on the river banks. Indeed it may be said that the Rishi are perhaps not totally unaware of the Hindu system of symbolic meanings, yet eventually, like Gita, they revert back to their own practical understanding of how things are. The fact then that the interviewed people are all basically illiterate does not affect the way the Rishi perceive things. Subhodra Rani Das, for instance, a first year BA student from Maltia says just the same things: there is no difference between cremation and burial and what is more, if she had to choose between the two modalities, she would certainly opt for the latter.¹⁰⁴

A similar practical and pragmatic attitude is shown by the Rishi also towards death pollution (*asauc*). Thus, it is adamantly clear that pollution for the Rishi has got to do with death and the corpse. They lack the subtleties of Hindu philosophical speculation so that to them pollution sets in at the time of physiological death and not at any ritually constructed moment afterwards. Indeed, while all my informants agree in pointing at

102. All the interviewed and their villages have a long history of interaction with Christian villages. So often their knowledge of Christian practices and beliefs are brought to bear on their present understanding of things religious.

103. As has already been remarked above, in Hindu ideology, it is a *sapinda* relative and not a *kutumbi* who should be in charge of the funerary rituals. Even here the Rishi manifest a good degree of flexibility.

104. Subhodra Rani Das, personal communication, Maltia 7–5–2011.

the polluting state brought about by death and consequently to the necessity of somehow removing it, it seems to me that the Rishi are however not very fussy about it. The clear impression is that while talking about pollution they are rehearsing a role learned somewhere else but which does not really concern them very much.¹⁰⁵

What instead appears to be central to Rishi concern are the risks and dangers connected with the *pret/bhut* (disembodied spirit/ghost). We may even say that the system of funerary rites is devised as a technology to appease the dead person's potential to harm the living. Strange as it may seem, all the Rishi I interviewed agreed in saying that the one who has died becomes an enemy (*sottru*), and as such he/she must be dealt with. Normal understanding is that those who die become jealous of the living. Rishi, like other Hindus, claim that these disembodied spirits do not maintain any sort of relationship with their former and living selves. In fact they do not recognise or remember who they were and thus can harm particularly their former relatives towards whom they all the same feel attracted.

It is said that *prets'* principal characteristics are greed and anger which can be neutralised by feeding them food. On my enquiring about the exact nature of these *bhuts* people in Kargati ambiguously and confusedly said that they are not living things. Yet they must be fed. And this is what they actually do by watering and giving food to the *tulshi* tree for the days before the *sraddha*. And this is also the meaning of the *pindas* they offer in different moments during the mourning period. Not to be living things for the Rishi, I speculate, might mean not to be human, not to have a body. And in fact to offer them food might mean indeed to offer them the possibility to get a new body and be able to go on, to re-get a life (*sot goti*). Yet my informants are definitely confused about *prets*. At the same time that they tell me of their liminal and thus dangerous status, they also say that they actually do not exist and that they are just "*moner bho*."¹⁰⁶ This, of course, does not satisfy another Rishi woman who retorts that if *bhuts* do not exist then why do the *kabirajs* (traditional village healers) cast them out? Rishi pragmatic attitude takes over again!

It may be unclear wherefrom this danger comes or what actually this *bhut* related danger is, nevertheless it is unquestionable that the *sraddha* is the right cure for it. I would argue that more than ending the period of impurity, the *sraddha*, in Rishi consciousness, is important because it eventually neutralises the danger represented by disembodied spirits, of which perhaps death pollution is a dimension. Most of the Rishi people I heard were quite unclear about the why and the how the *sraddha* had such potential. However,

105. This comment, however, must be taken together with the following consideration: the more sanitised a Rishi village is, the more the importance that village will give to pollution and to all other Hindu tenets, for that matter. Sometimes, I have noticed, the mere closeness to caste Hindu hamlets causes those Rishi to assume more standardised Hindu practises and ideology. The Rishi of Bemberia, for instance, who are surrounded by caste Hindus and no Muslims at all, appear to be more "hinduised," as it were, than other Rishi groups.

106. Bengali: "Fear of the mind" (litt.).

those same people were clear about what would happen if a *sraddha* was not properly performed. Thus, an informant in Kearnagati said that without *sraddha*, the dead person would not go to heaven. In Khajra, I was told that with the *sraddha* the dead person goes far away, without the *sraddha* he/she will remain dangerously close to the living.¹⁰⁷ In Godaipur it was said that without *sraddha* “*soc theke gelo*,”¹⁰⁸ while in Bemberia they say that without *sraddha* “*dosh katbe na*,”¹⁰⁹ and the dead person will suffer. With the *sraddha*, instead, the deceased will get peace. In Komlapur, finally the failure to perform *sraddha* was linked to an undefined idea of *amangal* (evil).

Interestingly, talking to Subhodra, the student from Maltia, she stressed the social aspect of the *sraddha*, giving less or no religious meaning at all to it. For her, not to perform the *sraddha* is basically to incur the excommunication of the village. At most the *sraddha* is just a social duty. Besides, she also felt it to be injurious and hypocritical for sons to spend lavishly on a *sraddha* when they refused to support or even mistreated their parents when they were alive. However, the question perhaps is faced from a wrong perspective. Actually the *sraddha* ceremonies are not performed for the good of dead people as such, but for the benefit of the living ones,¹¹⁰ as I have tried to show above.

All considered, the funerary rites of the Rishi do share with those of the Hindus the following concern: “The complete obliteration of the physical remains of the deceased is accompanied by an almost equally radical effacement of his personal characteristics and biography.”¹¹¹ The *sraddha*, with its focus on the ritual and social feedings, is in fact the last and most effective device in order to erase the individual memory of the deceased. Subhodra, on a more speculative level, explains: “After death nothing of what was the living individual remains, because the soul gets reborn in a new body. In the new body the soul does not recognise her older and previous relationships (wife, son, etc.).”¹¹²

While the Rishi do acknowledge some form of vaguely defined ancestors’ reality, their mortuary rites are focused on settling the score with the *pret*: this is what takes precedence over the *pitri*. It is as if the Rishi, without negating the *pitri* reality, just do not care about it, being more concerned with life in this world. Yet, contradictorily, the Rishi unlike their Hindu brethren, at the time of *sraddha* do call their dead by name manifesting parental relationships. In Godaipur a dead person was ritually called *babaji* (a respectful way to address a father) and *guru* (spiritual master). Despite Hindu ideology, these names might

107. Bengali: “*Sot goti hobe*” (he/she will get good speed); “*goti hobe na*” (he/she will get no speed).

108. Bengali: “Impurity remains.”

109. Bengali: “Guilt will not go away.” Here guilt might be interpreted as *amangal*, i.e. evil, or as the guilt incurred by burning the body of the deceased. In this sense cremation is sacrificial violence. See J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 182. The former interpretation however appears to be more probable.

110. Most of my informants spoke also of *punny* (*punya*, i.e. religious merit) as one of the benefits of performing *sraddha*.

111. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 210.

112. Subhodra Rani Das, personal communication, Maltia 7–5–2011. However, she also adds that she knows about reincarnation because she had read about it and that her people (i.e. the Rishi) know nothing of it.

indicate some sort of residual individuality.¹¹³ Ultimately, even this might indeed be less of a contradiction and more of a hint to a different Rishi perspective altogether.

Recollecting what is already said above, the Rishi funerary rites and their conceptualization do not seem to serve the reconstruction of a cosmic, and, even less, universal moral order threatened by the disruption provoked by death. Indeed, the perspective seems altogether different. It may also be true for the Rishi what Randeria wrote about the Dalits in Gujarat: “Mortuary rituals among Dalits do not reaffirm an abstract idea of a moral order but instead generate verbal and visual images of locally situated communities of kin, affines and neighbours at various levels within the caste.”¹¹⁴ To maintain thus a deceased person’s residual individuality might serve the amalgamation of his/her family within its wider system of kinship and, on the other hand, its ranking in Rishi internal power structure and hierarchy. In short, funerary rites, particularly the *sraddha* rituals, may help the Rishi to reconstitute or restate socio-political and strategic interests at the local level. In this light, the necessity to have representatives of one’s village¹¹⁵ and of other nearby ones at a *sraddha* ceremony may be revealing: “The mere hosting of a mortuary feast for a deceased parent is no virtue, but a *sine qua non* of belonging to the community.”¹¹⁶

The *sraddha* may thus just be the re-enactment of a power structure which a death gives the chance to rehearse once again. The following, for instance, may farther clear up the point being made. On June 1, a family of a Rishi village which a couple of years ago turned Christian, Chandkhali, organised a *sraddha* celebration in memory of the father who died some twelve years ago. The whole village was invited to the feast. On top of that, five representatives from each of a number of both Hindu and Christian Rishi villages were invited.¹¹⁷ In so doing, that Chandkhali family highly enhanced its social prestige not only in its own village but in the enlarged Rishi community of the area. In this perspective the harsh views of Subhodra and perhaps of the new educated Rishi generations, might shed a different light on these social dimensions of *sraddha*. Their critique might not primarily be directed towards its religious dimension but to the power structure and organization that a *sraddha* is bound to reinforce and perpetuate.

113. J. P. Parry, *Death in Banaras*, op. cit., 183. Here it is clearly expressed that “no relationship should be acknowledged with the ghost.”

114. S. Randeria, “‘We Are in the World in Order to Exchange:’ Mortuary Exchange and Memorialization Feasts among Dalits in Gujarat (Westers India).” In A. Bigger, R. Krajnc, A. Mertens, M. Schupbach & H. W. Wessler eds., *Release from Life-Release in Life: Indian Perspectives on Individual Liberation* (Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2010), 178.

115. Significantly, in Kearnati, Puspo said that at a *sraddha* “*dosjonke dakte hobe*,” (ten must be called). This idiomatic Bengali expression manifests the compulsion to invite the representatives of a village (the ten) at a *sraddha* ceremony.

116. S. Randeria, “‘We Are in the World in Order to Exchange:’ Mortuary Exchange and Memorialization Feasts among Dalits in Gujarat (Westers India),” op. cit., 193.

117. See David Rozario, personal communication, Borodol 4–6–2011. According to him, that day around five hundred people were fed.

New Rishi generations, in fact, find themselves quite at odds with a Rishi leadership which they often feel is old fashioned and, particularly, corrupted.

In all this the big missing factor is God himself. Rishi may speak of *bhut*, *pret*, *pitri*, heaven and hell, yet they seem to forget about God. The latter is mentioned here and there but without really participating in human happenings. Apparently, Rishi conceptualization of death turns out to be mechanistic and fatalistic with no role left for a personal God.

So, do this Rishi ritualization and understanding of death constitute a possible space for Rishi self-affirmation as against the marginalization, even religious, of centuries? Unfortunately this does not look like being the case, even though the new Rishi generations may take the lead for such an affirmation by negating that rituality which eventually continues to reproduce the *status quo*.

APPENDIX

THE DEATH OF MINA RANI DAS (22): A CASE OF *OKAL MRITYU*?¹¹⁸

My dear elder sister (*didi*) just before relinquishing her body was given water to drink and the name “*Hari*” (a name of god Vishnu) was chanted into her ear. After having given her the name of *Hari*, she left this world. It was very early Saturday morning at 00:36. Two leaves of the *tulshi* tree (basil) were positioned on her two eyes. The day after, in the morning we all decorated the bamboo stretcher with coloured paper, and banana trees. Afterwards, my sister was taken outside in the *uthan* (space in front of the house), under the *tulshi* tree, being oriented in the North-South direction, having her head facing the South, to the North close to the *tulshi* tree.

Then turmeric and oil were used to anoint her body. Sandal wood paste (*chondon*) was smeared on her forehead, and on her feet *alta* (red colour) was applied. Then by using white paper, an imprint of her feet was taken.¹¹⁹ Using a very perfumed soap, she was then washed. Eventually she was made to wear a white dress (*tan kapor* i.e. shroud). *Sindur* (vermilion) and sandal wood paste were smeared on her forehead. She was then garlanded with a wreath of flowers. Thus decorated, she was then taken with the bamboo stretcher to her own *bari* (paternal house, house where one is born, here, the burial ground). The place in our house where my sister stayed was burned with fire.¹²⁰

While she was taken to her own *bari*, someone took some wood (*patkati*, the sticks from the jute plant), someone an earthen *kolshi*, someone sprinkled liquefied cow dung along the way in front of the funerary procession, and someone else from behind using a worn out broom cleared the way after the procession has passed,¹²¹ another one took an earthen container, a handful of *till* (sesame) and some small denomination coins.

While taking my sister to the cremation ground we stopped three times to take rest. Once there, using the earthen *kolshi* brought with us, my sister was further washed throwing on her seven *kolshi* of water. Afterwards, my sister was decorated again like a beautiful new bride using *kacha holud* (raw turmeric) on her body, *kajol* (kind of eye liner) on her eyes, *sindur* and *chondon* on her forehead. Afterwards, fire was put on her mouth (*mukh agni*). She was then lowered into a grave one metre and a half deep, appo-

118. The following is my translation of the written report in Bengali that Kanchon Rani Das (19), Mina's younger sister, wrote for me. Mina died on 13-11-2010 after delivering a healthy baby girl, Sonali (28-10-2010). She suffered, quite unexpectedly, of kidney failure which eventually brought her to death.

119. I was explained that this was done to remember the deceased. Kanchon also added that this imprint will be used for *puja* (Hindu religious obeisance) later on.

120. I was explained by Kanchon that this was done to force her sister's soul to leave the place.

121. These actions have got to do with the impurity that a corpse spreads around and that cow dung somehow has the power to neutralise.

sitely prepared for her. The white cloth covering her was then removed¹²² and the tomb was filled with soil.

Everybody had a bath, and by lighting a fire and using leaves of *nim* (margosa tree) we all became pure again. My family remained impure for eleven days. After these eleven days, *sraddha* took place. For three days after death, we had to offer my sister food and water on a banana leaf. After thirteen days we were supposed to feast the whole village. However, because of financial difficulties we could not do that, thus incurring in social excommunication.

COMMENTS

Apart from some new elements not mentioned before (i.e. giving water to drink, the sprinkling of liquefied cow dung, the use of a broom to clear up the way after the passage of the *sabjatra* etc.), this case study further reveals the pragmatic attitude of the Rishi. Kanchon, for instance, speaks of the three times which the *sabjatra* had to stop before reaching the burial ground, something done, according to her, “to take rest.”¹²³ That Mina’s death had been an *okal mrityu* (untimely death, bad death) was recognised by both Mina’s relatives and villagers. The fact that she was not cremated reveals exactly that.

However apart from this formal acknowledgment of Hindu practice, Kanchon was unable to say the reason why an *okal mrityu* person should not be cremated. Under my insistent questioning, Kanchon eventually blotted out the following: “My sister being so young did not have time enough to commit sins, so it was not necessary for her to be cremated.” Notably, what in Hindu ideology was unworthy of cremation, in Kanchon’s understanding becomes just the opposite: cremation is seen by her as a way to atone sins. Mina did not commit sins, hence it was not necessary for her to go through it.

Other elements of the funeral were not different from what we already know about Rishi funerary rites in general. The failure to perform *sraddha* brought about the excommunication of Mina’s family. This points to the still great social importance given to the *sraddha*. All considered, Mina’s relatives neither gave any importance to cremation as sacrifice nor to her death as an *okal mrityu*. Nothing in their behaviour reveals awareness about Hindu symbolic meanings; Mina’s death was a disruption at both familial and social levels. It certainly represented nothing at a cosmic or universal level.

122. Kanchon told me that underneath the shroud Mina was completely naked. Her explanation for this was that in so doing Mina was going back to her being born. A new born baby comes into the world (*bhumisto hoe* i.e. deposited on earth, soil) without clothes on.

123. In Hindu thought these stops should be made in proximity of crossroads to appease lingering peripheral spirits. In each stop a gift of food should be made to appease them. These spirits may in fact interfere with the rituals being carried out.

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INDONESIA

MATTEO REBECCHI

One cannot speak of Indonesian culture as though it were a single reality. A very large number of ethnic groups still manage to live in relative isolation on one or several of the seventeen thousand plus islands that make up the sprawling archipelago of Indonesia, maintaining their traditional customs and speaking their own language. One must choose, therefore, a single culture that is shared by a large number of the inhabitants and that, in one way or another, influences a significant number of other cultures.

In Indonesia the choice is not difficult. Javanese culture holds such a preeminent position. First of all, 136 million people—60% of the population—live on Java. And secondly, for many centuries, and still today, the influence of Javanese culture extends to almost every part of the country.

In the decades after Independence (1945) this influence became even more pervasive. For example the ideological foundation of the new nation, the Pancasila, is strongly rooted in the

Javanese understanding of the basic values that guarantee cohesion in a society; and the model of the ideal Indonesian that undergirds the national education system is basically that of the ideal Javanese.¹

Javanese, as military personnel, government functionaries, or simple migrants are present almost everywhere in the archipelago. Due to the higher level of education in Java, residents from Java often assume leadership roles in the non-Javanese communities where they have settled permanently, or work temporarily. Wherever they live they proudly preserve their cultural identity. Lastly Jakarta, the capital, where political power and 80% of the nation's wealth are concentrated, is located in West Java.

Therefore, while we cannot simply identify Indonesia with Java, neither can we speak about Indonesia without making frequent reference to Java and Javanese culture. In this paper my approach to the understanding of death in Indonesian culture will be a study of the concept of death and beyond in Javanese culture, with the understanding that, though they are different, most of the other cultures in Indonesia have been somehow touched in one way or another by the way the Javanese deal with this reality.

Over the centuries many religious and spiritual traditions—Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity—have established themselves in Java, meeting and interacting with one another. Nevertheless the matrix of Javanese identity has remained so pervasive and transformative that it appears to have been able to assimilate elements, values, and beliefs from each of these foreign traditions while still maintaining its own culture and beliefs, embracing and integrating those traditions in such a way as to make them acceptable to Javanese sensitivities. A process of acculturation “à la Java” has taken place with the result that no matter which religion they adhere to there still exists a common ground shared by most Javanese on many issues.

When I began to search for the literature on the Javanese approach to death I quickly found out how little there was. This surprised me at first because I have long believed death to be a very important aspect of the Javanese vision of life. I came to realize that the dearth of literature on the subject was not because the issue was unimportant. On the contrary it is seen as so significant and serious that talking about it is taboo. Many Javanese are willing to talk about death only after apologizing for bringing up the subject and have asked permission to do so from their ancestors. Mr. Antonius Sutatno, a Javanese Catholic well versed in what is known as the “*kejawen*” tradition of Javanese culture kindly allowed me to interview him and supplied me with much additional information.

THE JAVANESE SPIRITUAL WORLD

The Hindu religion came to Java in the fifth and sixth centuries. Buddhism arrived shortly afterwards. The first great kingdom on the archipelago was the *Sriwijaya* (seventh

1. N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java, Ideology in Indonesia* (Yogyakarta, Kanisius, 2005), 17.

century), which extended its dominion from southern Sumatra eastwards into Java. It became an important international center for the diffusion of Buddhism at the time. The Hindu-Buddhist culture has left some important monuments which are still visible today, for example the Hindu temples on the Dieng plateau (seventh century); the Borobudur complex—the largest Buddhist monument in the world representing the symbolic pilgrimage of man beginning from lower worldly experiences and climbing towards the perfection of Nirvana, built during the Sumatran *Syailendra* dynasty; and the Hindu Prambanan complex consisting of 224 small temples and dedicated to Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu built in the ninth century during the *Mataram* dynasty which brought Central Java once again under the sway of Hinduism.

The Hindu-Buddhist era reached its peak during the *Majapahit* dynasty (1293–1528). During the reign of king Hayam Wuruk, this kingdom is believed to have extended its control beyond the boundaries of the Indonesian archipelago across the Strait of Malacca into parts of present day Malaysia, due mainly to the epic victories of general Gajah Mada.²

The Spread of Islam

Islam arrived on the North coast of Java supposedly around the fifteenth century,³ spreading from there. It was introduced mainly by traders and, later, by itinerant preachers. Overall it spread peacefully, converting firstly the aristocracy and the kings, and later the common people. The diffusion of Islam was surprisingly fast. It could be considered accomplished by the seventeenth century under the sway of Sultan Agung.⁴

It is commonly believed that the fast diffusion of Islam in Java was due to the fact that it was brought to the island in the form of Sufism, or *tasawuf*, which is generally what happened in most Asian countries.⁵ This form of Islam dominated the Asian scene from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It preached a form of Islam based on the teaching of love, stressing more Islamic spirituality rather than law (*shariah*). Sufi believe that spiritual practices can bring the believer to an inner experience of unity with God through an awareness of one's true self.⁶ This belief, meditation and other Sufi spiritual practices touched sensitivities that were already present in the Javanese. Because it did not insist on or overly stress the *shariah* and legal regulations, *tasawuf* made it possible for the Islam that came to Java to welcome and assimilate local customs and traditions whose roots lay in the animistic and Hindu-Buddhist Javanese culture already there. Cul-

2. R. Soekmono, *Pengantar Sejarah Kebudayaan Indonesia 2* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1981), 37–9.

3. The first known Islamic grave in Java dates back to 1419, see R. Soekmono, *Pengantar Sejarah Kebudayaan Indonesia 3* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1981), 46.

4. *Ibid.*, 42–73.

5. T. Michel, *Islam in Asia* (Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1991), 12–7.

6. “[Sufism] was a form of Islam that did not place great emphasis on doctrinal formulation, beyond the cardinal principle of the oneness of God, but emphasized, rather, the immanent presence of God and the illusory nature of the universe in relation to God's unique reality”, *Ibid.*, 17.

tural means of expression such as the Javanese puppet theatre (*wayang*), the traditional Javanese orchestra (*gamelang*), ritual meals (*slametan*) and pilgrimages to the graves of ancestors and spiritual masters were all embraced and maintained in the Javanese Muslim communities.

This astonishing acculturative attitude of the “old” Islam, (not yet affected by the attempted arabization and radicalization that the Wahabi sect has sought to impose since the beginning of the nineteenth century), coupled with the strong spiritual orientation of *tasawuf* made the rapid integration of Islam into the Javanese cultural environment possible. It is not by chance that the *Wali Songo*, considered the first nine Muslim missionaries to Java, were all Sufi.

Wahabi ideology was first felt in Indonesia at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the *Padri* revolution erupted in Western Sumatra. Some Indonesian *haji*, strongly influenced by *Wahabis* they met while on pilgrimage to Mecca, began the struggle to “purify” Indonesia of “syncretic” Islam. The Sufi masters in the area were killed and a more *shariah* oriented form of Islam began to be spread throughout the archipelago.

Two Islamic organizations were founded in Java at the beginning of the twentieth century mirroring the tension between the more orthodox and the more Javanese oriented Muslims. The first was the *Muhammadiyah*, founded in 1912 with the aim of pushing Indonesian Islam towards “purity.” For this reason they are called “modernists.” The second, the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (1926) was founded as a reaction to Wahabi influence and any puritan oriented Islam and therefore they are called “traditionalists,” because of their respectful and adaptive attitude towards the traditions of Java.⁷ Today *Nahdlatul Ulama* is the largest Islamic organization in the world with some 50 million members.

Besides some different understandings of doctrine, one of the main differences between these two movements is about how each honours Muslim Saints. The traditionalist *Nahdlatul Ulama* maintain the Javanese tradition, making pilgrimages to the graves of the nine *Wali Songo*, as well as the graves of people venerated as saints and the graves of ancestors. They also hold commemorative gatherings called *khaul*, in memory of their spiritual masters, the *kyai*. The *Muhammadiyah*, on the other hand, regard such practices as sinful and idolatrous.⁸

At present 85% of the population of Java profess themselves to be Muslim. But in that mass there are large groups of faithful whose level of adherence to the Religion of the Prophet differs significantly, and where the religious practices of one group are not followed, and in some cases not even tolerated by another group. C. Geertz divides Javanese Muslims into two main groups, the *Santri*, or orthodox and observant Muslims, and the *Abangan*, who are nominally Muslim, but who still preserve their Javanese culture, prac-

7. S. Soebardi and C.P. Woodcroft-Lee, “Islam in Indonesia”, in A. Israeli (ed.), *The Crescent in the East: Islam in Asia Major* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, and NJ, USA: Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, 1982), 200–4.

8. J. J. Fox, *Currents in Contemporary Islam in Indonesia*, 6, at <http://bgu.edu/SiteMedia/_courses/reading/Arti-Currents.pdf>.

tice its rituals and mysticism, and accept its cosmology and anthropology, all of which they have inherited from their preislamic past.

Over the centuries Javanese culture has shown a surprising ability to blend in elements from foreign cultures, “Javanizing” them rather than accepting them as they were, embracing them by emphasizing those elements that agreed with and reinforced values and beliefs that were already present, and transforming them as well. All the great religions have similarly been blended in this way. With Islam in Java this assimilation was conducted mainly by the *Abangan*.⁹

The Kejawen Culture

The distinctions between *Santri* and *Abangan*, orthodox and syncretist, traditionalist and modernist do not adequately describe the Javanese spiritual world. Javanese (*Kejawen*) culture is so deeply rooted in the Javanese soul and so pervasive that most Javanese simply live it as “the way things are” without much awareness of the complexity and differences between groups. *Kejawen* is not merely a religious category but a way of viewing the whole of reality, complete with its own system of values and ethical demands, transcending religious affiliation.¹⁰ Before the arrival of Islam, the culture of Java was a mix of animism and Hindu-Buddha elements, “a fertile matrix for magic, mysticism, the veneration of powerful souls, spirit cults, and the worship of holy places,”¹¹ and as a matter of fact, it has not been possible to erase this matrix. It is still very much alive, and continues to influence every Javanese spiritually and behaviorally.

The complex *kejawen* ethical system provides the foundations for harmonious coexistence within society. The two pillars of this system are the principle of harmony (*kerukunan*) and the principle of respect for others (*hormat*). The first of these requires that each individual knows his or her place, is always aware of his position in society, acts gently, represses strong feelings, knows precisely the limits of acceptable behaviour and is ready to renounce when necessary personal rights in favour of group harmony. The second principle is respect for ancestors, elders and persons of higher rank. The first concern of a Javanese is to ascertain the correct level of honour that must be given to the person

9. C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 5–7. Geertz speaks also of a third category, the *Priyayi*, or the protectors of the purity of Javanese Traditions who live in the entourage of the Sultan’s palace (*Kraton*).

10. On this point the anthropologist Niels Mulder, reporting his experience, writes: “I have met many Javanese who take their Islamic duties seriously and who qualify as *Santri* on all counts. Yet, they were also Javanese discussing life from the perspective of *wayang* (shadow play) mythology, or interpreting the five daily prayers as a personal encounters with God; appreciating the ritual meal (*slametan*...), as an important mechanism of social integration, or having a remarkable sense of obligation to visit their parents’ graves. Moreover, in ethical terms, they would measure themselves as seriously as any Javanese in being *ikhlas*, that is, sincere in purpose. This corresponds to the Javanese notion of being *sepi ing pamrih*, that is, not being guided by egotistic motives; placing the interests of others before personal interests.” N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java*, op. cit., 17–8.

11. Ibid., 17.

standing in front of him. This includes choosing a level of language appropriate for the speaker and the spoken to.¹²

The principle of harmony regulates one's relationships with fellow human beings and also with the world of the ancestors, with spirits and with God. The ritual meal (*slametan*), and small offerings of food to spirits (*sesajen*) are useful tools for maintaining harmony or rebuilding it if one sins or offends by infringements of correct protocol. The *slametan* is a meal to which the whole neighborhood is invited, and therefore contributes to peaceful coexistence in society. It is accompanied by the praying of mantras pleading graces, safety and peaceful feelings.

Through the *slametan* peace is restored and the person feels safe from spiritual threats. Even cosmic disorders may be brought back into harmony.¹³ The *slametan* is the main element of the celebration of all important events. It therefore figures prominently in Javanese funeral rituals (*lajatan*) and in the post funeral ceremonies intended to accompany the departed on their journey towards heaven.

Kejawen culture also has its own form of mysticism called *kebatinan*, meaning the science of the inner self (*batin*).¹⁴ *Kebatinan* practitioners strive to become aware of and develop the true self, based on the conviction of the essential oneness of all existence, according to a pantheistic and monistic vision of reality.¹⁵ The myth of *Dewaruci* well depicts the Javanese vision of mankind and its pursuit of its true self. The hero *Bima* is sent to find the water of life, he is unable to find it in a cave in the mountains or at the bottom of the ocean, but finally discovers it by penetrating inside his inner self, reaching the place where his soul becomes identical with the Eternal One.¹⁶ The idea of the unity (or identity) of the human person with God, expressed by the Javanese words *pamoré kawula-Gusti*, can be reached by the individual person through *kebatinan* practices which help him penetrate into the human soul.

To reach awareness of the true self, it is necessary to have control of one's emotions and to have severed the bonds of the illusory world by means of ascetical practices (*tapa*) such as fasting, reduced sleep, and sexual abstinence, and meditation (*samadi*). These practices become more effective when performed in a place that possesses a special spiritual energy, such as the graves of saints and ancestors, forests, caves, mountains, or rivers.¹⁷ They give the practitioner inner strength and special powers, which can also be misused against others. The line between the inner science of *kebatinan* and *klenik* (black magic) is very thin.

12. F. Magnis-Suseno, *Etika Jawa, Sebuah Analisa Falsafi tentang Kebijaksanaan Hidup Jawa* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1985), 39–81.

13. Ibid., 88–9; C. Geertz, *The Religion of Jawa*, op. cit., 29.

14. N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java*, op. cit., 48.

15. Ibid., 49.

16. The myth of *Dewaruci* is described in F. Magnis-Suseno, *Etika Jawa*, op. cit., 114–16.

17. Koranic verses are often used as mantras during *kebatinan* rituals, or as words having power to avert evil. The Islamic practice of *dzikir* (remembrance of God by repeating and praising His name) can also be

The *kejawen* tradition is thousands of years old, but has experienced a strong revival over the past one hundred years which have seen the foundation of thousands of *kebatinan* groups and movements each with its own spiritual master.¹⁸ This development could not be halted, not even during the strong repression of communism under General Suharto in the mid sixties, when half a million *Abangan* were slaughtered and many *kebatinan* groups banned because suspected of being infiltrated by communist ideology.

This great revival of *kebatinan* could be seen as a reaction against institutional religions such as Islam and Christianity, seen as too strongly bound to dogma and moral regulations, while underestimating the inner experience of unity between the soul and the divine world. But, according to Mulder, it was more a reaction against the chaos and decadence brought about by modernity, and an expression of the pursuit of true Javanese identity in a time of rapid change.¹⁹

THE FUNERAL

Funerals (*lajatan*)²⁰ are not conducted in precisely the same way in every part of Java: there can be noticeable differences of detail from one village to another. In general, though, the burial must be concluded as soon as possible, preferably on the day of death or, if the person dies in the afternoon or evening, the next morning.

Javanese believe that many spirits gather at funerals, and that the danger of the bad spirits (*sawan*) who could cause disease, possession, and might attach themselves to the bodies of those attending, is greater than in normal circumstances. For this reason a funeral is seen as a fearful ceremony to be concluded as soon as possible. Children are usually not allowed to attend.

In the villages, news of the death of a member of the community spreads from mouth to mouth and people spontaneously gather at the house of the deceased. The whole village will be present at the *lajatan*. Thus it would appear that a funeral often becomes the occasion when even old quarrels and longstanding disputes are overcome or forgotten. Certain villagers are assigned specific tasks such as washing and preparing the body, cooking, digging the grave or leading the ceremony, so that the family is freed, as far as

part of the *samadi* meditation. These are further evidences of the symbiosis that occurred between Islam and the *kejawen* cultural milieu, especially in *kebatinan* practice. See R. P. Suyono, *Dunia Mistik Orang Jawa, Roh, Ritual, Benda Magis* (Yogyakarta: LKis, 2009), 163–83; N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java*, op. cit., 56–9.

18. On *kebatinan* movements, see S. Sopater, *Mengenal Pokok-pokok Ajaran Pangestu* (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1987); P. Stange, *Kejawen Modern, Hakikat dalam Penghayatan Sumarah* (Yogyakarta: LKis, 2009). An incomplete list of some 250 *kebatinan* groups is listed in R. Subagya, *Kepercayaan—Kebatinan Kerohanian Kejiwaan—dan Agama* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1989) 129–38.

19. N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java*, op. cit., 31.

20. Information on the celebration of the *lajatan* is taken from C. Geertz, *The Religion of Jawa*, op. cit., 68–76; S. Endrawara, *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa, Alam Misteri, Magis dan Fantasi Kejawen* (Yogyakarta: Narasi, 2004), 208–18. I received additional information from Mr. Antonius Sutatno whom I interviewed on March 26, 2011.

possible, from these practical tasks. The closest relatives sit with the family grieving the departed. The actual funeral ceremony (*lajatan*) is led by the *modin*, the *Kejawen-Muslim* celebrant in charge of leading rituals in the village. The *modin* prepares himself usually by visiting a place deemed sacred and possessing certain powers (*keramat*), or by burning resin incense (*kemenyan*) in the yard of the deceased's house. For Christians the leader of the local community, or another person trained for this will lead the prayers.

The body is laid to be washed on a wooden bench outside the house behind a curtain made of *batik* cloth, the head pointing North. In some places those in charge of this task are villagers who perform this duty regularly and know how it is done. But, according to Geertz, there is also an old tradition (the *pangkon*) in which the closest relatives bathe the body lying on their laps while sitting on chairs, as a sign of devotion to their loved one. Three kinds of water are used during the *pangkon*: water with flowers; water containing money, a special kind of leaf and different types of herbs; and plain water.

The relatives are expected to be *tegel*, meaning that they must refrain from showing any sign of repulsion or other strong emotion while performing this unpleasant task. They must not weep, but adopt an attitude of resignation and acceptance (*ikhlas*), showing that they are willing to let their relative depart. If someone weeps the deceased's soul will have difficulty finding its way to the tomb, and could remain roaming around causing problems for the family. If they are not strong enough to do this they may leave the washing to be done by others.²¹

After being washed the body is covered with a coarse uncolored cloth fastened at the top of the head, the neck, hands and feet, making the so called *pocong*. If the deceased is a Christian the body is laid in a coffin, dressed up in the best clothes available, wearing the typical Indonesian hat (the *peci*), jacket and tie, if a man, or, if a woman, traditional Javanese dress, because they must look their best when they go to meet with God. Then the coffin is closed.

The body—or the coffin—is taken into the house where the *modin*—or the person leading the prayers—guides the burial service prayers. After this the body will be carried shoulder high on a litter—or in its coffin—using four pieces of bamboo. It is believed that the bamboo used in this way will bring good fortune to those who take it home after the funeral.

First the body is carried to an open space in front of the house where the typical *brobosan* ritual is held. The coffin or litter is raised and some of those present—generally the closest relatives—pass under it three times. Usually they pass under the litter or coffin, then circle in a clockwise direction around the head to pass under the body for the second and third time. Generally they pass transversally but sometimes the ritual is performed by passing below the corpse longitudinally, generally, from the head towards the feet. Those who perform the *brobosan* are, usually the heirs, starting from the elders

21. C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, op. cit., 69–70.

down to the youngest. But in fact, anybody who feels to have a close relationship with the deceased may join the *brobosan*.

The meaning of this ritual is not clear, but most probably it expresses once again the *ikhlas* attitude of the family who are ready to let their deceased relative leave them in order to begin his journey to heaven. If intentional, or consciously held, this inner attitude could help relatives from regressing to frequent and obsessive remembrances of the departed in the future. Another explanation is given by Suwardi Endrawara, who believes that the *brobosan* is a ritual promise made by the heirs to preserve the good name of the family.²²

Following this the body is taken outside the yard and a clay jar filled with water, particular leaves, flowers and money, is smashed by throwing it to the ground, showing once again that the family is already *ikhlas*, resigned, at peace and prepared to let their loved one depart.

After this the funeral procession begins, with the litter in front. Sometimes, especially if the funeral takes place on a special day such as Friday or Tuesday *Kliwon*—days when, according to the Javanese calendar, spirits roam in greater numbers—the procession will be led by a person carrying a torch or a sickle. This is a symbolic act of opening the way for the spirit of the deceased by lighting its path where there is darkness, or cutting through the dense scrub of obstacles that it may encounter, thus facilitating its path to the grave and beyond. During the procession yellow uncooked rice mixed with coins and certain leaves, is tossed along the way. Throwing away money signifies that the deceased no longer needs to take any wealth with him.

At the cemetery, the coffin or *pocong* is lowered into the grave with the head pointing North and, in the case of a *pocong*, the body turned towards the West. Then the knot which fastens the *pocong* over the head is untied to allow the soul to leave the body at the resurrection. Prayers are then said by the *modin* or prayer leader. At a Muslim burial the *modin* shouts the Muslim Profession of Faith into the dead man's ear, repeating it three times. After that another prayer is uttered in which the deceased is reminded that he is going to meet with God, and that all he needs to do is remember the Profession of Faith and pronounce it well thereby gaining admittance at the heavenly gates.²³

Then, beginning with the closest relatives, all present sprinkle flowers and a handful of earth over the body before filling in the grave. A wooden board bearing the name of the deceased, or two wooden markers, are fixed into the ground above the grave.

At the cemetery the burial proceeds quite quickly. When it is finished everyone leaves the area immediately and returns home, bathing in the river, completely dressed, before going there. This ritual is necessary in order to cleanse oneself of any bad spirit (*sawan*) that may have attached themselves to his or her body during the funeral. As an added

22. S. Endrawara, *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa*, op. cit., 211.

23. C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, op. cit., 71.

precaution each person will clean their feet before entering their house, stepping in ashes taken from the fireplace.

A funeral does not end with a big communal meal and celebration, as it is generally the case in other cultural contexts in Indonesia. Simple food is served to those who have worked during the funeral. Yet, despite its simplicity, this meal would be the first *slametan* served to honor and help the soul that is just beginning its journey to Heaven.

THE JOURNEY TO HEAVEN

After the funeral the family plays an important role in accompanying the soul in its journey to eternity. According to Suwardi Endrawara, the family provides a simple *slametan* (*geblag*) as soon as the funeral is over,²⁴ whose aim is to help the deceased person's soul find a "larger" place (*surtanah*) and a comfortable accommodation to stay. It is also intended to appease any evil spirits that may have gathered at the funeral, so that they would not hurt anyone who joined the celebration.

The spirit of the deceased, it is believed, does not stay at the grave after the funeral but follows the mourners back to its house. Many Javanese believe that it remains in its bed for the first few days but, after the third day (*neling dina*), leaves the bed and starts wandering around the house. It can appear to people in the shape of a shadow or in dreams, scaring family members. On the third day a new *slametan* is celebrated to console the family and help the soul.

After the seventh day (*mitung dina*) of death, the soul is believed to leave the house but stays in the neighborhood. Some people open the windows of their home—or even the roof by taking away some tiles—to make it easier for the soul to get out. A *slametan* is prepared again to help the soul on the path to salvation. In a Muslim family, the prayer will be a constant repetition of the Islamic Profession of faith in the one and only God (*"Laailaha illallah"*) said for the forgiveness of sins. The spirit needs the care and the prayers of its relatives: if not it will have difficulty finding its way, and will go back to its family home disturbing the occupants.

A further ritual meal is served on the fortieth day (*metangpuluh dina*) after the death. At this point it is believed that the spirit will leave the neighborhood and enter the world of the departed.

The soul will be honored again with prayers on the hundredth day (*nyatus dina*) after the death, and on the first and second anniversaries of death (*mendhak pisan* and *mendhak pindho*). During this period the soul may visit the family often even though it is by then far from them. It makes its definitive departure only after a thousand days after the death, when a special *slametan* meal, called *nyewu*, is celebrated. It is only after the *nyewu* that the soul meets God and becomes one with Him forever.²⁵

24. Cf. <<http://indoculture.wordpress.com/2008/11/10/adat-kematian-jawa/>>.

25. S. Endrawara, *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa*, op. cit., 210–16.

The food (*ubaramé*) prepared for each *slametan* is of a different kind, each one with its own symbolic meaning. One of them is the *tumpeng pungkur*. *Tumpeng* is a typical Javanese dish prepared for every important celebration. It consists of cooked yellow rice served in its characteristic conical shape. The *tumpeng pungkur*, is a *tumpeng* cut down the middle into two symmetrical parts, one opposed to the other. It symbolizes both the separation of the soul from its material body and instincts (*nafsu patang prakara*), and the separation of the deceased from his family, who now no longer need to remember him since his soul, the *sukma sejati*, has already gone back to its Origin.²⁶

The old book, *Serat Kadilangu*²⁷ describes the journey of the departed according to ancient *Kejawen* belief. After the person dies his soul undergoes a gradual process of purification before being admitted to Heaven. This eschatological interpretation still influences Javanese thinking today unifying and clarifying the soul's *post mortem* journey sketched above. According to *kejawen* belief the human person is made up of a physical body and six other elements (strength, will, breath, mind, intellect and soul) that constitute its astral body (*kama rupa*). These elements leave the material body after the person has been dead three days, forming a "subtle body" (*linga sharira*) which still retains its will and instincts. This astral body is accompanied by a fairy (*bidadari*) to a place called *Kamaloka*—the first "heaven" (*kelangitan*)—guarded by five spirits. The journey to *Kamaloka* takes seven days.

Having reached *Kamaloka* the *linga sharira* must pass a stringent test before being allowed to enter. It must cross a bridge called *Sirat al mustakin* made from a woman's hair divided seven times and positioned over the abyss of hell. To avoid falling the astral body must be very light, i.e. not burdened by many sins and worldly attachments that would make it too heavy to cross the bridge. Should the soul fall into hell, however, there is always the chance to save oneself through a process of further purification which will make it light enough to reemerge for another try.

The astral body stays in *Kamaloka* for forty days, during which it is free to go back to the world if it wishes, on condition that it must, at its own risk, recross the *Sirat al mustakin* bridge each time it comes back to *Kamaloka*. Once back in the world the soul can appear to people.

If, in life, the person had been able to control his instincts and worldly attachments, forty days after the death he moves to the next heaven—the first *Dewakhan*—undergoing a process called *Moksha* by which the spirit separates from the *linga sharira* that dies for the second time and assumes the shape of a shadow (*chayal*). The shadow may be prayed to by family members with petitions to protect their house and children.

The freed spirit dwells in the first *Dewakhan* until one hundred days after his death, then continues its journey toward its final destination, by moving to superior heavens

26. Ibid., 217.

27. The *Serat Kadilangu* description of the soul's journey is taken from R. P. Suyono, *Dunia Mistik Orang Jawa, Roh, Ritual, Benda Magis* (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 2007), 97–105.

after the first and second anniversaries of death, arriving finally after a thousand days of death at the door of the highest heaven—the *Swarga* (or *Surga*)—the place where God Himself (*Ghaib*) dwells. Here the soul enjoys perfect happiness and unity with the Eternal One.

Every level or “heaven” is guarded by spirits or fairies. Its door will be opened only after the soul has been examined to ascertain whether it is already detached from worldly things, affections and selfish attachments. Prayers and offerings (*sesajen*) made by relatives and friends can make the guardians more indulgent making the soul’s journey towards its beatitude easier. The soul reaches happiness progressively especially after the fifth level, but full beatitude can be experienced only in the last heaven (*Swarga*). At the lower levels the soul is still on trial and may experience pain and unhappiness.²⁸

Despite its Hindu background, the *kejawen* vision on death does not overstress the idea of reincarnation.²⁹ Nevertheless, this belief is not totally absent and is experiencing a sort of revival in the new *kebatinan* movements. According to the book of *Kadilangu*, as long as the spirit is still in the first “heaven” (*Kamaloka*) or hell (*Naraka*) reincarnation is possible. This happens especially to those souls who are still attached to worldly things and need more purification, and who are permitted to leave *Naraka* or *Kamaloka*. They reincarnate at a lower level than in their previous existence and must strive to improve their condition during their next life. According to the teaching of the *kebatinan* movement *Pangestu* the soul may reincarnate up to seven times in order to make itself fit to attain perfection. If it fails after all these attempts it loses all hope of freeing itself from hell.³⁰

INTERACTION BETWEEN THE DEPARTED AND LIVING PEOPLE

We have already seen how important the prayers and the offerings of his relatives are to the dead person. These expressions of love are essential for the salvation of his soul especially during the thousand day period after death, before he is admitted into Heaven. During that time the soul strongly desires and needs the help of its relatives, provided through *slametans*, prayers and *sesajens* offered for his salvation. In particular the *slametan* meal must be celebrated to coincide³¹ with the days when the soul is due to move

28. According to Suwardi Endrawara the description of the departed soul’s journey to Heaven was used by the Wali Songo as part of their strategy for the spreading of Islam in Java. By adapting and presenting their teaching in terms of these local stories (myths) they helped acculturate Islam into the Hindu-Jawa culture and succeeded in gradually modifying the ancient beliefs, teaching the Islamic faith in a way that proved satisfying and convincing to the Javanese. S. Endrawarsa, *Dunia Hantu Orang Jawa*, op. cit., 216.

29. F. Magnis-Suseno, *Etika Jawa*, op. cit., 153.

30. S. Sopater, *Mengenai Pokok-pokok Ajaran Pangestu*, op. cit., 124–25.

31. On this point, Antonius Sutatno told me during the interview that if the relatives forget the exact date for a *slametan*, the dead person will certainly remind them with particular signs, e.g. a plate breaks for no apparent reason, or the dead person appears to a family member during a dream. These signs clearly show that the soul needs help (the popular expression is: “he’s hungry”) to continue its journey.

from one heaven to the next to support it and also to beg the guardians of the heaven's gates to be lenient. Therefore, counting from the day of the death, the *slametans* are celebrated precisely 1) at the very day of death (*geblag*); 2) after three days (*nelung dina*); 3) after seven days (*mitung dina*); 4) after forty days (*matangpuluh dina*); 5) after one hundred days (*nyatus dina*); 6) at the first anniversary (*mendhak pisan*); 7) at the second anniversary (*menhak pindho*); after one thousand days (*nyewu*).

After the last *slametan*—the *nyewu* one—relatives still remember their deceased loved ones on the anniversaries of their deaths. They will pray for the deceased and plead for protection and special graces. But beyond this the Javanese do not feel that it is any longer necessary to remember the dead often. Upkeep of cemeteries is not a priority in Java. The soul has already entered the place of eternal happiness; is already reunited with its Origin. It has already crossed over the bridge that separates it from the world of the living.

Nevertheless, people believe that in some cases the total separation of the world of the dead from our world may be bridged making some communication still possible. The feelings associated with such encounters are usually feelings of fear. The soul has returned, it is thought, because the funeral rites or some of the other ceremonies were not carefully and respectfully observed. The departed soul is not at peace; it has returned to its house where it will still bother the family.³² Or else, a wrongly performed *slametan* could confuse the soul causing it to lose its way to the tomb so that it remains wandering around the neighborhood. Pronouncing the name of deceased people is also taboo, and if one is forced to refer to them he will add the word “*almarhum*”, as a sign of respect. Speaking about death or the departed makes people feel uncomfortable and they will do it only after having apologized to their ancestors for disturbing them.

A soul may not be able to enter the world of the dead for other reasons. For example one reason may be that he died before the time determined by destiny (*takdir*). This would be the case when someone commits suicide, is murdered, dies in an accident or from other unnatural causes. Death has come before its appointed time. In these cases the spirit will be refused entry by the guard of *Kamaloka* and forced to go back and wait in the world until its proper time has arrived. These souls may appear to people sometimes just to let them know about their unfortunate predicament. Other spirits that remain in the world are those of people burdened by particular sins or who practiced black magic during their lives. Their souls remain in the world disturbing people. They may cause illness, or even death.³³

But not all spirits are nuisances, dangerous or terrorizers. Some of them become guardians, protectors and guides of their descendants. An interesting example of a good spirit is the so called *Dayang* or guardian spirit of the village. Most villages have one. Most often the *Dayang* is the soul of the founder of the village; the one who cleared the land and became the first chief of the village. He protects the village and its inhabitants, and

32. R. Subagya, *Agama Asli Indonesia* (Jakarta: Sinar Harapan dan Yayasan Cipta Loka Caraka, 1981), 87.

33. R. P. Suyono, *Dunia Mistik Orang Jawa*, op. cit., 105–10.

sometimes appears to them to make them aware of some imminent danger. The *Dayang* is periodically honored by having ritual offerings placed on his grave. The tomb itself is commonly believed to be a place of spiritual power (*keramat*): people will come to pray there when they are in need of spiritual strength, seeking a solution to some problem, or some special grace. According to Mr. Antonius Sutatno many Javanese believe that *Dayangs* have chosen to postpone their experience of the blessedness of Heaven and remain in the world so that they may continue to bless and help the villagers whom they consider as their own children.³⁴

Over the past few decades the old tradition of making pilgrimages to the graves of the *Wali Songo*, Muslim Saints and other outstanding Javanese Muslims has become very popular. According to ancient Javanese tradition the graves of kings and saints too are *keramat*. As we have seen, such a tradition is considered idolatrous and unacceptable by the modernist *Muhammadiyah* movement and other puritan groups, but it is promoted by the traditionalist *Nadhlatul Ulama* organization. In spite of strong condemnation of the practice, it is undeniable that pilgrimages are increasing. The Sunan Bonang's grave was visited by a million pilgrims in 2003, double the figure for 1996. This strong revival suggests the pilgrimage answers a deep inner need of the Javanese to feel safe and seek spiritual help by visiting *keramat* places. The last three presidents of Indonesia made pilgrimages to the grave of first president Sukarno during their election campaigns: president Megawati—Sukarno's daughter—visited his grave seven times during the 2001 campaign. When asked why they go on pilgrimage, Javanese Muslims reply that the Koran invites people to get close to God by whatever means including through persons who are known to be close to Him and may act as intercessors (*tawassul*). Others quote from one of the *Hadits*³⁵ which reads: "Visit graves, for that will make you mindful of death."

However, according to George Quinn, many pilgrims "frequent holy places in order to plead for specific personal favours (*ngalap berkah*). They may ask for help with health problems or straitened financial circumstances, with employment, promotion, business, study, fertility, personal relationships and harvests. Very often pilgrims try to negotiate a 'transaction' or contract (*nadar*, *nadhar* or *nazar*) with a saint, vowing to 'repay' the saint in some way if a wish is granted. There seems to be a widespread perception that economic success is never wholly a result of individual initiative or plain hard work. Wealth comes from God, or from the fecund realm of the supernatural."³⁶ Is that idolatry?

34. To the *Dayang* and other instances of how the souls of the dead may remain present in the world of the living the huge list of spirits, giants, *jinn*, devils and ghosts that inhabit the Javanese spiritual world must be added. Lists and descriptions of these spirits can be found in C. Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, op. cit., 16–29; R.P. Suyono, *Dunia Mistik Orang Jawa*, op. cit., 111–29.

35. The *Hadits* is the collection of biographic reports about the sayings, customs and doings of Mohammed and his companions, see *The Hadis and Sunnah*, at <<http://www.answering-islam.org/Nehls/Ask/sunnah.html>>.

36. G. Quinn, "Local Pilgrimage in Java and Madura: Why is It Booming," in IAS News Letter, n. 35, 2001, at <http://www.ias.nl/nl/35/IIAS_35_16.pdf>.

Someone would answer: "Pleading for wealth, a beautiful wife, or health, just means that we strongly believe and acknowledge that God is the Almighty and so able to grant such things." Even through the intercession of a saint.

CONCLUSION

At the end of our journey through the Javanese understanding of death and life beyond it I will try to draw some conclusions in the shape of personal reflections.

Death for the Javanese is an unavoidable part of life. The exact time of a person's death has already been set by fate (*takdir*) and is unchangeable: it is unwise to try to hasten or postpone what is unchangeable. Some Javanese believe they already know precisely when they will die and accept this fate quite peacefully. Death cannot be delayed, but cannot be brought forward either. If by accident someone dies before his time his soul will not be accepted straightaway into the world of the departed. It must wait, wandering in the world of the living, until its appointed time has come. The immortality of the soul is not disputed. To the Javanese way of thinking it is almost inconceivable to see death as the end of one's existence: a purely materialistic view of life and death is foreign to this culture. Everybody believes that the soul survives death and continues its journey towards eternal happiness.

Death is also seen as the return of the human spirit to its Source, which is God. All the spiritual practices of *kebatinan* such as meditation, asceticism, and detachment from earthly bonds have the same goal, to bring the soul into full union with its Origin where one becomes inwardly aware of one's true Identity. The true self—the true reality—is Him, whilst the world is pure illusion.³⁷ Death frees the soul, allowing it to reach its perfection and happiness.

God is not perceived as transcendent or distinct from the human soul. Salvation, the process whereby the soul becomes one with its Origin, entails losing one's personhood which vanishes, melting into the Eternal Reality as a drop of water falls and disappears into the Ocean—as the Sufi masters teach. Union with the Eternal means that the individual identity of the person disappears into the reality of God who, in the end, will be the only existent reality left. Heaven will be full happiness but enjoyed alone; a Paradise filled by a lone God.³⁸

37. Many aspects of Kebatinan teaching are very close to Gnostic doctrines. N. Mulder, *Mysticism in Java*, op. cit., 48; R. Subagya, *Kepercayaan dan Agama*, op. cit., 92.

38. The difference between this belief and the Christian Trinitarian understanding of salvation comes spontaneously to mind. In the Christian view the person will experience perfect unity with God, but in a context of mutual love, which is a relationship with God and with others and not a union which erases distinctions between persons. The person is saved as member of the body of Christ, as an individual united to but also distinct from all the other members. Besides, as a member of the Body of Christ, as child of God in the Son, the person will experience perfect blessedness not in loneliness, because there will be always the Father in front of him, a Father who loves him and is loved by him. The Christian Heaven is the experience of unity and distinction at the same time, as it was since the beginning in the Holy Trinity.

Communication with the departed is not cut off at the moment of death. The relationship is felt with particular keenness as the thousandth day after death approaches. On that occasion the family prays for the salvation of the soul of the departed loved one. Interaction is also possible with those souls that still dwell in the world as wandering spirits (often as disturbing ones) or more agreeably as saints or *Dayangs* (the guardians of the village). All in all, though, relations with the dead seem to be far less harmonious, peaceful and joyful than one would expect considering that the soul is now enjoying eternal bliss. Death, it seems, cannot of itself bring the soul to perfection, nor do saintly persons die in a state where they can be admitted to heaven straight away.

Even after death, people are still burdened with their worldly attitudes and even defects: they still get disappointed, become angry, are temperamental and susceptible to strong emotions. They can punish and hurt, and may seek vengeance. People feel guilty if their offerings or prayers are not what they should be, or are imperfectly performed. Even the dead seem unable to fully practice the principle of Javanese ethics expressed by words *sepi ing pamrih* (do not look for your own advantage).

Therefore, the living make every effort to do things right in order to preserve harmony with them, praying for them or performing rituals in order to avoid their displeasure and possible punishment, pacifying them, and, if possible, obtain blessings through them as well. This anxiety to avoid irritating the deceased and ensuring harmony with the spirit world is a far cry from the idea of the communion of Saints, a communion based on love and pure self-giving, and also on the conviction that the saints in Heaven, cannot but be good as they have become like God who is love.

Finally God (*Gusti*) in the Javanese scheme of things is not a Person and not at all a Father caring for His children. He is an undefined Entity who dwells in a very distant place on top of a high mountain that is very hard to climb.³⁹ Only asceticism and, after death, a long climb of many steps to reach different stages of personal purification, will allow the human spirit to attain union with Him. God is not seen as the Savior of the human soul. He just waits, without doing anything, for the soul to purify itself sufficiently to reach Heaven. Reaching Heaven, then, is no more than a human accomplishment. It is not God who saves. The person saves him or herself while God waits.

39. It is true that the *Dewaruci* myth shows that true reality dwells within the human soul. But it is also true that the journey made by *Bima* to find it was very long, difficult, and dangerous; a struggle that was personal, solitary, and merely human.

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JAPAN

TIZIANO TOSOLINI

In Japan, as in many other countries, beliefs surrounding the phenomenon of death are rather peculiar and find expression in many suggestive rituals. Takie Lebra, a dedicated student of Japanese culture and behavior, wrote that “in Japan a heroic, romantic, aesthetic, and moral aura surrounds death in general.”¹ Matsuo Bashō composed one of his most famous *haiku* in 1694, shortly before he died: “Traveling, sick / My dreams wander / On a withered moor.”² For this Japanese poet, who was indifferent to the values of the *samurai* and city dwellers and cared little about Buddhist doctrines concerning the afterlife, the “way of elegance” became the only value worth living for. According to Bashō, death is something natural, the inevitable conclusion of the cycle of life which causes neither despair nor struggle, neither drama nor rebellion. The eyes sim-

1. T. Lebra, *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976), 190.

2. 旅に病んで夢は枯野をかけ廻る (Tabi ni yande / yume wa karenô wo / kake meguru).

ply dwell once again on the beauty of that moorland, where dreams wander silent and undisturbed until they finally leave the poet, who is no longer able to travel but can still express, one last time, words of wonder. It is in this contingent horizon that the poet was born, a horizon devoid of salvation and transcendence, the sole and last canvas on which the intention of his verses struggles to emerge and eventually fades away.

We may contrast this rather “aesthetic” view of death with a more “philosophical” one, like the one developed, for example, by Nishida Kitarō. Nishida speaks of a death which imbues the life of the self at every moment, a death which is known and actualized in every instant of the self’s existence. The self is truly itself in the moment in which it negates what it had become by becoming what it is not yet. This is the instant of the absolute present in which the self “lives as it dies,” by possessing itself in self-negation. This awareness of death does not refer to a separate mystical or ascetic state but is implicit in the very description of action, the continuous movement of a past that fades away into the present, the self that negates itself in order to live again in each of its actions. This contradiction, which is an incessant movement of death and rebirth, marks the outline of the individuality of the self, for what makes the self unique is precisely that which at the same time negates and affirms it, that which dissolves it and makes it reemerge completely in its new abode.³

Other interpretations of death are of course possible—for instance the one dealing with the tragedy of suicide, i.e. the unexpected gesture of someone who takes his own life, an existence that turns against itself by conceiving its own extinction as its last, desperate shelter: a dawnless night that finally puts an end to its agony, its delirium, its shame. Or, again, an even more “existential” interpretation of death, the one which invests the finitude of the subject with waves of suffering, pain, and desperation, and at the same time that kind of death which is re-lived countless times in the souls of the people who are left behind and feel lost, lonely, and useless without the one who has just died. This interpretation applies also to all those lives, young and old, that ended abruptly for no apparent reason, to the lives of those abandoned to rot alone in hospitals and nursing homes, to those people who still do not know how to die (who do not know yet that they are dying), those who do not want to die, and those who await in dismay the inevitability of death as the only certainty of this uncertain life.

We may also consider the “sociological” interpretation of death: death understood as capital punishment, wrongfully employed as a social deterrent;⁴ or again, the silently induced deaths of the last Japanese *samurai* (as white-collar workers are called), who devote themselves to their companies until they die of overwork.⁵ Yet again, there are the

3. On Nishida and his reflection on death see especially N. Kitarō, “The Logic of *Topos* and the Religious Worldview.” Trans. M. Yusa. *The Eastern Buddhist* 1986, 19/2: 1–29, 20/1: 81–119.

4. According to the data of Amnesty International, 15 executions were carried out in Japan in 2008 (the highest number since 1975) and 100 prisoners were on death row. Cf. <<http://amnesty.org/en/region/japan/report-2009>>.

5. In 1994, the Japan Economic Planning Agency estimated that about 1,000 people between 25 and 59 years

unjust deaths caused by the pollution of the environment and the contamination of air and water.⁶ Nor should we forget the “cultural” deaths of the literary figures who dared to speak out against the rampant degeneration of Japan’s traditions and glorious past (such as Yukio Mishima, who committed ritual suicide in 1970), or who were defeated in their attempt to reestablish the “sad purity” of the Japanese tradition against the blind and anonymous powers of modernity and Westernization (such as Yusunari Kawabata, the Nobel Prize for Literature, who took his own life in 1972 due to depression).⁷

However, all these expressions of death, no matter how varied and complex they may appear at first glance, should be considered as “external” phenomena when compared to the more general and objective meaning of that ultimate and final event which is called “death.” In other words, all these manifestations of death must certainly be carefully investigated in order to explain their hidden and profound reasons; but at the same time they seem only to scratch the surface of that fundamental issue that constitutes instead the focus of our study, namely: “the understanding or comprehension of death” in Japan. Our goal is to study death as a theme that is part of a tradition, as it is expressed in a particular mythology, developed by means of specific religious doctrines, and given further expression in certain philosophical reflections which, through the centuries, were in turn influenced and modified by other spiritual expressions or modes of thought.

The traditional way of understanding death in Japan is based on the awareness that the relation of body and spirit is completely unstable. A person is “alive” so long as the spirit remains within the physical body of a person, and death consists in the irreversible separation of the two. Between life and death there is an interim stage, and the spirit resides in this intermediate stage until it finally comes to settle peacefully in the realm of the dead. Thus, the conviction that the spirit survives the body and is therefore immortal entails the belief in the existence of a world where the dead reside. Terms like “passage to the world of the dead” (*kiyū* 帰幽), “reign of the dead” (*ne no kuni* 根の国), and “underworld” (a combination of *yomi no kuni* 黄泉の国 and *tokai no kuni* 常世の国) express the idea of an afterworld understood as the ultimate dwelling place of the spirits of the dead. These concepts, reflected particularly in a certain Shintō theology, are further complicated by the introduction of the Buddhist notions of *karma* (*inga* 因果) and transmigration (*rinne* 輪廻): if the spirit lives eternally or is constantly reborn, then death is not a permanent separation from the physical world, but only a temporary parting, at the end of which

of age (i.e. 5% of deaths related to cardiovascular diseases) died of *karoshi*. It is argued that today the new form assumed by *karoshi* is suicide. According to the National Police Agency, *karoshi* is the main cause of a third of the 30,000 suicides recorded for the year 2009.

6. Suffice it to mention the disaster of *Minamata* (a bay near Kumamoto where over 1,000 people died of lead poisoning caused by the Chisso Corporation) and *Yokkaichi* (a city South of Nagoya, now automatically associated with respiratory diseases caused by toxic emissions). Cf. A. Mishima, *Bitter Sea. The Human Cost of Minamata Disease*. Trans. R. Gage, L. Brown (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 1992) and N. Huddle, M. Reich, *Island of Dreams: Environmental Crisis in Japan* (Tokyo, Japan: Autumn Press, 1975).

7. On the reasons for the suicides of these two scholars see G. B. Petersen, *The Moon in the Water. Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979).

the soul will reincarnate in another body. In this sense, then, death should be understood merely as a transition from one particular life condition to another.

It is also taught that an individual's existence is not an isolated or casual event; on the contrary, it was intentionally passed on to him from his ancestors, and that this handing on from generation to generation will continue without interruption. Buddhist observances, such as those at the Spring and Autumn Equinox (*higan* 彼岸, literally "the other shore," which indicates the attainment of *nirvāna*) and *o-bon* (お盆, which is celebrated in August in remembrance of the dead), are the traditional occasions in which people visit the graves of their ancestors. These occasions also express the indissoluble link that ties the members of a family (or of a nation) through time.

Another Japanese attitude toward death is the tendency to seek immortality by identifying the person with an abstract principle, or a social organization, that absorbs or completely subsumes the identity of the individual. In this context, the spirit of the deceased lives on in the fruits of one's labor, in one's artistic and literary creations, in one's scientific conquests or discoveries; so long as these are considered worth recording and handing over in the universal book of knowledge, the individual spirit survives in and through them. This attitude includes also the "death of the self," of which "self-forgetfulness" in what one is doing is a peculiar expression: the painter, the sculptor, the writer, the flower arranger, the tea ceremony master, the artist... all of them, by being selflessly absorbed in their creations, achieve a state of "awakening" or "enlightenment" similar to that spoken of by Zen monks.

In all these (and many other) cases, the meaning of death is not that of a merely biological or statistical fact, but of something that touches the human spirit deeply, something which, though it may appear utterly useless or impossible to investigate (since the individual here comes up against one of the many limits of the unknown), never stops stirring questions and fears. Robert Hertz, in a study that later became famous, wrote: "Where a human being is concerned, the physiological phenomena are not the whole of death. To the organic event is added a complex mass of beliefs, emotions and activities which give it its distinctive character. We see life vanish, but we express this fact by the use of special language: it is the soul, we say, which departs for another world where it will join its forefathers. The body of the deceased is not regarded like the carcass of some animal: specific care must be given to it and a correct burial; not merely for reasons of hygiene but out of a moral obligation. Finally, with the occurrence of death, a dismal period begins for the living during which special duties are imposed on them."⁸

Hertz's succinct but precise description also marks out the ideal route of our study: after having focused on the conception of death proper to Japan's two great religious traditions (Shintō and Buddhism), we will first offer an overview of the various funeral rites that accompany the deceased into the next stage of their existence, and then attempt to investigate the role and significance of those who have "passed away" and now reside in

8. R. Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*. Trans. R. & C. Needham (Aberdeen: Cohen and West, 1960), 27.

otherworldly regions, reflecting also on the influence which they continue to exercise on the world of the living and on the importance of their involvement in human affairs.

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

Anthropologically, the early periods of Japanese history are an interesting object of study because they allow us to understand the evolution of both the present social structure and the concept of death in Japan. Archeological excavations suggest that during the Jōmon period (10,000–300 BC) the view of death was principally one of fear. The dead were buried with their limbs tied to prevent them from returning to terrorize the living and perform evil deeds. However, nothing was buried along with the dead (as in later phases) and this suggests the absence of a belief in an afterlife. Thus, it seems that at this time people were more concerned with problems related to life than with speculations about the existence of an otherworldly dimension.

This fear of death (or rather, “of the dead”) was probably overcome during the Yayoi period (300 BC–250 AD). The deceased were buried in rudimentary coffins with their limbs outstretched. In this period, too, there is no trace of objects buried with the dead, once again a likely indication that no idea of an afterlife existed. We know that funerary rites at this time consisted of a ten-day period of mourning; one person would take the place of the dead during the ritual and some concluding ablutions would fulfill the purpose of cleansing the relative of the deceased from the impurity of death.⁹

The period between the third and the sixth century (the Kofun period) saw the appearance of tombs or graves, whose dimensions varied depending on the social status of the deceased. Objects dear to the dead (mostly precious and imported from continental Asia) were placed next to the corpse; the coffins were shaped in the form of ships, suggesting either the idea of sending the dead far away, or of a voyage to a life after death.

Ancient Shintō religion is characterized by animistic beliefs and a shamanic influence; it receives and elaborates this view of the afterworld and systematizes it through myth. In the *Kojiki* (Record of Ancient Matters, 712 AD) and the *Nihongi* (Chronicles from Japan, 720 AD) the world is divided into three great zones: the sky (*takama no hara* 高天原), the earth (*nakatsu kuni* 中つ国) and the underworld (*ne no kuni* 根の国). The latter is the dwelling place of the souls of the dead (as well as of the spirits of many gods) and is divided in what is “under the sea” (*yomi no kuni* 黄泉の国) and what is “at the horizon of the sea” (*tokai no kuni* 常世の国). The reign of the dead is described in terms borrowed from the world of the living; it lacks all “otherworldly” traits and, in particular, ideas of

9. “When a person dies, they prepare a single coffin, without an outer one. They cover the graves with earth to make a mound. When death occurs, mourning is observed for more than ten days, during which period they do not eat meat. The head mourners wail and lament, while friends sing, dance, and drink liquor. When the funeral is over, all members of the family go into the water to cleanse themselves in a bath of purification,” in R. Tsunoda, T. De Bary, D. Keen, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, Vol. 1. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 4–5.

remuneration and punishment do not apply to it. This mythical division of the world seems to determine the existential stages of a person's life: his birth, his dwelling in the best possible world (i.e., the present, situated between past and future), and finally his death, through which he crosses the threshold of the reign of the dead and enjoys a different type of existence.

In the mythical accounts, the reign of the dead is always described as impure and dirty. The *Kojiki* narrates that Izanagi (the creator god and father of all other gods or *kami*) decided to meet again his sister and companion, Izanami, who had died after giving birth to the fire god Kagutsuchi. Izanami welcomed Izanagi by slightly raising the trapdoor of the "palace" (the grave?) where she was dwelling and told Izanagi that she would be glad to return to the world of the living with him, but that since she had already tasted the food of the underworld, it would be difficult for her to leave it. She suggested that she would discuss the matter with the god who ruled the world of the dead, but explained to her husband that for the time being he would not be allowed to see her. Having said this, Izanami shut the trapdoor and retired into her "palace," leaving her husband to wait outside for her. Since the wait was getting a little too long, the impatient Izanagi entered the "palace" (grave?), where he was horrified to see his bride in a state of decomposition. He fled immediately, while Izanami, angry at having been seen in such a condition, had him pursued by 1,500 warriors from the reign of the dead. Izanagi was able to escape and slow down the chase of his pursuers, until Izanami herself set out to capture him. Izanagi rolled a boulder over the passage connecting the world of the dead to that of the living; less than 1,000 men could not have removed that boulder. The two gods symbolizing the creation of the world are now confronting each other, one placed in the reign of the living and the other located in the reign of the dead, and here they pronounced the words of separation. Izanami threatened her husband: "O my beloved husband, if you behave thus, each day I will strike dead one thousand people of the world in which you live." To which Izanagi replied: "O my beloved spouse, if you behave thus, each day I will be able to bring to birth more than one thousand five hundred people". Izanagi thus declares that life will always triumph over death. By contrast, this episode is also a reminder of the presence of death and its power in human experience and history, as well as of the fracture caused by death in every human heart. It is at this juncture that we find the story about the entrance of evil (i.e., what makes something impure) in the world. Izanagi's entrance in the reign of the dead and his sight of Izanami in a state of decomposition causes him to be contaminated. Thus he decides to purify himself by bathing in the waters at the mouth of the river near Tachibana.¹⁰

10. *Kojiki*. Trans. D. L. Philippi. (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968), 61–8. For a discussion of the exact location of the mythological world of the dead see T. Kōnosshi, "The Land of Yomi. On the Mythical World of the *Kojiki*," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1984/11–1: 57–76. It should be noted that the notion of the afterworld gradually changed until this came to be thought of as a kind of Heaven, where the deceased live blissfully with the gods. The *tokai* is now a heavenly land, located far away on the other side of the earth and almost entirely confused with the *takama no hara*, the original dwelling place of the gods. This

What really matters for Shintō, then, is life, the complete affirmation of the positive character of this earthly reality, while death must always be considered as something impure, so much so that one should avoid even the mere mention of it. For the optimistic Shintō philosophy, death is to be understood as the worst of evils, the source of ineffable suffering and pain. The causes of death can be reduced to three: fate (in relation to the shortness of life); the fact that death is an intrinsic law of this earthly reality (in relation to the finitude and limitation of human existence); some tragic mistake or error (in relation to chance or fate).¹¹

Despite its negative views about death, Shintō religion does not reject all relation and contact with it. It is conventionally agreed that Shintō deals with rites celebrating life while Buddhism is concerned primarily with funeral rites, although as we shall see later, the Shintō tradition is not altogether unfamiliar with funerary rituals (*shinsōsai* 神葬祭) and prayers for the deceased. Moreover, as Ono points out, “in some few cases there are graves, either within the shrine precinct itself or immediately adjacent to it, and it appears that some shrines originally were built in front of burial mounds. Furthermore, there are a great many shrines devoted to commemoration of the departed spirits of historical persons.”¹²

When Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century, the Japanese speculation about death entered a more articulate and abstract stage, a phase whose reflection focuses mainly on the achievement of buddhahood. The problem of death is no longer understood in terms of the survival of the soul, of the dwelling places of the dead, or of an afterlife, but rather in terms of liberation from the chain of “rebirths” that characterizes the existence of all sentient beings.¹³ As it is written in the *Nirvāṇa Sutra*: “All things are impermanent: they appear and disappear; when an end is put to this appearance and disappearance, the bliss of *nirvāṇa* is realized.”¹⁴ In Buddhist thought, appearing and

identification of the world of the dead and that of the gods is also at the basis of the idea that Japan is the native Land of the gods: “*Takama no hara* is the brilliant ethereal domain of the glorious sun, while this land of Yamato or Japan is where the sun was born... and so Japan is a land of light, a realm of brightness, a place of endless sunshine, in short *Akitsukuni* o *Akitsushima*, diametrically opposed to the *Yomi no Kuni* or Land of Eternal Darkness... Thus both this earthly Nippon and the ideal celestial region enjoy forever the brilliance of the sun; while entirely devoid of light is the Underworld, a hideous polluted land where gloomy darkness prevails eternally. This is reason why the Japanese of all times cherish and adhere to this glorious land of their birth, never, unlike the ancient Hindus, looking for an ideal beyond but rather, on the contrary, recoiling from any thought of wandering elsewhere.” In G. Kato, *A Study of Shinto* (London: Curzon, 1971), 46.

11. See L. Menegazzo, “Alcune proposizioni dello 神道 sulla morte,” in *Il problema della morte in Giappone. Relazioni dell'incontro del gruppo per il dialogo interreligioso sx-mm* (Pro Manuscripto, 1987), 5.

12. O. Sokyō, *Shinto. The Kami Way* (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1979), 109.

13. For this reason, the first of the four noble truths proclaimed by the Buddha, the one about universal suffering (*dukkha-satya*), reads: “What is the holy truth about suffering? Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering. To be united with what is hated is suffering. To be parted from what is loved is suffering. Not to obtain what is sought is suffering. In short, attachment to the five aggregates is suffering. This, then, is the noble truth of suffering (*dukkha-satya*).”

14. Quoted in M. Abe, “The Problem of Death in East and West. Immortality, Eternal Life, Unbornness,” in *The Eastern Buddhist*, 1986, 19/2: 47.

disappearing, being born and dying, are correlative elements that constitute the flux and reflux of the reality of appearance, or of *samsāra*. However, *nirvāna*, which is achieved by an overcoming of the illusory reality that is the seat of suffering and ignorance, should not be understood as the logical and metaphysical counterpart of *samsāra*, but as its correlative, or that which allows the subject to inhabit and penetrate the depths of the eternal cyclicity of life and death (thus transcending this cyclicity from within rather than from without). The liberation from death becomes, in Buddhist terms, the overcoming of this reality, not its perpetuation; the liberation from attachment and ignorance is nothing but “awakening;” it is the phase that follows the “great death,” which empties the reflux of birth and death of all consistency by contemplating it in its fragile impermanence. The seemingly absurd affirmations of Zen masters like Munan (1603–1676) who said: “While living be a dead man, be thoroughly dead, and behave as you like, and all’s well;” or master Egen (1277–1360) who proclaimed: “There is no birth or death in my life”—mean precisely that the awakened individual has become aware of the “non-existence” or “inconsistency” of this reality and has left it behind to the point of being now able to live in it while transcending its oppositions.

The logic behind this notion of birth and death is called “logic of *soku* (and yet),” that is, a kind of logic that expresses the coexistence of two different identities without opposition between the two. This logic affirms the identity of two terms while not dismissing their differences. “*Samsāra*” and “*nirvāna*” are not understood in their static acceptance as isolated concepts, which tend to exclude their respective opposite by virtue of the principle of individuation through genus and species. On the contrary, they are conceived of as terms or identities that are such precisely because they are immediately interrelated within the same structure, which thus grounds their individuation, their relation, and their differentiation. In other words, *nirvāna* is not the opposite of *samsāra*, in much the same way that death is not the opposite of life, but each term permeates the other in such a way that life-death, such as it is, is *nirvāna* (and *samsāra*) itself. The one who is “awakened” lives *nirvāna* within (not outside) *samsāra* and experiences the transcendence of space and time in the present instant. The “absolute,” therefore, is experienced in the “relative;” *nirvāna* is the *nirvāna* of this particular moment. As the Zen master Dōgen puts it: “This present birth and death itself is the Life of Buddha. If you attempt to reject it with distaste, you are losing thereby the Life of Buddha. If you abide in it, attaching to birth and death, you also lose the life of Buddha, and leave yourself with (only) the appearance of Buddha. You only attain the mind of Buddha when there is no hatred (of birth and death) and no desire (for *nirvāna*).”¹⁵

The “awakened,” therefore, has realized the impermanence of the world of appearance, including the appearance of his own self. The self is freed from its attachments to this world and from the ignorance that considers it real, and has finally achieved the state of

15. Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō*. *Zenki* “Total Dynamic Working” and *Shōji* “Birth and Death.” Trans. N. Wandell and M. Abe, *Eastern Buddhist*, 1972, 5/1: 79.

“un-born” and “un-dead”, that is, true buddhahood. The self is now free from appearance and the infinite chain of “rebirths” that belongs to it. The self lives now, in every instant, the *nirvāṇa* which is beyond *and yet* is in every thing, is eternal *and yet* crystallizes in time, is absolute *and yet* is manifested in the relative.

These reflections, which may sound purely conceptual or theoretical, will eventually take on a concrete form in the various Buddhist Schools of Japan. According to Kōbō Daishi (774–835), founder of the Shingon School, buddhahood can be reached only through the *sanmitsu kaji* (三密加持), the three esoteric practices carried out through body, speech, and mind, namely devotional gestures (*mudra*), sacred formulas (*mantra*), and meditation (through the composition of a *mandala*). The goal of all these practices is to identify the life of one’s nature with that of the Mahāvairocana Buddha, or cosmic Buddha, who is the foundation of all phenomena and is present in all of them.

By contrast, for Tendai Buddhism (founded by Saichō, 767–822), the whole of reality is empty and temporally impermanent, and no single phenomenon exists independently of other phenomena. This “absolute truth” is grounded on a “conventional truth” according to which every phenomenon is perceived in its singularity and particularity. The experiential synthesis of these two seemingly contradictory truths leads to the realization of a third truth, or “middle truth,” namely the fusion of conventional truth and ultimate truth. The Tendai School argues that all beings are expressions of the buddhahood that permeates the whole of reality. Thus, buddhahood was manifested concretely not only in the Śākyamuni Buddha, but can be achieved by all beings—in this body and in this very life—through enlightenment.

The excessive ritualization of these forms of Buddhism and their apparent disconnection from common experience eventually led to the foundation of another typically Japanese Buddhist School, the Pure Land (*Jōdo*) School, centered around the figure of Amida Buddha (or the Buddha of Infinite Light). With the emergence of this School, two innovations took place, one ritual and another doctrinal. Concerning the ritual innovation, the old-School Buddhist monks used to perform funeral rites for emperors and nobles but were not allowed to ask for any compensation for their activity. New styles and rituals emerged instead during the Kamakura period (1192–1333), that is, during the time when the Pure Land School was established. Watanabe writes: “During the Kamakura period, a new branch of Buddhism, *Jōdo*, arose. It did not have the backing of the nobility, and since its belief denied the merits of this world, it could not expect financial support from patronage. Therefore, they found that the only way to support themselves was by holding funerals. Since then, other branches of Buddhism have followed this method of supporting themselves. Also, since the Edo Shogunate ordered Buddhist temples to keep the census registers of the population, Japanese Buddhism has been in an inseparable relationship with funerals.”¹⁶

As for the doctrinal innovation, Hōnen (1133–1212, founder of *Jōdo* Buddhism) did

16. S. Watanabe, *Japanese Buddhism* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten Corp., 1958), 120.

not only introduce the concept of a final dwelling place (the Pure Land) where people will be reborn one final time and find shelter against *karmic* transmigration, but also popularized the worship of Amida Buddha, a divine figure endowed with great perfection and infinite mercy. Because of the 48 Vows he pronounced when he was a *bodhisattva*, Amida retained the ability to bring back to life those who invoke him in the Pure Land, where the “redeemed” can become first *bodhisattva* and then Buddhas in their turn. Of these Vows, the best known are the 18th (which states that whoever invokes Amida’s name—through the formula *Namu Amida Butsu*: the so called *nenbutsu*—even only ten times with genuine faith will be saved) and the 19th (which states that whoever recites the *nenbutsu* constantly will be greeted by Amida upon passing away, or will see him while one is still alive).

Shinran (1173–1263), disciple of Hōnen and founder of the True Pure Land School, pays less attention to the practice of the *nenbutsu* in favor of a simpler practice of faith in Amida Buddha. Rebirth in the Pure Land is no longer achieved by ascetic efforts grounded in “self-power,” but is the result of total and sincere abandonment to Amida’s merciful love, or of “Other-power.” Therefore, liberation is absolutely and uniquely a gift from Amida and is intended primarily for the sinner—for as Shinran states: “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will!”¹⁷ Beyond all doubt, then, the idea of Pure Land (or Western Paradise) drastically affected the Japanese view of death, although one may ask whether entrance into the Pure Land should be understood literally. In fact, Pure Land Buddhism is Japan’s most popular branch of Buddhism, but it does not seem to foster the belief in a “blessed and heavenly place” which is transcendent and completely separated from the common and immanent dwelling of the Buddhist gods.

Another important Buddhist School of the Tokugawa period was founded by the monk Nichiren (1222–1282), who tried to bring Buddhist teaching back to its origins by giving primacy to the *Lotus Sutra*. On the basis of prophecies and predictions made by Śākyamuni Buddha in several Sutras, Nichiren attributed the cause of diseases, epidemics, and natural disasters (especially droughts, typhoons, and earthquakes) to the emperor’s and the people’s support of forms of Buddhism which he considered either heretical or unsuited to the third and last historical age, that of the “final *Dharma*.”¹⁸ His notion of death was opposed to that of Amidism: for Nichiren the true Pure Land (or the Land of the Good Law), namely the true place of enlightenment, had to be sought within this world and, according to his nationalistic views, was identical with Japan.

Finally, the Zen tradition, by calling attention to the idea of the inconsistency of the self (or “no-self”) and of reality as such, states that true wisdom and knowledge can be achieved only through enlightenment or “awakening” to the truth of things, which is

17. *The Collected Works of Shinran*. Vol. 1. (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 663.

18. According to Buddhist reckoning, the periods or ages of history are three: *Shōbō* 正法 or Age of the Correct *Dharma*; *Zōbō* 像法 or Age of the Apparent *Dharma*; and *Mappō* 末法 or Age of the Final *Dharma*.

what is experienced beyond all appearance, discrimination, and differentiation. As we already pointed out, in this process life and death are understood as complementary aspects of a single reality and are included in the perspective of a ceaseless flux (*samsāra*) within which the self is liberated through enlightenment.

In general, therefore, for both Shintō and Buddhism death should not be considered as the last definitive stage of life, or something that annihilates the individual forever, but rather as a threshold to a new existential condition (Shintō), or else as one of the aspects that contribute to the formation of reality as such and that can be overcome through “awakening” (Buddhism). Moreover, in the case of Shintō, death is not seen as something tragic or frightening which forces the individual to face a definitive judgment regarding his moral conduct; on the contrary, since there are no otherworldly punishments and rewards, both the good and noble person and the evil and unrighteous one will cross the threshold of the *yomi no kuni*.

In Buddhism, by contrast, enlightenment places the “awakened” “beyond good and evil” already in this life (since these moral categories already belong to a discriminatory and dichotomizing mode of thought and maintain the opposition of subject and object, which is the root of all ignorance and suffering); instead, if one *must* speak of “sinners,” these are the very people that Amida vowed to redeem.¹⁹

In any event, the ineluctability of physical death for every individual immediately forces the living to carry out certain practices for the dead and to fulfill without exception certain duties. In the case of Buddhism, these practices and duties are the main motive (whether rightly or not) behind a full-blown funerary industry.²⁰ And it is to these funeral rites and their complex structure that we now turn our attention.

FUNERARY AND COMMEMORATIVE RITES

Statistically, Buddhism in Japan has a 90% share of funerals and memorial rights. The

19. Traditionally there are sins that no Buddha can ever redeem and that deserve the “deepest hell.” These sins are: parricide, matricide, the murder of an *arhat*, to sow dissension in the Buddhist community, and to wound a Buddha voluntarily. Buddhist literature abounds with descriptions—whether horrifying or blissful—of the various places where sentient beings reap the fruits of their *karmically* negative or positive actions. But we should not forget that even this condition is not eternal; it too, like every life form depending on something other than itself, is destined to come to an end.

20. Although Japanese Buddhism is also known as “funeral Buddhism,” we are not inclined to endorse the opinion of the scholar G. Tanabe: “The two legs on which Japanese Buddhism stands ritually and economically are funeral services and the practices of worldly benefits (*genze ryaku*), the one serving the dead, the other the living. Take away funerals, memorial rites, good luck charms, talismans, and prayers for good things, and Buddhism will topple over,” in “The Orthodox Heresy of Buddhist Funerals,” in J. I. Stone & M. Namba Walter, *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 325. After all, the Buddhist message of liberation is directed at living sentient beings, not to the dead, and many people today remind Buddhism of the genuine roots of its message.

question immediately arises: Why is it that Buddhism has come to be entrusted with the afterlife?

The first answer to this question may be that Buddhism, ever since it was introduced to Japan in 552 AD, possessed a far deeper systematic doctrine, an institutional organization, and a broader ritual repertoire than many of the local religious traditions. This fact explains why Buddhism spread rapidly first among the nobles and then among the people.

A second factor that may explain Buddhism's ascendancy in the realm of death and funeral rites lies in its proverbial ability to assimilate and reshape elements of other religious traditions. Recent studies have thrown light on the "combinatory logic" by which the local gods (*kami*) and other divine figures imported from the mainland (especially India) took on the provisional forms of Buddhas or *bodhisattvas* (this "fusion" is called *honji shuijaku* 本地垂迹) and their worship was integrated in the Buddhist rituals and institutional structure.²¹

A third reason is the fact that in Buddhism death is not understood as a contaminating factor (as in local traditions such as Shintō). Therefore, those who perform funeral rites are free from the dangers of the defilement of death and are rather perceived as capable of mediating between this world and the next.

Finally, we should remember that Buddhism offers an elaborate ethical picture of the afterworld, a picture in which individuals are reborn in pleasant or unpleasant conditions depending on their behavior in this life.²² This doctrine fulfills two purposes: first, it guarantees that the very structure of reality is an ethical one, thus encouraging people to act as virtuously as possible; secondly, it offers a solution to the thorny question of *karmic* retribution, or of the amount of meritorious deeds that one has to perform in order to atone for the sins of prior lifetimes. Thus in Japan, as in other countries, the doctrine of *karmic* causality is intertwined with that of "merit transference," whereby the living are able to offer their own merits to help their dear ones who might be suffering in the afterlife. So it is clear that Buddhism, standing in the magnetic tension generated by these two perspectives, acquired a dominance over death and became the primary point of reference for all those who, in some way or another, wished to improve or even eradicate the postmortem *karmic* suffering of the dead.

Be this as it may, there is no doubt that today almost all Japanese turn to Buddhism when they need to perform their funerary rites (as confirmed also by a famous saying:

21. See, for example, M. Teuwen e F. Rambelli, eds., *Buddhas and Kami in Japan: Honji Suijaku as a Combinatory Paradigm* (London: Routledge-Curzon, 2003).

22. These are the realms in which the dead are reborn depending on their past behaviors: hell (*jigoku* 地獄); the reign of hungry ghosts (*gaki* 餓鬼); the realm of beasts (*chikushō* 畜生); the realm of demons (*ashura* 阿修羅); the realm of human beings (*ningen* 人間); the realm of divine beings (*ten* 天). In the famous book *Ōjō yōshū* (985), the monk Genshin vividly illustrates the torments of the various hells and contrasts these torments with the bliss of the Pure Land.

23. For a detailed analysis of the origin, development, and structure of the funerary rites of the various

“One is born a Shintoist and dies a Buddhist”). The details and practices of these rites vary based on the Buddhist denomination to which a given family is affiliated,²³ although there are some customs common to all the different Schools. However, before we describe these rites, we should remind ourselves that in Buddhism, consistent with its idea of “birth-and-death,” there is no “celebration of death.” Rather, the true meaning of the Buddhist funeral rite is to provide the deceased with the religious initiation that will allow that person to achieve liberation. The Buddhist ritual, therefore, consists of a posthumous initiation of the deceased to Buddhism through a threefold adherence to its “Three Jewels” (*sanpō* 三宝): Buddha, *Dharma*, and *Sangha* (the Buddhist community).

As death approaches, the dying receives the “last water” (*matsugo no mizu* 末期の水): the closest relatives, beginning with the closest kin, wet (or moisten with a brush) the lips of the dying with water. Upon death, the body is washed with hot water (*yukan* 湯灌) and robed in a white kimono (*kyōkatabira* 経帷子). If the deceased is a woman, some light makeup may be applied, while men have their beards shaved.²⁴ The corpse is then placed on a *futon* and covered with a blanket, and the face is wrapped in white linen. A dagger (or a knife) is placed on the chest of the deceased (in Buddhist rites) or near the head (in Shintō rites) to drive evil spirits away. A bowl of rice, some incense, a candlestick, and other small objects are placed on a small table located next to the deceased. In Shintō rites, by contrast, ritual candles, some washed rice, salt, water, and the favorite food of the deceased are placed on the table. Meanwhile, a bonze is called upon to recite some Sutras by the deathbed (these Sutras are called *makuragyō* 枕経, that is, *Pillow Sutras*). A mortuary death notice, written on a black-edged white sheet, is placed on the door or on the entrance gate to the house and will remain visible for the entire mourning period (*kichū* 忌中), which lasts 49 days. Once the corpse has been purified and the Sutras have been recited, the corpse is placed in the coffin (*nōkan* 納棺) together with some objects that belonged to the deceased. The coffin is nailed only when it is ready to leave the house, and the lid remains closed during almost the entire funeral ceremony.

Originally the wake (*tsuya* 通夜) to mourn the deceased and pray for his soul lasted the whole night; recently it has been shortened to just two hours, generally between 7 and 9 in the evening. When the mourners arrive at the reception table placed at the entrance of the temple or of the house, they bring with them an envelope tied with black and white strings containing the “incense money” (*kōden* 香典) and then enter the building. The bonze recites the appropriate Sutras for the occasion and the mourners take turns burning a pinch of incense. A relative of the deceased or the master of ceremony (*moshu* 喪主) gives a brief condolence speech. At the end of the speech, the relatives and close friends

Buddhist Schools, see M. Namba Walter, “The Structure of Japanese Buddhist Funerals,” in J. I. Stone & M. Namba Walter, *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, op. cit., 247–92.

24. An interesting movie on this issue is Yōjirō Takita’s *Okuribito* (*Departures*), which won him the 2009 Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film in Los Angeles. The movie tells the story of a young man, who works for a funeral company, managing the traditional Japanese ceremonial preparation of the corpses of deceased people in front of their families.

of the deceased consume a short meal as they share with each other anecdotes about the deceased. The recitation of the “Pillow Sutras” and the wake conclude the initial phase of the funeral rite, whose primary goal was to prepare the spirit of the deceased for its journey to the afterworld.

The funeral (*sōshiki* 葬式) usually takes place the following day, unless this coincides with an ill-omened day called *tomobiki* (友引 or “a friend will follow”). The goal of the second phase of the ritual is to ordain the deceased a Buddhist monk. This posthumous ordination generally begins with the sprinkling of some water over the corpse and the ritual shaving of the hair. Even if the person was already formally a monk in life, the ordination is performed again during the funeral to ensure the deceased a safe passage in the afterworld and to make sure that, having left behind the sufferings of this world, he may eventually achieve the Buddha’s enlightenment.

First the bonze, on behalf of the deceased, recites a brief prayer of repentance for all his past sins, that is, for all those actions that the deceased committed under the influence of desire, anger and ignorance. This prayer is followed by the symbolic rite of the shaving of the head, which nowadays is usually replaced by the simple gesture of placing a pair of scissors near the head of the deceased. Through this rite the deceased, “severing” all blood ties, is made a disciple of the Buddha, and becomes “awakened.”

Then the deceased receives the precepts (*jukai* 授戒), or the law that must be observed if he wishes to become a Buddha. At this point the deceased is given a new name (*kaimyō* 戒名), the *dharmic* name written on the tablet of ancestral names (*ihai* 位牌) by which from now on he will be recognized as a disciple of the Buddha. Then the bonze addresses the deceased as he recites the concluding Sutras; he reminds the deceased that he is now surrounded by the light of the Buddha and that, although it is established that in this world all things are impermanent and the result of mere illusion, in the realm of the Buddha we will find immortality and enlightenment.

Shintō funeral rites are very similar to the Buddhist ones. A ritual called *senreisai* (遷霊祭) is performed before the spirit of the deceased is entrusted to the tutelary or guardian god and to the ancestral spirits. The deceased does not receive any posthumous name, but only an honorific title (*mikoto* 命). After the wake, the funerary rite is performed not in the shrine (since death is impure), but in a common funeral hall. The altar is decorated with small bamboo poles and braided ropes, branches of *sakaki* (榊, an evergreen plant considered sacred within Shintō), and with some flowers. After the rite of ablution (which amounts to rinsing one’s mouth and washing one’s hands with water), the *kannushi* continues with the rite of purification (*o-harai* お祓い), followed by a brief farewell speech. Music is played on traditional instruments while the musicians sing a funeral song. The family of the deceased and the other mourners place on the altar the *sasaki* branches decorated with stripes of white paper (*tamagushi* 玉ぐし). All those present join their hands in silence (*shinobite* シノビ手) as they pray.

The third phase of the Buddhist ritual takes place once the funeral rite is over and before the coffin is permanently sealed. It is during this phase, called *indō* (引導), that the

deceased (now in every way a Buddhist monk) begins his journey to the afterworld. This phase generally consists of a brief prayer, the recitation of a few verses, and an incense offering. The coffin is finally sealed and carried onto the hearse. Only relatives and close friends accompany the deceased to the crematory. Inside the crematory, usually by the door of the oven, they set up a small table where they place the tablet with the posthumous name of the deceased, his photograph, some candles, incense, and flowers. After the bonze has recited the Sutras, the coffin is moved into the oven through a sliding trolley and is cremated. During the process of cremation, the relatives and friends of the deceased may retire to a reserved room to drink tea and eat something. When the cremation is ended, the attendant opens the door of the oven, and pulls out the trolley where they had placed the coffin and where now lie only the bones and ashes of the deceased.

The relatives gather around the remains of the deceased and after the attendant has put some particular fragments of the skeleton (for instance, the Adam's apple or *nodobotoke* 喉仏—so called because it is thought to resemble the Buddha sitting in contemplation) in a special mortuary urn, also they are invited to collect small bone fragments with wooden chopsticks. This ceremony is called *kotsuage* (骨揚げ).

At the end of the rite, the urn with the bones of the deceased is brought back home and formally installed, along with the mortuary tablet, inside the buddha altar, where it will remain for 49 days. Before they return home, those who participated in the ceremony are ritually purified with salt (sprinkled on their bodies) and water (with which they wash their hands). Inside the house the bonze may recite a few more concluding Sutras, this time in front of the altar holding the urn, then the relatives take their leave of the family members of the deceased. The tablet with the posthumous name, the photograph of the deceased, some incense, a small Buddhist bell, a candle, some rice, and a basket of fruit are placed on the little altar near the urn. They also arrange two vases of flowers on the sides of the altar as decoration.

During the mourning period—which lasts between 49 days (*kichū* 忌中) and one year (*mochū* 喪中)—the family members dress circumspectly, abstain from amusement, decline invitations to weddings or festivals, refrain from participating in the celebrations of New Year's Day, particularly avoiding Shintō shrines. The seventh day after the funeral, and on every seventh day until the 49th, family members, relatives, and friends gather to pray around the small altar where the urn is kept.

On each occasion a bonze recites the Sutras, incense is offered and food is served to the participants. Before the end of the 49th day, the family members of the deceased express their gratitude to those who participated in the funeral by sending them thank you cards and by reciprocating the gifts they received on the day of the funeral with small gifts of their own (*kōdengaeshi* 香典返し). At the end of the mourning period, the urn is moved into the family tomb. A bonze accompanies this last act of filial piety with the recitation of some Sutras.

In the case of a Shintō funeral, on the 50th day the tablet with the name of the deceased is placed in the family altar alongside the other tablets. If the deceased is the father, the

first born recites a brief prayer in which he invokes protection over his family and asks his ancestors to welcome the soul of his deceased father among them.²⁵

Two sets of rituals must be performed at the end of the 49th day: one “linear” and the other “cyclical.” The linear rituals focus on *hōji* (仏事) rites: they take place at a Buddhist temple on the first anniversary of the death and on every anniversary year that include two numbers traditionally valued in Buddhism, namely three and seven (hence on the 3rd, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th, and 33rd year). Linear rituals also include *meinichi* (命日) rites, that is, commemorative rites generally celebrated on the anniversary of the death and taking place at home, in front of the Buddhist altar. The tablet with the posthumous name is placed at the center of the altar as people offer prayers and incense for the soul of the deceased.

The cyclical rituals are also of two kinds. On the one hand, there are certain occasions on which the family (or one member representing the whole of it) visits the grave. These occasions, called *higan* 彼岸, embrace the spring and autumn equinox (respectively on March 21st and September 21st). During these visits, the visitors clean the grave, pour water on it, offer incense, and say a few prayers in front of the tomb. On the other hand, there is a period of four days (usually between August 13th and 16th) called *o-bon* (お盆), a most popular and beloved feast in Japan, second only to New Year’s Day. During this time the spirits of the dead return to their former homes. People show them the way home by lighting welcoming bonfires and by performing traditional dances. The family of the deceased erects a temporary small altar (*shōryōdana* 精霊棚), on which they place the tablets with the posthumous names and some offerings. Finally they light some fires (*okuribi* 送り火) or some floating lanterns (*tōrōnagashi* 灯籠流し) in order to see the spirits off.²⁶

During the 33 years of the linear rituals, the deceased is remembered through the mortuary tablet with his posthumous name; the tablet is kept with the utmost respect

25. The prayer reads: “To you, august soul of my father who have become a god, I announce that this day, the fiftieth since you departed from us and became a god, your tablet is placed in the altar where you now join our ancestors. I beg you with all my respect and reverence that you may hear us calmly as we vow to serve you forever, to offer you sacrifices, and to celebrate rituals in your honor. I now pray that you may protect your children and grandchildren for eighty generations – that is, for all generations – and that you may stretch your hands on them and grant them all happiness. And now I turn to you, dear souls of my ancestors and elders: in this memorable day, I transfer the august soul of my dear father, who has now become a god, in this domestic shrine: I beg you with all my respect and reverence that you may be so benevolent as to welcome the soul of my father and allow him to share the sacrifices that are here offered to you.” In A. Bonazzi, *Elzeviri e studi di un missionario in Giappone* (Brescia: Travagliato, Editrice Lumini, 2004), 190.

26. “A well-know scholar of Shintoism, Yanagita Kunio, holds that the spirits of the dead linger on the outskirts of villages in order to protect their descendants, particularly during such major festivities as New Year’s Day, *o-bon*, the feast of the dead, and *Higan* (the Buddhist feast of the Spring and Autumn Equinox during which people celebrate the achievement of enlightenment). In spring the gods that dwelt in the mountains move to the rice fields to protect the crops, while in autumn they return to the mountains. This belief gave birth to suggestive celebrations during which these gods are respectively welcome and bid farewell.” In Y. Sonoda, “Shintoismo e cultura giapponese,” in F. Sottocornola (a cura di), *Religioni Giapponesi*. “Shintoismo — La via degli dèi”. *La religione autoctona del Giappone* (Bologna: Edizioni Studio Domenicano, 2002), 42.

in honor of the person it represents. At the end of this period, the tablet is delivered to the family temple and burned after a brief celebration. This gesture symbolizes the disappearance of the individuality of the deceased and its integration in the great ancestral pantheon.²⁷

The funeral rites we have been describing are the traditional ones still practiced by the majority of Japanese families. However, in the past decades (particularly from the 1990s), a number of alternative forms of celebration have emerged to challenge the well established Buddhist and Shintō practices. Among these new forms we find the “natural funerals” (*shizensō* 自然葬), advocated by the Grave-Free Promotion Society (*sōsō no jiyū wo susumeru kai* 葬送の自由をすすめる会)²⁸ and consisting in the scattering of ashes. This practice physically eliminates the place (the grave) around which the relatives gather to pray, thus contributing to weaken (and even to sever completely) the ties between the deceased and his family.

Another phenomenon that is gaining wide acceptance is that of the “eternal memorial graves” (*eitai kuyō baka* 永代供養墓) maintained by voluntary funeral associations not tied to the family (a fact that contributes to eliminate the relationship between the deceased and the community or religious affiliation) and have met with the approval of some Buddhist organizations.²⁹ In order to meet changing needs, other Buddhist institutions started new practices regarding the last wishes of deceased. One of these practices is the visit to the so called “*pokkuri* temples,” where one may pray for protection from senility and the mercy of a quick and possibly painless death.³⁰

27. There are also some commemorative rites to be celebrated on the occasion of the 50th and even of the 100th anniversary of the death. To determine which anniversary should be the last is not central here, since all of them have the same meaning, namely that on any of these dates the personal identity of the deceased becomes extinct. As for the meaning of the number 33, it may be connected to the myth of the Buddha's return to this earth after he had spent three months in the “Heaven of the Thirty-three Devas” (*Tra-yastrimsha*) teaching his doctrine to the gods and to his mother, who had died before Śākyamuni achieved enlightenment. Notice that these dates and explanations are chiefly Buddhist. The Shintō tradition offers other accounts of how long it takes for the soul of a deceased person to become an ancestor. On one of these accounts, the purification period varies, depending on the condition of the soul prior to the person's death. The most refined souls reach their future abode immediately, while less perfect souls must wait several years. Other Shintō Schools maintain that the soul of the deceased achieves the condition of *kami* only one year after the person's death.

28. Cf. <<http://www.shizensou.net/english/introduction.html>>. For a study of this phenomenon see S. Kawano, *Nature's Embrace. Japan's Aging Urbanities and New Death Rites* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010) and M. Rowe, “Grave Changes: Scattering Ashes in Contemporary Japan,” in B. J. Cuevas e J. Stone., eds. *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 405–37.

29. Cf. M. Rowe, “Where the Action Is: Sites of Contemporary Sōtō Buddhism,” in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 2004, 31/2: 369–83.

30. The term “*pokkuri*” means “suddenly.” See on this F. Wöss, “*Pokkuri* Temples and Aging: Rituals for Approaching Death,” in M. Mullins, S. Susumu and P. Swanson, eds., *Religion and Society in Modern Japan: Selected Readings* (Berkeley: Asian Humanity Press, 1993), 191–202. Cf. also <<http://www.economist.com/node/9539825>>. On other funerary “novelties” see R. Filippini, “Cose dell'altro mondo. *Trends* funerari in Giappone,” in *Quaderni del CSA*, 2009, 1: 44–8.

It remains to be seen whether and how these new practices will be integrated into the traditional rituals of Buddhism and Shintoism. What seems certain is that many people are looking for alternative and innovative solutions to the problem of how to dispose of their bodies at the time of death. By doing this, people are also implicitly trying to redefine the relations that tie (as they always did) the world of the dead and that of the living.

THOSE WHO ARE BEYOND

Lafcadio Hearn, famous for his writings and expertise on Japanese culture, wrote that “ancestor worship is the real religion of Japan, the religion still professed in one form or another by the entire nation.”³¹ This claim, though profound and enlightening, needs to be clarified, for although the term “ancestor worship” is an acceptable translation of the Japanese *sozen sūhai* (祖先崇拝), it may easily lead to misunderstandings arising from the usual definitions given to both terms.³² In fact, the notion of “worship” does not include the theological nuances that are proper to the term in Western languages. The term *sūhai* (崇拝) refers rather to “a deep, respectful feeling toward another person and may be translated as admiration, adoration, idolization or veneration as well as worship. The word may be used in reference to highly esteemed living persons as well as the dead.”³³

As for the term “ancestors,” it does not refer only to the deceased of one’s own family: “Along with ‘ancestors’ in the literal, linear sense, deceased children, relatives outside the formal, hereditary line (including those by adoption or marriage) and non-relatives, such as a respected teacher, friend or lover may be included as objects of veneration in household altars... Thus, if ‘ancestor’ is taken in its original Latin connotation as ‘one who goes before,’ referring it to those who have preceded others in death, it would be a more accurate description of the objects of veneration.”³⁴ In any case, in this study the term “ancestors” will be used to indicate the spirits of those deceased whose personal identity, as we pointed out earlier, has already been extinguished and who have already been incorporated (or “merged”) in a single form with those who died before them.³⁵

31. L. Hearn, *Japan: An Attempt at Interpretation* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1955), 21.

32. These are some of the Japanese terms for the rites celebrated after the funeral: *ireisai* (慰霊祭), a Shintō rite to comfort the spirits of the dead; *senzo kuyō* (先祖供養), a Buddhist rite in which people offer prayers for the repose of one or more ancestors; *sozen sūkei* (祖先崇敬), a rite to honor the ancestors; *sozen saishi* (祖先祭祀), a general term used to denote ancestral rites; etc. The most common expression remains *sozen sūhai* (祖先崇拝).

33. C. Offner, “Continuing Concern for the Departed,” in *Japanese Religions*, 1979, 11/1: 5. The Catholic Church warns us that although the expression *sozen sūhai* most often means “respect” and does not immediately imply the kind of adoration that within Christianity is reserved to God, the use of the term varies depending on the situation. Since in some cases the ancestors are actually worshiped as gods, the term should be used cautiously.

34. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

35. This “merging” does not mean “dispersion,” for the soul of the deceased does not disappear into an anonymous “collective soul” but rather it “merges” with *its own* ancestors.

Many Shintō scholars share the conviction that the ancestors remain on this earth to tend to the prosperity of their household and of their nation. Yaganita claims that there are four typically Japanese elements expressly indicating the closeness of the world of the dead to that of the living: “The first would be the view that souls remain in their country after death instead of going off far away; the second would be the idea that there are goings and comings between the two worlds, the clear and the dark, and at other than fixed occasions of spring and autumn there were times when the living invited, could invite, the souls; the third would be the idea that the dying wish of the living could be carried out and he could make all sorts of plans for his descendants; and the fourth would be the idea that he could be reborn again and again to carry on in his same work.”³⁶

Lafcadio Hearn, instead, makes three important points about the ancestors: “1) The dead are still in the world of the living. They dwell in their tomb as in a house and come forth from it to take part in the activities of their relations and friends. 2) All the dead become *kami*—‘superior ones.’ They acquire supernatural powers, but their character is in no way changed. The good are still good, the bad remain evil. 3) The happiness of the dead depends entirely on the service given to them by the living; and conversely the happiness and welfare of the living depends on their rendering that service with due reverence and respect.”³⁷ Other elements will be added to these, for instance the fact that the dead are responsible for whatever happens in this world (weather, harvest, typhoons, earthquakes, etc.) and that all the activities of the living, whether good or evil, are determined by the dead.

All the elements just listed are taken from ancient Shintō but are still accepted by the majority of the population. They may also help us to explain the three different kinds of ancestor worship practiced in Japan: the worship of imperial ancestors, the worship of clan ancestors, and the worship of family ancestors. The worship of imperial ancestors is conceived as the cornerstone of the Nation; its practice entails a duty to make pilgrimage to the Imperial Shrine of Ise at least once during a life-time. As part of this ancestral worship, the Emperor performs several rites in honor of the thousands of *kami* (in particular the goddess Amaterasu-ō-mikami)³⁸ in order to ensure the continuity of the State, the happiness of the people, and world peace. Moreover, since ancient times, there are some ancestral rites concerned with the worship of the spirits of past Emperors and of members of the Imperial House (*kōrei saishi* 皇靈祭祀). Among the “Major Rites” that are part of these ancestral rituals are those celebrated on the occasions of the Spring and Autumn Equinox, the commemorative ceremony for Jinmu (the first mythical Emperor of Japan), and the cyclical celebrations in honor of the three generations of Emperors

36. K. Yaganita, *About Our Ancestors*. Trans. F. H. Mayer and I. Yasuyo. (Tokyo: Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 1970), 146.

37. In F. J. Horner, *A Case History of Japan* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1948), 15–6.

38. For example, the ceremony of *niinamesai* (新嘗祭) is solemnly celebrated in the imperial palace on November 23rd. During this ceremony the Emperor offers the first fruits of the rice harvest of the year to the ancestor goddess Amaterasu, and he himself takes a share in the offering.

and Empresses that came before the present one (*senteisai* 先帝祭). All these celebrations may seem somewhat anachronistic, since in the Constitution drafted after the Second World War the Emperor is conceived as merely a symbol of the nation and no longer as a descendant of the gods. But it would be wrong to underestimate the importance of these celebrations, an importance which is also political. As Hozumi wrote in a 1945 text predating Japan's surrender: "Eleven 'Great Festival Days' (大祭日) are observed as National Holidays. All these, with the exception of two, one of which is the birthday of the Emperor and the other the Banquet of the New Year, relate to the worship of Imperial Ancestors."³⁹

By contrast, the relevance of the worship of clan ancestors is largely historical and tends to be incorporated in the worship of family ancestors. It seems that in the past it was customary to pay homage to the clan ancestors every three months in the house of the village head. As this practice became obsolete, people began to worship clan ancestors only three times a year in the local shrine. The purpose of this practice was to establish a bond between different generations and to secure the favors of the god of the clan. Gradually the practice became combined with the worship of the tutelary god (*ujikami* 氏神), or the god of one's birthplace or residence. Throughout the country, parents still take their newborn to the shrine for a first act of worship (*hatsu miyamairi* 初宮参り) as they ask the *kannushi* to pray for the health and happiness of their child.

Finally, the worship of family ancestors is certainly more prominent than the other two kinds of worship, affecting as it does all the members of the extended family. This kind of worship includes three areas or spheres of interaction between the living and the dead.⁴⁰ The first area (which we may call "community of obligation") is the respect due to the ancestors, which constitutes the primary standard for the evaluation of moral conduct. The prosperity, unity, and harmony of the household come before all personal interest. Therefore, the ultimate moral criterion is not to be found in universal norms that transcend the social group, nor in precepts that promote personal happiness or edification. Since the ancestors are thought of as "living" members of the family, it is of the utmost importance that all the members of the family be in complete harmony with the will of their forebears. This harmonization of wills is the expression of the concept of authority, of which the ancestors are the depositaries.⁴¹

39. N. Hozumi, *Ancestor-Worship and Japanese Law* (Tokyo: Maruya & Co., 1901), 17. It should be noted that Imperial Ancestors are also mentioned at the beginning of the text of the 1890 Imperial Rescript on Education (also repealed in 1945), which students were made to memorize and solemnly recite at the beginning of School activities. The first lines of this text read: "Know, ye, Our Subjects, Our imperial ancestors have founded Our Empire on a basis broad and everlasting, and subjects ever united in loyalty and filial piety have from generation to generation illustrated the beauty thereof." In H. Hardacre, *Shintō and the State, 1868–1988* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 121.

40. For a description of these three aspects I follow the excellent study of J.-M. Berentsen, "The Ancestral Rites in Missiological Perspective," in *Japanese Religions*, 1983, 13/1: 2–27.

41. We might add, in passing, that it is because the ancestors are considered as "living members" of the family that in Japan it is still difficult to raise the issue of medical and legal "brain death" and "organ dona-

This chain of obligation toward one's ancestors extends further to the concrete moral behaviors and motivations of the individual family members. The key factor that regulates the relations between the living and the dead is the gratitude due to the ancestors for the benevolence (*on* 恩) that they bestowed upon the family. This *on* ought to be repaid through virtuous conduct and filial piety (*kō* 孝). The concrete content of filial piety (or gratitude) varies, depending on the status of the person within the family, but there is no doubt that for each family member the first and fundamental requisite of filial piety is to serve his immediate circle of relations as best as possible in accordance with his particular status.⁴²

The second area of interaction between the living and the dead (or “community of interdependence”) regards the conviction that death does not put an end to an individual's existence, but that the spirit of the deceased outlives the body through a kind of “development,” by which it changes from the state of “soul of the dead” (*shirei* 死霊) to that of “spirit of the ancestor” (*sorei* 祖霊). As we saw previously, the primary stages of this process are centered around the 49th day after the person's death (when the spirit departs from its family) and the 33rd anniversary year (which marks the transformation of the spirit from an individual into a collective entity). This period of development explains two aspects of the relation of interdependence between the living and the dead. The first aspect concerns the celebrations (*tsuizen* 追善) that the living must offer to the deceased so that he may achieve the status of ancestor.⁴³ To neglect these celebrations would not only mean that the soul would be unable to access a superior level of existence, but also that it would turn into a wandering soul, something which could turn against the very family of the deceased. The second aspect concerns the power exercised by the ancestors over the lives of their descendants. The ancestors exercise this power as they provide their descendants with protection and guidance, or as they punish them through misfortunes

tion.” “A central tenet of ancestor worship is the conviction that the welfare of the living is dependent upon paying appropriate homage to the dead. So long as the deceased is given the proper offerings and honored by suitable funeral arrangements, then the living should suffer no ill. But declaring a person dead based on a brain death criterion may not be the most respectful way in which to treat one's future ancestors, and cutting up their bodies in order to harvest their organs would seem to clearly violate the respect that is their due.” In E. Feldman, *The Ritual of Rights in Japan. Law, Society, and Health Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89.

42. As Doerner puts it: “A parent gives life and raises a child. Thus the child incurs *on* to his parents. Because of this *on* a child is expected to be dutiful, perform *kō*, to one's parents. However, this *on* incurred by a child is not limited solely to one's parents but includes one's ancestors as well. A child is begotten by one's parents who in turn were begotten by their parents and so back from generation to generation. Thus the *on* incurred by a child goes back to his ancestors. The child is expected to show the same filial piety to one's parents and one's ancestors. In this way a child is taught in the family structure to venerate his ancestors.” In D. Doerner, “Comparative Analysis of Life after Death in Folk Shinto and Christianity,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 1977, 4/2–3: 166–67.

43. The two most common celebrations are of two types: those comprising the offering of fruit, vegetables, and other items at the family altar, and those requesting the bonze to recite some Sutras for the deceased. These rites show how the passage from the status of “deceased” to that of “ancestor” is not only a temporal matter, but also depends on the correct worship procedures that the living offer to the spirit of the dead.

and adversities if their descendants failed to pay them due honors. Protection from the ancestors (if these are properly worshiped) and reprimands (if neglected) are, after all, the two sides of the same bond that connects the living and the dead.

The third and last area of interaction (or “community of cosmic continuity”) relates to the consideration of the officiants for the spirits of the ancestors. For example, the fact that the ancestors are invoked expresses the belief that they possess a supernatural and superhuman power, a power that is in many ways similar to that of the *kami* worshiped in the *kamidana* (the Shintō family altar). The parallel between ancestor and protector gods is expressed symbolically both through the relocation of the tablet with the posthumous name of the deceased from the *butsudan* (the Buddhist family altar)⁴⁴ to the temple of the local tutelary god, and through the erasure of the posthumous name and the removal of the tablet from the *butsudan* to the *kamidana* at home. In both cases the power of the ancestors is seen as continuous with that of the *kami*.

Finally, it should be observed that these forms of ancestor worship, this “uninterrupted community” of the living and those who came before them, derive primarily, not from Buddhism, as one might think at first, but from the Shintō tradition. In fact, although today everything related to death is associated with some religious movement, there is nothing in Japanese Buddhism that could make us think of a cult of the dead or of the ancestors. As we saw earlier, the reason for this is that the Buddhist funeral rite is in fact a ritual of religious initiation whereby the deceased passes definitively into *nirvāṇa*. With this in mind, one might understand why some Buddhist authorities deny that we should take care of the spirits of the dead and assert instead that filial piety towards the dead is a practice for the laity, not for monks.

Shinran, founder of the True Pure Land School, stated: “As for me, Shinran, I have never said the *nenbutsu* even once for the repose of my departed father and mother. For all sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brothers and sisters in the course of countless lives in many states of existence. On attaining Buddhahood after this present life, we can save every one of them.”⁴⁵ And when a disciple asked Dōgen, founder of the Sōtō Zen School, “Shall we carry on the obligation of fulfilling our gratitude to our fathers and mothers?” Dōgen replied: “Filial piety is most important. Yet there is a difference between lay people and monks in how to fulfill it. Lay people... serve their parents in life and in death. All people in the world know that. Monks abandon their debt of gratitude and enter the realm of non-doing. Our manner of paying off the debt of gratitude should not be limited to one particular person. Considering that we have debts of gratitude to all living beings equal to our own fathers and mothers, we must transmit all the merits of our good deeds to the whole dharma-world. If we limit it specifically to

44. On the *butsudan* see the recent study by F. Rambelli, “Home Buddhas: Historical Processes and Modes of Representation of the Sacred in the Japanese Buddhist Family Altar (*Butsudan*),” in *Japanese Religions*, 2010, 35/1–2: 63–86.

45. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, op. cit., 664. Shinran himself ordered that after his death his followers should throw his corpse into the Kamo river as food for the fish, without performing any funeral rite.

our own parents in this lifetime, we go against the Way of non-doing. In our day-to-day practice and time-to-time study, following the Buddha-Way continuously is the only true way of fulfilling our filial piety. Lay people hold memorial services and make offerings during the forty-nine days after a person's death."⁴⁶

And yet, although these statements explicitly oppose the idea of a world of the ancestors and their worship, historically Buddhism had to readjust its doctrine and rituals to accommodate Shintō beliefs. In this way Buddhism allows two apparently antithetical logics to coexist: the "logic of buddhahood" (according to which the deceased passes definitively into *nirvāna* through a funeral initiation rite and the imposition of the posthumous name—whence the origin of the convention of referring to the deceased with the term *hotoke*, or Buddha), and the "logic of spirit taming" (in which the spirit, burdened by its past *karma*, is thought to be constantly in danger of falling into hell unless someone performs a cycle of expiatory rites on its behalf in order to direct it peacefully towards *nirvāna*. These rites correspond to the rituals to be performed until the 33rd year after the death of a person). Some scholars point out that both logics conceal a doctrinal "heresy." This heresy consists in the fact that since Śākyamuni Buddha preached the truth of the "non-self" (*anātman*; in Japanese *muga* 無我), it follows that all the celebrations and commemorations for an alleged "spirit" of the deceased that might survive after death, enter an "intermediate" state between this life and the next, and finally achieve *nirvāna* or the Pure Land at the end of the 49th day, are completely absurd. This holds for all Buddhist Schools, in particular the True Pure Land School, which contends that the spirit of the deceased is reborn immediately in the Pure Land at the moment of death. In fact, "Orthodox Jōdoshū doctrine states that the power of Amida Buddha is exceedingly efficient, and the soul upon the death of the body, goes directly to the Pure Land without any wandering about in an intermediate stage. The attainment of the rebirth is immediate (*sokutoku ōjō*) and therefore there is no *chūin*, no in-between state, no need to provide for a soul in transit, no need for forty-nine days of critical care and feeding... The practical application of this idea would eliminate funeral and memorial services, since there is no postmortem existence requiring care. There is no need to support the journey between lives if there is no traveler making the trip. The intellectual conundrum that results is interesting: immediate rebirth of the soul means that the soul defined as the *intermediate* existence does not exist."⁴⁷

There are several answers to this ontological dilemma. Some say that funeral rites are concerned with a worldly, rather than otherworldly, truth. Others point out that funerals are not an answer to metaphysical doubts, but to the emotional and psychological reality of the living in relation to the deceased. Others still insist that historically the very concept of "soul" or "spirit" is an alien element that made its way into Buddhist doctrine

46. *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, at <http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/common_html/zuimonki/02-19.html>.

47. G. Tanabe, "The Orthodox Heresy of Buddhist Funerals," in J. I. Stone e M. Namba Walter, *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, op. cit., 335.

in order to meet the needs of the laity. In spite of all these answers, it appears that the content of the very concepts of “heresy” and “orthodoxy” employed in the dispute has constantly undergone several transformations. Thus, if today some Buddhists regard the practice of funerals “heretical,” during the medieval period the monks of the True Pure Land School were considered “dissidents” precisely because they refused to take part in this last rite of passage.

In any event, what seems clear is that despite these accusations of “heresy” and “heterodoxy,” contemporary Buddhist Schools have neither limited nor modified their funeral practices. As we pointed out previously, these practices are not the result of abstract metaphysical speculations but, rather, answers to the affective need of the living to remember their dear ones. And as Tanabe writes: “Human sentiments make the core elements of Japanese funerals resilient to the persuasions of orthodoxies. In the end, love and affection hold sway over both theory and practice.”⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

In what we have written about the concept of death, funeral rites, and the role of the ancestors in Japanese religious thought, there was no mention of the contribution of Christianity to this aspect of human existence. It should not come as a surprise that the reflection on death, and particularly on the role of the ancestors, is central for a respectful inculturation of the Christian message. In the 1972 book, *Japanese Religions*, the Agency for Cultural Affairs states: “One of the reasons Christianity is not more generally accepted may be that to the Japanese religious consciousness, with its orientation toward family and household religion as opposed to a religion of individual choice and commitment and with its almost instinctive inclination to affirm an essential continuity between the divine and the human, Christianity simply seems utterly alien.”⁴⁹

In reply to this statement, which we find rather partial, it must be observed that from a theological point of view the Church has actually given some serious thought to the problems of death and the afterlife as they are perceived in Japan. Along the same lines, from a practical point of view the Church has offered precise pastoral indications about the worship of the dead in order to reassure the believers (in particular those who converted to Christianity as adults and whose parents and relatives are not Catholic) regarding the destiny of their ancestors.

There are at least four areas that deserve some reflection and consideration in the *theological guidelines* of the Church. The first area regards the difference between the Christian understanding of God and the Japanese conceptualization of the divine. The Christian confession that man was created by God radically contradicts the idea that the human and the divine world are somehow interchangeable because they belong to

48. *Ibid.*, 345.

49. Agency for Cultural Affairs, *Japanese Religions* (Tokyo, 1972), 25.

an omnicomprehensive totality. For the Christian faith, man can in no way forget or get rid of his creatural status and turn himself into a god. On the contrary, man must always regard himself as God's created human being, and God must always be understood as his creator to whom honor and worship are due. Man's final destination is not to merge with the divine, but to become a new creature by taking part in the glory of the Resurrection. This is all the more relevant in relation to the practice of remembering one's dead. The respect that is due to the dead, and the prayers and sacrifices offered on their behalf by their families and friends, must not be mistaken as worship of the ancestors conceived as family gods.

The second area of reflection pertains to the concept of death. As we saw previously, in Japanese religious thought death does not separate in a definitive manner the world of the living from the world of the dead. On the contrary, there is a mutual correspondence between the two worlds which constitute an uninterrupted and interrelated community. This correspondence of worlds constitutes the doctrinal justification of the rites that the living owe to the dead (in order that these may achieve the final status of ancestors) and of the rewards (or punishments) that the dead bestow on the living based on how well they have been worshipped.

These ideas are at variance with the Christian faith, which maintains a sharp separation between the two worlds and believes that "among those who belong to Christ's mystical body, some have already entered God's glory, being in the presence of the Trinity of God in eternal beatitude. Some, after ending their earthly lives, are undergoing purification. And some are still in this world on their journey toward the final glory. Although the living and the dead are in different states, both belong to the same body of Christ. Therefore they are spiritually firmly bound together by the love of God and the love of neighbor."⁵⁰

Moreover, while it is true that Christians believe in a *communio sanctorum*, it is also true that this should not be confused with that *communio familiae* in which the direct interrelation of the living and the dead is limited to one's ancestors or to the deceased members of one's family. "The Church, from its very beginning, has deeply respected and commemorated the dead, and has been offering prayers and sacrifices to obtain the remission of sins and punishments. On the other hand, the Church has shown special love and veneration to the Saints who have already participated in the glory of God, while praying to ask for their intercession and trying to follow their holy example."⁵¹

The third area of reflection concerns the concepts of *on* (benevolence) and *kō* (filial piety). These concepts ensure the solidarity of all the family members (both past and future) and constitute the criterion for evaluating every moral decision. In fact, these concepts are akin to the commandment to love one's father and mother, although a healthy balance between the individual and the collective lies, according to Christian faith, in a

50. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, *Guidelines on Interreligious Dialogue for Catholics in Japan* (Tokyo, 2010), 53.

51. *Ibid.*, 53–4.

proper subjection of this commandment to the first. Moreover, the family, in which the Christian is born and lives and which one ought to respect, is not only the natural family, but also the *familia Dei* which unites all believers in brotherhood and solidarity through their faith in Christ.

Lastly, we must emphasize that the Church has great respect for the practices of non-Christian religions, particularly on the issue of the dead and the ancestors. The Declaration *Nostra aetate* states: "There is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father."⁵²

The Church confirms this idea and applies it to the Japanese situation as it declares: "We must find and appreciate the profound religious feelings and spirituality in what the Japanese have been practicing to venerate ancestors since ancient times. The worship of the ancestors is derived basically from Japanese people's love and respect towards ancestors and the emotional solidarity of the family. However, within the shifts of history, the worship of ancestors has been connected with religions and gained elements from these respective religions. Some of these religious elements may be inconsistent with Christian belief. Nevertheless, many Japanese rituals for the deceased are derived from their love and respect towards ancestors. Therefore they have much in common with the commemoration of the dead of the Catholic Church which has been observed since ancient times... The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men."⁵³

As for the *practical aspect*, Catholics living in a non-Christian environment experience many difficulties and ask many questions as they find themselves having to interact with other funeral rites and customs. In partial reply to these difficulties and questions, I have attached to this paper the second part of the *Practical Guide for Catholics in Relation to Problems Concerning Ancestors and the Dead*, published by the *Commission for non-Christian Religions of the Japanese Bishops' Conference*.

This text, edited in a question-and-answer format, meets the concrete needs of Christian believers by offering them secure guidance in complex situations. The text also represents a clear example of the depth of the Church's tactful and loving attempt to inculturate the message of the Gospel in an existential, moral, and spiritual issue that is of primary importance in the Japanese context.

The Church, through these theological reflections and practical guidelines, continues to be faithful to its Lord. At the same time, it welcomes both the somber wandering of

52. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

53. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, *Guidelines on Interreligious Dialogue for Catholics in Japan*, op. cit., 55-6.

Bashō's dreams and master Dōgen's profound warnings about birth and death;⁵⁴ it welcomes them, however, by reading in them what perhaps they try to express without being fully able to articulate it, that is: the hope that death—the painful mark of our temporality and finitude—may be nothing but the final and definitive passage into the sweetness of God's transcendence.

54. Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. *Zenki* "Total Dynamic Working" and *Shōji* "Birth and Death," op. cit., 79: "It is a mistake to think you pass from birth to death. Being one stage of total time, birth is already possessed of before and after. For this reason, in the Buddha Dharma it is said that birth itself is no-birth. Being one state of total time as well, cessation of life also is possessed of before and after. Thus it is said, extinction itself is non-extinction. When one speaks of birth, there is nothing at all apart from birth. When one speaks of death, there is nothing at all apart from death. Therefore, when birth comes, you should just give yourself to birth, when death comes, you should give yourself to death. Do not hate them. Do not desire them."

APPENDIX

PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR CATHOLICS

IN RELATION TO PROBLEMS CONCERNING ANCESTORS AND THE DEAD

Commission for non-Christian Religions of the Japanese Bishops' Conference

1984

SECOND SECTION

Practical guide to solving problems concerning communion with ancestors

Many Japanese Catholics live in a social context or family with persons of different faiths. This explains why many are concerned about how they should behave in daily life and relationships in connection with the other religions, and they wonder how they should relate to the dead. This concise and practical manual is an attempt to reply to the concerns of such people. It is offered as a contribution to solving problems concerning the dead in a manner that is based upon faith in the Resurrection of Christ. In the past, at the moment of baptism, some people were asked to abandon their Buddhist or Shinto altars. Those who experienced those times may have the impression that this manual is very lax, or that it concedes too much to other religions.

Yet, as everyone knows, the Second Vatican Council, which took place in the period 1962–1965, interpreted itself and the Church as “a Church open to the world”. This openness embraces other religions too. Previously, the attitude of the Church was more apologetic and it asked its faithful, as we mentioned above, to abandon all contact. Now the Church sees the action of God in the other religions and tries to discover the evangelical values they contain (cf. *Nostra aetate*).

This does not mean that the Church’s attitude has radically changed: instead, we can say that some lost values have become visible again. This attitude of today’s Church has been invariably present throughout its long history, though in some periods it was not so visible. The relationship with other religions has helped to shed light on the Church’s authentic attitude towards the world.

Below, in question and answer form, we reply to some specific problems that have been brought to our attention.

Q. 1 *What should I do with the Buddhist altar, a statue of Buddha, and Buddhist paintings?*

A. If all of your family members are Catholic, it would be better for you to have only one Catholic family altar. But if you need to maintain the Buddhist altar for reasons of your family or relatives, just leave the altar as it is. When you do not have to keep the Buddhist altar, ask the temple concerned about the disposal method. The family altar is a place to pray. If you use the Buddhist altar as the family altar, remove the statue of Buddha and the Buddhist painting and put instead a cross, or an image of Christ or the Blessed

Mother. You could also place the *ihai* (Buddhist memorial tablet with the name of the dead) in it.

Q. 2 *Buddhists recite the Sutra for the dead; do Catholics have something similar?*

A. The Catholic Church has no Sutra as a prayer for the dead, but it does have many kinds of prayer. For example, Mass is offered for the dead. The Mass is the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ and, therefore, it is the source of infinite love. From very early times, the Church has always offered Masses for the dead. It is the duty of the whole family to deepen communion with the dead. Therefore, it is recommended that the family should pray together from time to time. On these occasions, they can use the “prayers for the dead” contained in the various Catholic prayer books. It is also an excellent idea to invite a priest to pray with the family at its altar/shrine.

Q. 3 *Is it all right to offer favorites of the deceased such as fruits, tea, or sake to the Buddhist altar?*

A. As an expression of respect and affection for the departed, offering such things seems to be all right, even if it done every day. According to Catholic teaching, prayers and acts of charity are offered for the deceased.

Q. 4 *Do Catholics have something similar to the “kakochō” (register of the family’s dead members) that Buddhist families keep in their homes?*

A. No. However, in order to deepen communion with the dead, the family can keep a register that contains the baptismal name and the dates of birth, baptism, confirmation, marriage and death of the family members. Furthermore, if a written memory is kept of the deceased, this may be placed on the family altar, or any other suitable place. If the deceased was a Christian, his baptismal name should be included.

Q. 5 *What should I do with hiai?*

A. If there are already the ancestors’ *ihai* in the Buddhist altar, just leave them there in order to preserve and deepen the memory of the departed. You do not have to do anything to *ihai* in the Buddhist altar. On *ihai*, *kaimyō* (a posthumous Buddhist name) is written, but Catholics have baptismal names. Therefore, when you place memorial tablets of Catholics, add a cross and the baptismal names of the departed.

Q. 6 *Is it necessary to have kaimyō (a posthumous Buddhist name)?*

A. *Kaimyō* is a name given to those who join some Buddhist sects. It is proof of becoming a believer in Buddhism, and is usually given after one dies. Catholics are given a Christian name when they are baptized, and participate in God’s life since then. Therefore, it is not necessary to be given another name. It is advised that all Catholics—on the tombstone, for example—always add a cross and the baptismal names.

Q. 7 *I am the only one Catholic in my family. Is it all right if I pray before the Buddhist altar, ring the bell, offer rice and so on?*

A. Even if the ancestors have not been baptized, praying for them who had a good will and asking for their protection is a commendable action as a family member. When praying with hands joined before the Buddhist altar, you could say in your heart, “Lord, grant them eternal rest.” Ringing the bell or offering rice to the parted is a sign of affection and respect toward the ancestors. Therefore you should do so with such feelings.

Q. 8 *My children and I are Catholic, while my husband/wife is not. Neither I nor he/she is the heir of the ancestors’ grave. When he/she dies, how should the funeral be conducted?*

A. Trusting the mercy and the call of God who desires the salvation of all, you may hold the funeral for your husband/wife at the Church. He/she can be buried in the same grave with the other Catholic family members.

Q. 9 *I am Catholic, but my parents and ancestors were Buddhist. What shall I do to venerate their memory?*

A. According to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Lumen gentium* 16), those who do not know the true God nor our Savior Jesus Christ, through no fault of their own but due to the circumstances they have been surrounded by, will be able to share the abundant mercy of God thanks to the merits of the death on the cross and resurrection of Christ, if they sincerely follow their conscience moved by the divine mercy. For this reason, a person like this, no matter what religion he or she belongs to, will live in a deep relationship with God’s love and will also enjoy fellowship with other members of the family. Therefore, Catholics are encouraged to mourn for their ancestors and parents by means of the appropriate prayers and rites of the Church. This is not against the will of ancestors or parents. When both ancestors and parents are Buddhists, depending on the circumstances, it may be better to follow the Buddhist tradition respecting the relatives’ will. But when most family members are Catholic, on the day of *hōji* (a Buddhist ceremony), it is recommended to ask a Catholic priest to pray in the house or offer a Mass, and attend the Mass and pray.

Q. 10 *May Catholics participate in the rites, anniversaries and commemorations of other religions?*

A. When a funeral is held in a Catholic church, people of other faiths also participate devoutly. In the same way, the Catholic faithful may take part in the rites of other religions; this is not just a matter of good manners, since praying for the happiness of a dead person is also a Christian work of mercy. The offering of incense and flowers is common to all the religions and, therefore, there is nothing against taking part. In such a case, the Catholic faithful may pray in their hearts—for example—“Lord, grant him (her) eternal rest.”

Q. 11 *I am the heir of the family. All my ancestors and parents are Buddhist. Therefore, the funeral of my parents and other relatives must be held at a Buddhist temple and entrusted to a Buddhist monk. Would this be all right?*

A. Yes, it should be all right. Ignoring the religion of others only because of being a Catholic is against charity. This is a problem to be always kept in mind.

Q. 12 *There are Buddhists in my family and, on the occasion of monthly anniversaries, the rites of the spring and autumnal equinoxes and the celebration of the “o-bon” (15 August), a Buddhist priest of the family temple is always present. Should I reject this custom?*

A. No. If we look at things from the perspective of religious freedom, since you are now Catholic it is only natural that the veneration of the ancestors should split in two. While the Buddhist priest recites the Sutra, you should pray to God for the dead.

Q. 13 *When the only one Catholic in a family passes away, what should be done to contact the Church and ask for the Funeral Mass?*

A. It would be better to arrange ahead of time for the details of the funeral with the family members, Catholic friends, the godfather or godmother, the pastor or Church members. It is recommended to tell other members of the family in advance that, in case of death, they should contact the Church. Then the Church members should try to celebrate the Funeral Mass in the church after consulting with the bereaved family. When the family wants to do it with a Buddhist service or some other way, their wishes may be respected, but the Church members should celebrate the Mass for the dead in the church.

Q. 14 *When there is a funeral in Japan, it is the custom to make an offering (“kōden”) to the spirit of the deceased, or to offer a gift in return for the offering received (“kōdengaeshi”). How should Catholics behave?*

A. This custom, among the Buddhists, expresses the desire to help relieve the financial and spiritual burden of the funeral. The return gift for the offering received is a sign of love and gratitude for the friendship and favors received during the life of the deceased. It can be given as a gesture of love and gratitude towards the deceased. In any case, Christian poverty and simplicity should not be forgotten. Recently, there has been a tendency to make a donation to some work of social assistance, instead of giving a gift in return for the offerings received.

Q. 15 *What should Catholics do during the bon festival (Buddhist festival of the dead) and higan (equinoctial week)?*

A. In the liturgical calendar November 2 is All Souls Day. Especially in November, the final month of the liturgical calendar, Catholics recall the deceased, pray for their eternal repose, and celebrate Mass for them. On August 15, the Catholic Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is also appropriate to com-

memorate our deceased ones on that occasion. In the Catholic faith, we can always hold communion with dead, through prayers, in the love of God. It is very meaningful to pray and strengthen the spiritual unity with the deceased, during the *bon* festival, *higan*, and *meinichi* (anniversary prayers).

Q. 16 *Our family grave has been for generations inside a Buddhist temple. What shall I do when I visit the grave?*

A. When you visit the grave with non-Catholic relatives or Buddhists, you may ask a Buddhist priest to recite Buddhist sutras. The Catholics should pray in their hearts to God for the deceased. When all the family members are Catholic but the grave cannot be removed, Catholic prayers can be recited at the grave. In this case, if the grave is taken care of by the Buddhist temple, a fee must be paid to the temple after consulting with them. When a Catholic family wants to have a new grave, do so in a Catholic cemetery if there is one. If not, have it in a public cemetery. It would also be fine to put the ashes in the Church crypt.

Q. 17 *I would like to make one grave out of several graves of our ancestors, but the stone mason says, "Tombstones have souls and the stones cannot be touched unless their souls are removed." What can I do about this?*

A. Tombstones do not contain souls of the deceased in any way. But since there is a hope of resurrection in the Catholic faith, we should take good care of the tombstones and pray in front of them. If some problems occur, it is recommended to consult with the temple, choose the most acceptable way for everyone including the stone masons, with respect for the will of family members and relatives, and pray.

Q. 18 *I am the heir of my family. All of my family members became Catholics, so there is nobody to take care of the Buddhist grave of my ancestors. Is there any good option?*

A. You should have a new grave in a place where you can offer Catholic prayers, and bury there your ancestors' remains, if possible. If that is not possible, upon receipt of the temple officials' consent, ask them to take care of the grave as usual, offer them a donation, and keep on visiting the grave.

Q. 19 *When ancestors are Buddhists while descendants are Catholics, is it possible to bury all in the ancestors' grave together in a temple?*

A. If the temple agrees, it is all right with the Catholic Church. But as stated before, especially when all the family members are Catholics, it is preferable to build a new grave in a Catholic or public cemetery and have the remains buried in the new grave.

Q. 20 *If a grave is considered to face an unfavorable direction, do Catholics also have the practice of driving out an evil spirit?*

A. In the Christian faith there is no concept of an unfavorable positioning. Therefore

there is no need to ward off evil spirits. However, if the non-Catholic relatives worry about the grave position and want to have the grave exorcised, there is no need to be against it. That is the case with houses, too. In such cases, ask a Catholic priest to have it blessed so that the family will be convinced.

Q. 21 *Can we say that the souls of the dead, in some way, reside in the tomb?*

A. The souls of the dead do not reside in the tomb. The tomb holds the mortal remains of the dead (body, bones, hair) and should be treated with respect. This allows us to deepen our awareness that both we and the dead belong to the community of those who have been redeemed in Christ, through the mercy of God.

Q. 22 *Many people believe that when somebody dies, one will arrive in heaven and join one's ancestors after undergoing purification. It is believed that if their relatives do not make offerings to them, the souls will suffer and may even cause harm to living persons. Do the Catholics believe the same?*

A. Every religion offers a different explanation for life after death. The Catholic Church, in its own way, has acknowledged the purification after death and has been praying for the dead from the beginning. The purpose of these prayers is to obtain eternal peace and repose for the dead. According to the teaching of the Church, all who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are assured of their eternal salvation, but they undergo purification after death to enter the joy of heaven. This purification is called purgatory. Therefore, the Church encourages people to pray and offer Masses, and practice almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance in order to help the dead. In the Catholic Church, however, there is no idea that the dead suffer agony and cause harm to living persons when their relatives do not make offerings for them.

Q. 23 *If I do not respect ancestors, will I be punished?*

A. This question is somehow related to the previous question. Ancestors do not harm their offspring. In other words, there is no punishment coming from them. However, those who feel some kind of responsibility for their sins, sometimes think that it is due to their disrespect for ancestors, and they think they will be punished. Christians who think they have not been kind enough to their ancestors, should ask for God's forgiveness and try anew to respect their ancestors.

Q. 24 *Is it possible that some of our ancestors are in hell?*

A. First of all, we humans are not able to know whether someone is in hell or not. If somebody does not love God or his/her neighbors at all while living in this world, the person will be eternally separated from God, who is the origin of love and happiness. This is what we call being in hell. Since humans cannot see inside the others' hearts, nobody can ever say that someone is in hell. Meanwhile, the souls of persons in hell never harm

living persons. God loves all humans and wants all to be saved. Let us leave the things of the afterlife up to the will of God, Who is infinite love.

Q. 25 *Is there such a thing as muen-botoke (a dead person with nobody to tend his/her grave) in the Catholic Church?*

A. *Muen-botoke* in the sense of a soul wandering off into this world and cursing people does not exist according to the teaching of the Catholic Church. However, *muen-botoke* also means the deceased who do not have descendants or anyone to pray for them. Catholics should pray for these people. In fact the Church is praying for them every day.

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PHILIPPINES

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Death, burial ceremonies and mourning encompass a wide range of traditional, personal and communal beliefs and practices in the Filipino society. A blend which draws its sources from pre-Hispanic beliefs, colonial traditions, Christian faith and local religious traditions. This brief overview will force us to confront once again the complex and very often ambivalent tone of the different Filipino cultures, shaped by the colonial history of this country and at the same time with a heavy pre-Hispanic influence which still lingers on. Death, its related ceremonies, and the world view it implies has been the meeting point and focus of two different cultures: that of the Filipinos and that of their Christian colonizers. This paper, limited in its scope, seeks to portray some present, and still quite common traditions related to basic patterns of belief, behavioral code and ritual practices dealing with death, in both the indigenous and city milieu trying to detect a continuity line in the present-days' Filipinos celebrate death.

WHAT IS YOUR RELIGION?

“I went as far as Tawi-Tawi and portions of Central Mindanao. In Siasi, I met a teacher and asked him: ‘What’s your religion?’ ‘It depends on what day.’ I was surprised by that answer because he said that he was originally Muslim. ‘Can you explain that?’ ‘On Friday we are Muslim. But during the planting season we have to perform the rituals for our ancestors because they’ll get angry and we’ll have no harvest.’”¹

This is the witness of Florentino Hornedo, a leading Filipino anthropologist and scholar who did fieldwork on ethnic cultures of the Western part of Cordillera and the Ivatan culture. His account seems to apply to Muslims and Christians alike from Tawi-Tawi to Batanes, i.e. from the farthest South to the farthest North of the Philippines. Most of the indigenous groups² would believe in a “Supreme being,” the spirits of their ancestors, “the seen and unseen things,” a cosmic and animistic system where everything is alive, interconnected and interdependent; a system that would permeate their lives.

With the successful introduction of Christianity, Roman Catholicism became their dominant religion without the indigenous beliefs being completely obliterated. They never disappeared and the fundamental differences were to be reconciled in a way or another with the “competing” belief system. It is possible, then, for an Ivatan³ to attend Holy Mass and receive Holy Communion and ask the *anitus*⁴ for a successful and safe fishing season, as he divines the meaning of the lines they found in a piglet’s liver, the piglet being offered as a sacrificial offering.⁵

While the perception is that the indigenous belief is going to continue to weaken with each passing generation, Filipinos, nevertheless, without even realizing it, continue to do things that are rooted in their indigenous traditions and cultures—their traditional Christian education notwithstanding. Religious rituals and belief dealing with death can be considered a sort of “fortress” or “meeting-point” where two different cultures meet and clash, be it intentionally or not.

The Spanish *conquistadores* found a people that had a religion of their own. They worshipped and offered gifts to the *anitos* or *espiritus* of their ancestors in exchange for their protection. This worldview is based on the belief that deceased family members continue

1. N. L. Mercado, ed., *Filipino Popular Devotions. The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion & Christianity* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2000), 24.

2. Beside a considerable number of communities of American, Arabic, Chinese, Indian and Hispanic descent, the Philippines has ten distinct major indigenous groups: Bicolano, Ibanag, Ilocano, Ivatan, Kapampangan, Moro, Pangasinense, Sambal, Tagalog and Visayan. There are also several aboriginal races such as the Badjao, Igorot, Lumad, Mangyan and Negritos. Each one of these minority groups consist of various sub-groups totaling more than 100 ethnic groups.

3. Ivatan: a Filipino ethnic group predominant in the Batanes group of small islands, in the Northermost part of the Philippines.

4. *Anitu/Anito* (or *diwata*): spirit. It is to be understood both as the collective name for pre-Hispanic belief system and the soul of the dead when it is regarded as manifesting itself to the living in some way such as by apparitions or other sensible signs.

5. C. A. Hidalgo, *The Making of the Ivatans* (Metro Manila: Cognita TRC, 1996), 385.

to exist having interest in the affairs of the world, while at the same time holding the ability to influence the fortunes of the living.⁶ Therefore Filipinos revered their ancestors with the purpose to ensure their continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living and sometimes to ask for special favors or assistance.

LIVING TOGETHER WITH THE ANCESTORS

The pre-Hispanic belief system of Filipinos consisted of a pantheon of gods, spirits, creatures and men that guarded the streams, fields, trees, mountains, forests, and houses. Bathala, the creator of earth and humans, was superior to these other gods and spirits. Regular sacrifices and prayers were offered to placate these deities and spirits—some of which were benevolent, some other malevolent. Traditional Filipinos believed in an afterlife. Reward or punishment after death depended upon their behavior in this life. Anyone who had alleged power over the supernatural and natural beings was automatically ranked to a socio-religious position of prominence within the community; every village having its share of shamans and priests or priestesses who competitively plied their talents and carried on ritual healing.

The persistence of ancestor reverence among many of the Philippines ethnic groups is due to the understanding that ancestors play a vital role in the fulfillment of their aspirations as individuals and as an indigenous community. Ancestors remain part of the community of the living. They are its link to the divine and its source of solidarity and resilience amidst the joys and perils of life.

In this respect, the Benguet indigenous communities in the Cordillera Region (from now on: “Igorot”⁷ or “mountain dwellers”) may be considered a case in point, in so far as their ancient traditions and ritual sacrifices regarding processes of burial, mourning and ancestors reverence are still present and active. “Ancestors play a major role in fortifying

6. “We have to understand that the word *espiritu* is widely used in the Philippines. What *espiritu* might mean for the educated Catholic and for the priest and bishop, may not be the same for ordinary Filipinos who have not been instructed in the faith... The word I prefer (for *espiritu*) is *anito*. Even though *anito* today is not so commonly used among the tagalogs, the word captures the sense much better. Our ancestors believed that people after death became *anitos*. But *anitos* are simply invisible beings. Although invisible, they still have bodies. They can be wounded or get wet. Although we cannot see them they basically are like us. They have needs like ours. If you collide with *anitos* of your *ninunos* (tagalog word for departed ancestor) you might get sick. So be careful. You have to ask permission first. If you need fresh air, they also need fresh air. If you need food, they also need food. That is why from time to time it is important to give food offerings. This belief explains present-day practices.” F. Zialcita in: N. L. Mercado, ed., *Filipino Popular Devotions. The Interior Dialogue Between Traditional Religion & Christianity*, op. cit., 27–8.

7. The name Igorot is referred to any of various ethnic groups in the Mountain Province of northern Luzon, Philippines. Most of them have an elaborate cosmology and thousand deities of various classes. They still keep or have kept until recently their traditional religion believing in spirits, including those of ancestors, and have complex rituals to propitiate them. Ethnologists distinguish about ten main ethnic groups, each one with its own dialect and culture, including the Ibaloi, Kankanaey, Bontoc, Tinggian, Ifugao, Apayao, southern and northern Kalinga.

and maintaining their solidarity as a kin group and as an indigenous community... We can claim that ancestors serve as the key symbol of the Benguet Indigenous religion. The ordered world of their community life is often associated with ancestors spirits where everyone and everything has a definite place and function.”⁸

The Igorots, particularly the Ibalois, Ifugao and Kankanaeys, believe in the presence of lesser gods and spirits, classified as nature spirits, ancestral spirits and spirits of the living. “Nature spirits” are claimed to be the offspring of the gods. They live in the environment and interact with man in a close relationship where whatever blessing they receive and hardships they experience are attributed to the spirit beings. For this reason, every Ibaloi or Kankanaey is conscious of working for both the living and the world of spirits.

Ab-abiik or *kadkadua* is the spirit of the living. When this spirit separates from the physical body, the person becomes ill unless proper rites are performed and instituted.⁹ When the body functions cease to be, the person is still not considered “dead.” it will be only when it is declared so by the community. Burial usually occurs after three to seven days from the time of death.

Unlike many Westerners, talking about death is not a taboo among Igorots people. Many Benguet homes have a tomb or two in the family backyard. Ordinary people would like to be buried within their own land. In Sagada,¹⁰ Mt. Province, villagers have instituted—long time ago—burial and mourning rites on the death of a stillborn, a child, a young adult, an adult, an elderly and those who die because of violent death.¹¹

Ancestral spirits are classified as the *ammed* and *penten* spirits. The *ammed* and *kadaring*, are the spirits of ancestors who lived their expected life-span and death was their natural ending. They are believed to be good spirits living in *Gawdan*, which is the level proximate to the summit of Mount Pulag that is often in confluence with the clouds. The *penten*, instead, are the spirits of relatives who died of sudden and violent death such as drowning, car accident, suicide, etc.

8. L. L. Taray, “Understanding Ancestor Reverence in the Benguet Tradition,” in *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review*, 2008/1: 69–70.

9. According to Leonardo Mercado, the phenomenology of the soul among Philippines groups—i.e. the existence of more than one soul among the Filipinos—reveals a pattern with very little difference between the thinking of the upland ethnic minority groups and the lowland Filipinos. Cf. L. N. Mercado, “Soul and Spirit in Filipino Thought,” in *Philippine Studies*, 1991, 39/3: 287–302.

10. Sagada: very famous municipality where the ancient funeral norm of hanging coffins from mountain cliffs is still being practiced by some minority groups. The purpose of suspending the casket from the mountain rocks is to bring the deceased closer to heaven.

11. A detailed account of the traditional and still practised burial beliefs and rituals of the Igorot people, above all in Sagada, Northern Luzon is to be found in the Piluden-Omengan’s Elma book: *Death and Beyond (Death & Rituals & Other Practices & Beliefs of the Igorots of Sagada Mountain Province, Philippines)*, (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 2004). The author is a Sagada native and educator. Other references: <http://www.benguet.gov.ph/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=288&Itemid=301>; M. Malanes, *Death Very Much Part of Igorot Life*, 2010, at <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20101031-300682/Death-very-much-part-of-Igorot>>; and R. Rabang Roland, *Inside the Cordillera Death Ritual*, op. cit.

Kalutaan is the earth, the natural dwelling place of humans and of “nature spirits.” The latter can dwell in the world above and in the underworld. Some of these, the *an-anitos* are generally malevolent. They always desire to harm man in order that man will feed them through animal sacrifices and other offerings. Also dwelling in *Kalutaan* are the *kadaring*; the *penten* who live in those places where they met their death. These spirits entice people to die a similar death to theirs, and the *angel/banig* (spirits of people who died recently).

It is believed that during a ritual celebration, ancestral spirits would visit their living relatives and show them certain omens, which the living have to interpret while performing the *sangbu* (acceptance ritual) celebrated as a way of recognizing and reciprocating the benevolence of the ancestor. Among the Kankanaeys, the welfare of a family is attributed to its *sangbu*¹² or acceptance of a gift from the ancestral spirits.

The following are some of the most familiar and traditional rituals performed among the Mountain Province indigenous communities.

The “*Kiyad*” is a sacrifice performed to appease the ancestor spirits. A horse, a carabao (water buffalo) or a cow must be slaughtered and their meat, eaten and shared among the community members gathered for the occasion. It is usually performed to cure an ailing family member following the advice of the diviner. It is believed that when one of the ancestors had performed it, then one of the descendants’ children or grandchildren will have to perform it again.

The “*Dawigi*.” This is a ritual offered to deceased who died of violent death. It is meant to deal and cope with the loss of a loved one perished in that way. In some villages, community members would prevent the body of a murdered person from being transported during market days. A dog is traditionally butchered before the burial to ask for help in discovering the killer,¹³ and after the burial seeking to cleanse all grief and pain. Prayers offered by an elder accompany the rite to ward off the misfortune that had befallen the family and the community, to reestablish the shattered order of the community so that no one else suffers the same fate. The interesting conclusion is that all violent deaths have a killer. Death is never natural!

The “*Lobon*.” After the burial of the father or mother, the bereaved members of the family having houses of their own perform the *lobon* in their respective house. The ritual marks the parting of the spirits (*kadkadwa* or *ab-abiik*) of the deceased from this world

12. It is considered as a Kankanaey formula of success. They believe that ancestral spirits or the spirits of recently departed relatives can make the living relatives rich by sending them omen signs subject to the wise interpretation of the diviner and *mambunong* and the performance of the *sangbu* ritual. Such omens can be observed in dreams, in ritual performances especially in the reading of animal’s bile and liver, and in physical signs observed in the household.

13. An elder prays: “We offer this dog, which will seek revenge on who had destroyed you because we did not see who did it (murder). You sun, help the victim. But if the murder happened at night, you, moon, have seen the killer. If not, maybe the stars have seen the killer. And if it was cloudy, maybe the clouds have seen the killer.” M. Malanes, *Death Very Much Part of Igorot Life*.

leaving behind wealth, health and prosperity to his family. The ritual animal which is usually offered is a pig.

The “*Lawit-Dawit*.” Oftentimes, during the period of mourning, souls or spirits of the living are frightened and believed to leave the person and wander off to a different world. To call back these souls or spirits or *ab-abiik*, the *mambunong*¹⁴ performs traditional healing rituals. More so, after death has occurred in the family circle. The ritual performer usually offers blankets, chickens and pigs to the spirit of the ancestor.

The “*Mangmang*” is a ceremony celebrated for the first death-anniversary of a person and ends the period of mourning for the spouse.

The “*Etong*” is a feast performed for the souls of departed people—“*Kadaring*”—in order to dance his *Tayao*¹⁵ which is symbolic representation of his flight to the spirit “world” or to their dwelling place on Mt. Pulag. This ritual marks the culmination of the mourning period because after the *panayawan* (dance), the bereaved relatives can now resume their normal work and are free to travel again. Animals such as pigs, cows, and carabaos are offered depending on the social status of the person. These animals are believed to be taken by the spirit of the deceased to the “spirit world” where he will continue to take care of them.

The “*Batbat*.” This ritual is performed to cure a prolonged sickness of a household member. This is attributed to the craving for material things like blankets, animals or a re-burial to another place especially in his/her home compound by departed ancestor. The ritual usually starts in the evening and ends the next day. For the occasion at least two pigs are butchered; one in the evening and the other on the next day. There is no dancing but the drinking of *tapey* (rice wine) lasts until the supply eventually dries out.

The “*Kechaw-Kedaw*.” It is a ritual meant to fulfill the desires of one or more ancestors who are in need of chickens, pigs, g-strings or tapis, blankets, etc. or even money. A person sickness is at times attributed to the ancestral spirits summoning the *ab-abiik* (soul) of the sick person to express their want for some material needs. When a *mansip-ok* (diviner) finally determines that the cause of sickness of the person is the *kechaw-kedaw*, then that ritual has to be offered to that particular ancestor so that the *ab-abiik* of the person will return and his physical body will get well again. The things to be sacrificed, as well as the animals requested by the ancestor depend on the social status of the ancestor.

The “*Peshit* (or *Pedit*)” is a festivity ritual, namely a big feast performed by a rich family as a offer of thanksgiving to the spirits for blessings received and to show the family’s wealth. It is a popular belief among the Kankanaeys and Ibalois that with the performance of the *pedit*, the spirits will always reciprocate with blessings: a long life, good

14. The *Mambunong* is a native priest or Shaman. To become a *mambunong* by heredity means that the talent and characteristic of being a *mambunong* is passed down by an ancestor spirit to a living descendant upon the spirit’s discretion.

15. *Taya-o* or *Baya-o* is a tribute to the dead. It extols the virtues of the dead and seeks his/her blessing for the community and for those who shared resources and efforts to usher the passing of the dead back to the world of their departed ancestor.

health, fertility and economic prosperity. One is then encouraged to perform a *peshit* because this is the occasion where the ancestral spirits come in to shower blessings over a couple and the family. A *peshit* usually takes several days and there is lot of dancing and merrymaking. Usually, for a couple's first *peshit*, three pigs are butchered. This is followed by subsequent feasts wherein five, seven, nine, eleven, or more animals are sacrificed. The highest is the twenty-five pigs sacrifice.

All these practices/rituals are still relevant in this modern times because of the strong sense of unity and discipline of these communities. According to many, they will endure for generations to come. As a matter of fact, the Benguet people hope to become an ancestor in the afterlife. Such aspiration can be realized if one lives an ethical life. They believe that the more one is remembered by the living through ritual performance, the better is one's chance of being accepted in the ancestral abode. It is then an obligation of family members to perform the appropriate ritual to help their dead attain the status of godhood in the afterlife.

Among the Benguet, as among other populations, death rituals are nowadays quite often mixed with another different set of beliefs. They could be considered, at best, a sort of "compromise" between the Christianity introduced by Western missionaries and local traditions and beliefs. It is not uncommon that the *baya-o* (tribute to the dead) is performed during the wake alongside with Christian hymns.¹⁶

ANCESTORS RITUALS AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS IN MODERN TIMES

"On many scores the pre-Christian cult of the *Anito* among the Filipinos predisposed them to accept with ease Catholicism and Christian form of worship and the cult of the saints. The pre-Hispanic Filipinos became Christians without much resistance because they had no need to change their general religious attitude. No violence was done on the religious psychological constitution of the pre-Christian Filipinos. Even if the Spanish missionaries vigorously condemned the pre-conquest superstitious practices and beliefs, they replaced them with Catholic practices and beliefs which—on account of minimal doctrinal foundation—also appeared as superstitious."¹⁷

16. According to Santiago, the pre-Hispanic observances and wake, burial and mourning customs in the Tagalogs provinces were mostly variations of the same themes of the other regions, included the Benguet region, having much in common. During the wake, the social values of *pakikisama* (group or community cooperation) and "*utang na loob*" (debt of gratitude for past favors to the family) were displayed. The long wakes, the offerings to placate the ancestral spirits who were thought responsible for the fatal illness, the heavy drinking as norm to encourage mourning to participate in the rites, the big feast after the burial to celebrate the end of the wake which beckoned the soul of the dead to enter the next life have much in common with the rituals of the Mt. Province. Cf. P. R. L. Santiago, "The Language of Mourning and Depression in Filipino and Its Indonesian and Malayan Cognates Transcultural, Sociological, Historical, Artistic and Therapeutic Significance," in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture & Society*, 1993, 21/3: 284–87.

17. D. T. Gener, "The Catholic Imagination and Popular Religion in Lowland Philippines: Missiological Significance of David Tracy's Theory of Religious Imaginations," in *Mission Studies*, 2005, 22/1: 47.

With the introduction of Christianity, the old burial and mourning rites or phases become observed by the local people under a different guise. The ancient traditional beliefs are now invested with new Christian meanings. Ancient customs with only “minor” and external changes are kept, preserving, untouched, the realm of ancestors, *spirits seen and unseen* of this world in a dynamic interaction among survival, syncretism and transformative continuity.¹⁸ The acculturation of most indigenous Filipino groups to Catholic teachings concerning the human soul and death is quite definite. But it is also clear that survival of indigenous beliefs and customs are still there under a different guise.¹⁹

Nowadays, death and funerals are a regular and public event in the Philippines. They imply lengthy and colorful ceremonies and rituals that, as elsewhere, reflect many aspects of our humanity: a respect for the dead, a deep sense of grief and mourning, together with a notion of an afterlife.

From the most luxurious, extravagant and welcoming air-conditioned funeral parlors, which can provide catering for hundreds of people per day, to the most modest, scanty and pitiable scenery easy to be found in any of the urban-poor slums, the external “settings of death and mourning rituals” may look different from the old ones. However, the actions, attitudes and traditions that unfold describe the same beliefs towards death and the dead.

Interesting enough, some researchers would contend that if we want to understand Filipino society with its hierarchies and status and class relationships, “the geography of death” provides ready-made “maps” of such relations in graveyards!²⁰ Many times even “the cities of the dead”—the cemeteries—reflect those of the living. There, one can find mausoleums and mansions of the rich alongside the tombs of the poor packed shoulder to shoulder or, even more shockingly, on top of one another replicating the vision of shantytown just a stone’s throw away from the opulent mansions and *subdivisions* of the rich.

The modern basic format of death rituals, celebrations and mourning in the Philippines are the wake (or vigil), the burial, the nine-day-novena, the fortieth day, and “*waksi*”

18. It is not uncommon that residents of a housing project in Quezon City retain many of the values and attitudes of the provincial barrios, and not a few *barangays* in Metro Manila still celebrate their district fiestas as if they were in rural areas. This continuum in their worldview may range from the thoroughly Western to the pre-colonial, but within this continuum all Filipinos share basically the same core values and the way of thinking, both in the urban and rural context.

19. Cf. K. Pagampao, “A Celebration of Death among the Pilipino”, at <http://bosp.kcc.hawaii.edu/Horizons/horizons_1999/celebration2.html>. It is an essay by a Filipina student born and living in Hawaii with her relatives, which makes one wonder if pre-Spanish, pre-Christian and, particularly, old pre-conquest belief in ritual systems about death have been eradicated or how much they still persist and remain in some form or other, under what is called “Folk Catholicism.” She writes from the *Ilokano* tradition.

20. P.-F. Tremlett, “Religion Culture and Politics in the Philippines,” at <<http://www.anpere.net/2007/8.pdf>>. “The geography of death” provides an important insight into the hidden structuring of society in the Philippines. According to the author, there is a link between social class and the kind of burial practices one might choose for a deceased relative.

(death anniversary). There are areas in the Philippines where “professional mourners” are hired to weep and wail during the wake and burial. This is no more so common in the cities, but still widespread in the small towns and provinces.

a) “Vigil/Wake” (*lamay* or *paglalamay*) is held all throughout the night until the burial of the dead to keep the deceased company. Wakes and vigils are noisy, almost festive and may last for three, five, seven or even fifteen days if the surviving family is waiting for someone who will be traveling from afar. People usually kill time during the vigil by eating, drinking or just plain talking with one another. Gambling tables are set up under the tarpaulin, and family, friends and neighbors have an obligation to visit the bereaved to keep them company, and to gamble (an otherwise illegal activity) since a tenth of the winnings goes to the bereaved family as a contribution towards their expenses. Relatives and friends are expected to condole with the members of the family of the dead, to help out meet the funeral expenditures by making monetary contributions (*abuloy*). The family, in return, is expected to provide food and refreshments to those who come to sympathize with them. A small food offering is usually left over the coffin. The extension of the house to provide more shelter with a canopy to host condoling guests during the time of the wake and for the funeral meal, could also be seen in this light, for throughout this time the family house is referred to as “the dead person’s house,” making the deceased a kind of retrospective host at large gatherings.²¹

b) Burials are very solemn events. The family view the embalmed body for the last few moments and then the lid of the coffin is sealed off. Before the coffin is moved out of the house, members of the family offer a prayer and the presiding priest is requested for “the final blessing.” The parents and the strict circle of relatives are also asked to sprinkle the coffin with holy water as a final gesture of parting. The coffin is then carried out the main door feet first. Should the head exit first, it would be a bad omen: it would mean that the spirit of the deceased will not leave the house. The coffin is then loaded on a “hearse,” usually a big white “American” car or carried by chosen individuals. In several Philippine provinces, the traditional funeral procession may involve walking to the church and from there to the cemetery, no matter how long the distance. Today most of the friends and other relatives who cannot join in the parade on foot can opt to ride a car during the procession. A funeral Mass is normally officiated either at the church or at home of the deceased. The key emotional point of the rituals performed at the cemetery (often without a priest) is reached when the coffin is lowered into the tomb. It is often marked by outbursts, “hysteria” and drama by women (and at times also men) with shouting, crying, fainting, weeping and calling the name of the deceased. Failing to weep in this way

21. Actually the whole funeral can be seen as the first of a series of attempts to make a kind of final payment to the dead. The dressing and embalming of the dead, which at the beginning was associated with the wealthy but now is extended to all categories of people, is a way of showing respect for the deceased. The dead person’s face is made up and beautified: all these acts can be seen as a kind of gift or tribute to the dead person. Cf. F. Cannel, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 163–64.

is thought to be quite dangerous for the welfare of the surviving group. Burial practices may vary and at times they may include cremation.²²

c) After the burial, a nine day “novena,” together with group prayers and Holy Masses offered to the dead, must take place. They are held to help the deceased enter the gates of heaven. The fourth and ninth days are said to be the time where the soul of the deceased comes back to earth. A food offering is left outside the door of the family’s house during these days to offer to the soul of the deceased. It is not uncommon to hear after the completion of the first novena that the soul of the dead “wants more prayers” or “needs more help”. This is an interpretation the bereaved family may have regarding manifestations believed to come from the departed either through dreams, apparitions of a *multo*²³ or omens.

d) The fortieth day death-anniversary is celebrated with a Mass because it is said that on that day the spirit of the deceased ascends to heaven. After the novena or the fortieth day, the last will of the deceased may be opened.

e) Exactly one year from the day of the death, a final mourning called “*waksi*” is celebrated. In a *waksi*, the family offers a Requiem Mass and prepares a feast and, together with the visitors, offers prayers to the deceased. Some provinces consider this as the day where the family can go back to wearing colored clothes, what is called *babang luksa* (taking off mourning clothes). From that time, the birthday and death anniversaries of the deceased are solemnized every year with a Mass. Humans must remember the souls of the dead through prayer some Masses offered for them or risk punishment in the form of illnesses.²⁴

22. Filipino culture is still adjusting to *cremation*—which is becoming widely practiced. Many Filipino still have reservations about the practice. Currently, many Catholic churches started to offer a *columbarium*, a place to store ashes of the deceased, the niches neatly lined up looking very much like super-mini apartment rows.

23. *Multo*: a ghost, the soul of a person returning from the dead for some unfinished business here on earth. Most Filipinos would claim and swear they saw or they felt the presence of a *multo*. Its troublesome encounters, people say, are the cause of nightmares (*bangungot*) which can provoke instant death. In the provinces, many still rely on *multo*, through mediums, to tell them who murdered a relative or who stole whatever is lost in the house!

24. To restore the proper relationship with a neglected soul, the person (usually a healer) prays a novena, makes an offering of the soul’s favorite foods and admonishes the family to have a Mass said for her, asking the soul not to bother them anymore. The following are witnesses from two shamans or healers of the Visayan region: “The souls of the dead want us to remember them. Life where they are is difficult, especially for those who have sinned here on earth. They give us illness so that we will not forget to pray for them. With Inday (name of the sick person) I found out that her grandmother had given her the sickness. I placed an egg on a plate and called out to all of Inday’s dead relatives... The soul that has greeted its relative will hold the egg and make it stand. It was Inday’s grand mother who held the egg. We started the novena on a Sunday and said it every day for the rest of the week. On the seventh day, I placed an offering of food on the altar, along with the name of the grandmother who had died. ‘This is Inday’s offering.’ I called out to the soul... What I offered was the grandmother’s favorite food when she was still alive. We continued the prayers for nine nights, and Inday recovered. I told them to have a Mass said for the soul when they had the money.” And also: “The souls of our parents may also punish us if we do not pray or have a Mass said for them. And if you are punished

As a whole, Filipinos seem to be very “superstitious,” and even though death and burial practices may vary according to local traditions, nevertheless they share a strong religious component, which, at times appears interspersed with folk traditions rituals.²⁵ Death due to supernatural beings is viewed with fear and concern. Premonitions could be in form of direct and/or symbolic dreams. The traditional final answer given to such a death is a person’s *suwerte* (luck or fate) or a curse by a malevolent agent. People tend to work around the superstitions handed down to them by their parents and grandparents and believe in them to avoid any negative consequences.

Each year, the First and Second day of November, traditionally kept as All Saints and All Souls’ day, are considered the third biggest holiday in the Philippines. They manifest the soulful nature of Filipinos: Christian Filipinos customarily remember, honor and pay respect to the dead. In the old days, in the provinces, the occasion was marked by what is called “*nangangaluluwa*” (literally “pretending to be the souls of the dead, going from house to house serenading the living humans”). “In ancient, colonial and modern times, the intense social process of mourning was and is repeated several times a year in various degrees in the extended family and their network of friends. In colonial and modern times, it is also reinforced twice a year by the religious observance of Holy Week and All Souls Day or Day of the Dead (which also had a counterpart in the pre-Christian era).”²⁶

For All Saints and All Souls Day, Filipinos will throng cemeteries to pay homage to their dead relatives buried there and see living relatives they have not seen since last celebrations. Grave sites are visited, cleaned and adorned by family members, relatives and friends who remain at the cemetery, to light candles, to pray, to lay flowers and bring food

in this way, nothing can help you. Only when a Mass is said will the illness disappear. Like Pastor Gamboa who came to me after spending 400 pesos with a doctor in Tagum. I talked to him about having a Mass said for his parents and tears came into his eyes. He recalled that he had never prayed for his father or mother. He had a Mass said and was freed from his illness.” In J. P. McAndrew, *People of Power. A Philippine Worldview of Spirit Encounters* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2001), 65, 35.

25. The Filipino way of life is encompassed by countless sayings, proverbs, and beliefs with superstitions as interesting—and strong—components of the chemistry of Filipinos’ day in and day out activities. These beliefs may be true or not, but they make up a unique culture of how Filipinos practice the burial of their dead. Cf. L. B. Corpuz, “Filipino Superstitions,” at <<http://filipinotraditions.ph/filer/toledo-cebu/Filipino-Superstitions.pdf>> and H. D. Tacio, “Death Practices Philippine Style,” at <<http://philippinesheritage.ph/filer/toledo-cebu/Death-practices-Philippine-style.pdf>>. A few examples: “A beautiful flower or candle scent smelled in a home after a death of a beloved, means there’s a spirit of the dead visiting who wants the relatives to know he/she’s around. Pray for his/her soul.” “When the funeral procession is passing by your house, awaken the person sleeping; otherwise he/she may be the next one to die.” “The rosary usually placed in the hands of the dead has to be cut and just made to look whole so to break the cycle of death. The cut rosary is believed to hinder anymore tragedy in the family.” “If a butterfly comes fluttering around inside someone’s house, it means that the spirit of a loved one that had passed away is visiting or reminding the family to pray for the dead; it may also be a reminder that a death anniversary is coming soon”.

26. P. R. L. Santiago, “The Language of Mourning and Depression in Filipino and Its Indonesian and Malayan Cognates Transcultural, Sociological, Historical, Artistic and Therapeutic Significance,” op. cit., 285.

for the consumption of the attendees. It could be considered a kind of family reunion—at the graveyard—between the living and the dead. At times booths set up by the major fast-food franchises, can be noticed in the premises of the biggest cemeteries. Once more, one can observe how death for Filipinos is a public affair, incorporating social togetherness and open display of human emotions and the sharing of grief as widely as they can.

Fenella Cannel conveys it in a very illuminating way: “It is part of the belief that the dead attend the living people to whom they were close, seeking their companionship, but this can only be safely offered in controlled conditions like those of the All Souls’ Night observances, where the dead are offered prayers and food, visited in their tombs and invited into the house. At the same time, the living makes clear that the participation of the dead cannot be real or permanent: the dead can only ‘sniff at’ life and not consume it, and by morning they must return to their voiceless realm of darkness.”²⁷

Beyond doubt, there is no better way to illustrate what could be described as “the paradox of ambivalence:” lamenting the loss of the person, remembering him/her, cultivating a kind of relationship, but at the same time asking the deceased not to come back and not to “disturb” anymore.

CONCLUSION

The Philippines, a country where large extended families are quite common and respect for elders widespread, is a land of ancestor “veneration,”²⁸ a theme very much stressed in the traditional religion of the pre-colonial Filipinos. Certainly, the understanding of death has been one of the key arenas in which battles were fought out between Filipinos and their Christian colonizers. The mixture of folk religion with official Catholic practices shows the presence of survivals of native traditions and, although the majority of the Filipino people are Catholic, they have retained many beliefs, rituals, attitudes and practices (what many would call *tout-court* superstitions) concerning death and its realm.²⁹

Furthermore, “the fact that the Philippines is the only Christian nation in Asia can probably to a considerable extent (though not exclusively) be attributed to the observation that Christianity... is the only major religion in the world in which mourning plays

27. F. Cannel, *Power and Intimacy in the Christian Philippines*, op. cit., 162–63.

28. Considering also the strong influence of the Catholic education on the native traditions, the word “veneration” is probably more accurate than “worship” since most people—maybe aside from some indigenous group from the Igorot area—do not actually bestow anymore upon their ancestors god-like powers, they simply revere and honor them. In the same line, it must be said that ancestor *worship* cannot be equated with God’s worshiping.

29. For instance: the same pattern of respect for ancestors in exchange for their aid and protection can be found in the stipends offered by Filipinos for requiem masses. The following maybe a typical case: relatives pointed out to a sick young man that his illness may be due to his forgetfulness of his departed grandparents. So the family requested that a Requiem mass be offered for the repose of his grandparents. In: L. N. Mercado, ed., *Filipino Religious Psychology*, op. cit., 187.

a significant role. This aspect of Christianity must have appealed to Filipinos from the outset. In a manner of speaking, a culture of mourning met a religion of mourning.”³⁰

Equally, sociologists point out that what really transpires in the mourning rituals is the Christianization of the Philippine animistic belief.³¹ The power believed to be immanent in the *anitos*, as powerful semi-gods, at times capricious and whose anger needed to be appeased with *atang* or offering is now transferred to the enforced Christian belief system.

The Spanish and Mexican missionaries brought with them their own “brand” of folk-Christianity, including the veneration of the Saints, and a host of “superstitions” (regarding ghosts, evil spirits and the like) entirely congenial to the natives’ belief system. Thus, if indigenous concepts were used to interpret and assimilate Christian notions, it was not just because the first were mistakenly applied to the latter, but because there was a similarity in structure between some Christian belief and some indigenous beliefs, including the structure of pre-Spanish pantheons of *anitos* and *diwata*. “As a result, cults that respected customs of Hispanic Catholicism—thus acceptable to catholic priests, such as the cult of the saints or funerary rituals—could prosper with the blessing of the clergy, while retaining their polytheistic structure and fulfilling pre-Christian religious needs, which were quite simple and basically concerned with prosperity, health and peace.”³²

Another possible conclusion to be drawn from this paper, points at the relative lack of interest which Filipino Catholics show in concepts like Heaven, Hell and Purgatory; something that suggests the degree to which the message of the Spanish missionaries were modified, contracted and simplified by early Filipinos. They took the new religion and made it uniquely their own, “tapping” into the power sources of the catholic religion, while retaining their fidelity to the indigenous one.

The *Visayans*, for instance, long resisted the Christian dogma of a heavenly paradise since the sky was not the heaven where the good were rewarded. It was the abode of the deity and the afterlife a continuation of the kind of life one had led while living on this earth.³³ Basically, there is little discussion of Heaven and Hell, sin and repentance and

30. P. R. L. Santiago, “The Language of Mourning and Depression in Filipino and Its Indonesian and Malayan Cognates Transcultural, Sociological, Historical, Artistic and Therapeutic Significance,” op. cit., 289. He continues saying: “The evangelization of the Philippines, like that of Ireland, is one of the most sweeping and impressive in the records of Christianity. Although Islam had been introduced into the Islands two centuries earlier, it did not spread as swiftly and widely as the Catholic faith.”

31. “Filipino is still an animist at heart, in spite of four centuries of Roman Catholicism.” In L. N. Mercado, ed., *Filipino Religious Psychology*, op. cit., 183.

32. J.-H. C. Macdonald, “Folk Catholicism and Pre-Spanish Religions in the Philippines,” in *Philippine Studies*, 2004, 52/1: 87–8.

33. “Father, we do not doubt there will be a heaven for the Castilians, but not for the *Visayans*, because God created us in this part of the world so very different from yours; and since, as we see, the Spaniards will not even let us sit down in their houses here, nor show us any respect, how much less there where, as you say, all is grandeur, majesty and glory without end?” in H. W. Scott, *Barangay. Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 93.

the primacy of afterlife. The “cult of the dead,” more than saying anything about the after world, was mirroring the social order.

Hence, if what *Bicolanos*, *Visayans*, *Ifugaos*, *Tagalogs* say about death is not clearly focused on the afterlife, it is focused on relations between the dead and the living, the permeability of barriers between the two, and the problem of achieving a correct separation. Folk beliefs found in most of the Filipino areas, reveal that the loved departed are now more “powerful” than before as they are able to watch us from their abode, able to send omens and dreams to guide us as we live our life here on earth. Ancestral worship/veneration is society strengthening. In other words, they are here; they influence our lives as we depend somewhat on them.³⁴

“We Filipinos believe in the presence of spirits everywhere—in places, persons and things. There are spirits in nature, spirits of the dead, spirit of our ancestors, spirits of the saints. Some make their presence felt...”³⁵ For the Filipinos veneration, love, respect (as well as fear) for the dead, present both a cultural and a doctrinal shade. It is part of their identity, having an obvious social relevance and religious implications. Catholic teachings insist on the fact that the dead are not to be feared, because they are our loved ones and would not do anything to scare us. Moreover, the Catholic description of “the realm of the dead” points to the fact that even the dead have their space and their time given by God even if—as living—we have no opportunity of reaching this space or time yet. As we proclaim in the *Nicene Creed*: “We believe in one God... maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen;” and in the *Apostles’ Creed* we declare: “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord... He... was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead...”

Yet, “ancestors veneration” is a field where “orthodoxy” remains ambiguous. Fear and hope are like the two poles that characterizes at the same time the relation with (and the dependence on) the ancestors, within an inclusive understanding of the family, where reciprocity and propriety are the moral attitudes expected. In a number of ways that we have referred to, the dead are felt to threaten the living with their proximity and influence their well-being or misfortune. That is why we affirm that, all in all, “ancestor veneration” is an ambiguous matter, an ambivalent reality. On the one hand, people are aware of the presence and the influence of the ancestors; they know that they depend on them and that

34. Cathy Guballa is a born-again Christian who shares in this way her relation with his departed father and son: “Though my church does not believe in visions or signs, I still adhere to that. These beliefs offer me comfort in knowing that my loved ones are just around and happy in God’s kingdom. In our church we are discouraged from ‘talking to the dead’ even through pictures. I sometimes have these running conversations in my head... with my son and I see no harm in doing that. When I spot a particular butterfly, I relate that to either my son or my father. These are my comfort mechanisms and not dictated by faith of any kind.” See C.B. Guballa, “Grief in the Filipino Family Context,” at <<http://www.indiana.edu/~familygrf/culture/babaoguballa.html>>.

35. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, *Filipino Way to Holiness (Filipino Spirituality)* (Makati Philippines Word & Life Publications, 1999), 47.

they need their help. On the other hand, this “cult” is not focused on (or caused only) by love or piety towards the dead—but rather by fear of the dead.

As a Catholic missionary, while a part of me supports the analysis that these practices are carryovers from the Filipinos’ pre-Christian past, I also believe that in this specific topic, there are elements of the people’s faith that cannot be dismissed so easily. In approaching popular religion in its concrete signs, we cannot forget that we are not simply dealing with some “doctrine.” Rather, we are dealing with people: psychological, cultural, social and religious considerations have to be given due weight in transforming patterns of popular beliefs and practices regarding ancestors’ reverence and native religion.

The Christian Good News is no longer concerned with invoking the ancestors or praying “to” them as it is with invoking Jesus and praying to him: in Jesus, we pray “for” the ancestors. What originally was expected from the ancestors, the gift of life and livelihood, prosperity and health, now is granted, in a much deeper sense, by Jesus Christ, the fullness of life.

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TAIWAN

FABRIZIO TOSOLINI

“王假有廟致孝享也 ‘The king will repair to his ancestral temple:’ with the utmost filial piety he presents his offerings (to the spirits of his ancestors)” (*Yi Jing, Cui*).¹ This sentence appears in the *Book of Changes*, the most renowned among the *Five Classics*,² and already indicates ritual as the main approach of Chinese culture to death and ancestors.³ In other words: the experience of

1. Unless otherwise stated, this and the following texts from the Classics, are quoted according to the translation of James Legge <<http://ctext.org/>>.

2. Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_Books_and_Five_Classics>.

3. “Clearing the fields was too laborious a task for each peasant to do on his own. Several families had to join together to work one field in common, and the associated groups of families formed villages. Each group of villages, larger or smaller, had its territory where the right of clearing land for tillage and for pasturing animals was reserved for the inhabitants. These territories constituted seignories, units both political and religious, which the lords governed on the human level and over which the earth gods presided on the divine level. Below the lord, the society was divided in two classes: patrician families... and plebeian families of peasants who cultivated the soil. Below were the slaves. Only patricians could possess domain, which were granted by the lord. They owed this privilege to their proximate or distant descent from an ancestor who had

death and the mysterious realm of those beyond its threshold do not become the object of rational or philosophical reflection, rather they are integrated into the world of the living by means of rites, celebrations and traditional rules of behavior.

As a first step in the realm of the varied approaches to death and ancestors in Chinese culture (especially in Taiwan), some sparse quotations from ancient texts may provide a general introduction to the theme, and may help to show to what extent Chinese culture, as far as perception of death is concerned, shares in the common human heritage. Then, an overview of Chinese philosophical interpretations of death and the world(s) beyond, notably the attitude of Confucius, of his early disciples and of the ancient Daoist School, with special reference to Laozi and Zhuangzi, will show how varied Chinese reflections on the topic are.

This will be followed by a presentation of the doctrines and practices of the two major religious traditions, first Daoism and then Buddhism around the time of their encounter in China (from the second to the sixth century AD), then of present-day Buddhism and Folk religion. They display a varied set of doctrines and rituals dealing with death and ancestors, which are continually kept alive, in ceremonies both public and private. As a result, it will be apparent how much, even now, what is beyond the threshold of death is seen as relevant for the daily experience of those who are still alive.

ANCIENT TEXTS

Some of the songs of the *Book of Odes* come close to Western sensibility when expressing the whole spectrum of human feelings when confronting death: some soldiers with no hope of returning home mourn the fact that they will not be able to keep their pledges to their wives:

For life or for death, however separated,/ To our wives we pledged our word./
We held their hands; / We were to grow old together with them. / Alas for our
separation!/ We have no prospect of life./ Alas for our stipulation! /We cannot
make it good (*Odes of Bei, Ji Gu*).

been a lord... The family, the fundamental cell of ancient Chinese society, is well known only for the patrician class. From the very earliest time this patrician class was essentially agnatic. The name was transmitted from father to son;... headship of the family descended to the eldest son of the principal wife, unless he had a physical defect which rendered him unfit to perform the rituals of ancestor worship... Underlying the family proper was the clan, *hsing* (姓). This consisted of all the families who bore the same clan name... The clan was a religious unit, linked by the worship of the first ancestor and sanctioned by the rule of exogamy... The fundamental element of both secular and religious organization was the seignory, just as the city was for the Greek world. Within the seignory, society was founded upon two bases: the family group and possession of the seigniorial land. Likewise, religion was founded upon two kinds of worship: of ancestors and of local earth gods. The two kinds of worship were merely the two fundamental bases of society transposed onto the religious plane: the ancestors were the family made divine, as the earth god was the seignory deified." H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*. Trans. F. A. Kierman. (Amherst MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 4–5.

In another song, *The Cypress Ark*, a wife cries while the coffin of her husband floats along the river:

It floats about, that boat of cypress wood,/ There in the middle of the He./ With his two tufts of hair falling over his forehead,/ He was my mate;/ And I swear that till death I will have no other./ O mother, O Heaven,/ Why will you not understand me? (*Odes of Yong, Bo Zhou*).

In another *Ode*, a man vents his anger at unworthy men, and asks when their time will be over:

Look at a rat,—it has its limbs;/ But a man shall be without any rules of propriety./ If a man observe no rules of propriety,/ Why does he not quickly die? (*Odes of Yong, Xiang Shu*).

Yet another *Ode* tells of death and the deceased's grave as a place where social differences and divisions of rank will be overcome:

His great carriage moves heavily and slowly,/ And his robes of rank glitter like a carnation-gem./ Do I not think of you?/ But I am afraid of this officer, and do not rush to you./ While living, we may have to occupy different apartments;/ But when dead, we shall share the same grave./ If you say that I am not sincere,/ By the bright sun I swear that I am (*Odes of Wang, Da Che*).

In another *Ode* the “*gaudeamus igitur*” cry echoes:

On the hill-sides are mulberry trees;/ In the low wet grounds are willows./ When we have seen our prince,/ We sit together with him, and they play on their instruments./ If now we do not take our joy,/ The time will pass till we are no more (*Odes of Qin, Che Lin*).

In the same collection, the *Ode Huang Niao* files an unusual protest to Heaven over the death of some heroes:

They flit about, the yellow birds,/ And rest upon the jujube trees./ Who followed duke Mu (to the grave)?/ Ziche Yansi./ And this Yansi,/ Was a man above a hundred./ When he came to the grave,/ He looked terrified and trembled./ Thou azure Heaven there!/ Thou art destroying our good men./ Could he have been redeemed,/ We should have given a hundred lives for him.

In this *Ode* their fear of death is also voiced, together with the hypothesis that somebody could be redeemed and saved from death, albeit at the price of other lives.

A song of the *Minor Odes of the Kingdom* criticizes a leader for his bad governance, while attributing the critical situation of the country to Heaven.

Lofty is that southern hill,/ And vigorously grows the vegetation on it!/ Awe-inspiring are you, O (Grand) master Yin,/ But how is it that you are so unjust?/

Heaven is continually redoubling its afflictions;/ Deaths and disorder increase and multiply;/ No words of satisfaction come from the people./ And yet you do not correct nor bemoan yourself!/ The Grand-master Yin,/ Is the foundation of our Zhou,/ And the balance of the State is in his hands./ He should be keeping together the four quarters (of the kingdom);/ He should be aiding the Son of Heaven,/ So as to preserve the people from going astray./ O unpitying great Heaven,/ It is not right he should reduce us all to such misery! (*Ode, Jie Nan Shan*).

In this *Ode* Heaven is both the direct cause of evils, and the one who allows Master Yin to be so cruel.

Another song of the same collection presents the God of heaven, asking whether he might hate anybody:

Look into the middle of the forest;/ There are (only) large faggots and small branches in it./ The people now amidst their perils,/ Look to Heaven, all dark./ But let its determination be fixed,/ And there is none whom it will not overcome./ There is the great God, / Does He hate any one? (*Zheng Yue*).

In the *Ode Shi Yue Zhi Jiao*, of the same collection, Heaven's decrees are seen as inexplicable, yet not enough to cause the author to leave his office and duty: "The ordinances of Heaven are inexplicable, But I will not dare to follow my friends and leave my post" (天命不徹我不敢傲我友自逸).

The following *Ode Yu Wu Zheng* is even harsher, asking Heaven why the people must suffer from famine and natural disasters:

Great and wide Heaven,/ How is it you have contracted your kindness,/ Sending down death and famine,/ Destroying all through the kingdom?/ Compassionate Heaven, arrayed in terrors,/ How is it you exercise no forethought, no care?/ Let alone the criminals:/ They have suffered for their offences;/ But those who have no crime,/ Are indiscriminately involved in ruin.

A strophe in the *Wen Wang Ode* of the *Greater Odes of the Kingdom* can be taken as a synthesis of the oldest Chinese traditions: to think of his ancestors connects the noble man to Heaven and His decrees. This is the road to happiness:

Ever think of your ancestor,/ Cultivating your virtue,/ Always striving to accord with the will (of Heaven)./ So shall you be seeking for much happiness./ Before Yin lost the multitudes,/ (Its kings) were the assessors of God./ Look to Yin as a beacon;/ The great appointment is not easily (preserved).

The saintly King Wen is even present at the right hand of God, accepting the offerings of one of his successors, in a feeling of communion between the visible and invisible world mediated by the rite (*Ode Wo Jiang*, in the *Collection of the Sacrificial Odes of Zhu*):

I have brought my offerings,/ A ram and a bull./ May Heaven accept them!/ I

imitate and follow and observe the statutes of king Wen,/ Seeking daily to secure the tranquility of the kingdom. King Wen, the Blessor,/ Has descended on the right and accepted (the offerings)./ Do not I, night and day,/ Revere the majesty of Heaven,/ Thus to preserve (their favour)?

The life of nature itself, the work of agriculture finds its meaning in the sacrifice to the ancestors, thus connecting different times into a continuum (*Ode Zai San* of the *Decade of Min Yu Xiao Zi*):

Luxuriant looks the young grain, And the weeders go among it in multitudes. Then come the reapers in crowds, And the grain is piled up in the fields, Myriads, and hundreds of thousands, and millions (of stacks); For spirits and for sweet spirits, To offer to our ancestors, male and female, And to provide for all ceremonies. Fragrant is their aroma, Enhancing the glory of the State. Like pepper is their smell, To give comfort to the aged. It is not here only that there is this (abundance); it is not now only that there is such a time: from of old it has been thus.

CONFUCIUS AND HIS EARLY DISCIPLES⁴

Even before the arrival of Buddhism in China, a set of beliefs about the afterlife for the dead already existed: if, on the one hand, Chinese religions did not contain a well-developed idea of an afterlife, on the other hand the belief was widespread that the souls of those who had lived in accord with the “Mandate of Heaven” (the will of Shangdi) would become ancestors in Heaven; whereas the souls of those who had not followed Heaven’s decree would, after death, continue to live on for a time in a dark underworld area (called “the Yellow Springs”) and then fade away into nothingness.

Confucius

Confucius (孔子, Kong Zi, 551–479 BC)⁵ lived around the middle of the Zhou Dynasty (1100–221 BC). He used to say that he did not create; he merely transmitted the wisdom of the ancients. He believed in the high value of the civilization built up by the early rulers of the Zhou Dynasty, deplored its visible decline, and tried to rediscover and re-present the high points of that civilization, so as to save the people from the evils of his time. However, Confucius not only transmitted; he also modified the traditional outlook, as in the case of belief in the afterlife.

In Confucius’ *Dialogues*,⁶ there are some instances dealing with this issue: “Life and

4. In this section I make ample use of an article prepared by Prof. Umberto Bresciani which was published in *Quaderni del CSA*, 2011/2: 115–18. I gratefully thank Prof. Bresciani for his help and permission to use his materials.

5. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucius>>.

6. Also called *Analects*, in Ch. *Lun Yu* 論語. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Analects_of_Confucius>.

death are predestined; richness or poverty is decreed by Heaven” (*Dialogues*, XII, 5).⁷ This expresses Confucius’ belief in Heaven’s rule over human life. Heaven is the one who decrees the span of life of each individual person.

“You do not yet know life, how could you know death?” (*Dialogues*, XI, 12). This saying is included in a conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zilu. Zilu asks two questions; the first one is “How to serve the spirits?”, to which Confucius replies: “You are not yet able to serve men, how could you serve the spirits?” The second is “May one ask about death?” The reply of Confucius to this second question is the saying just recorded above.

This saying has been sometimes employed to prove that Confucius was simply a misbeliever, but this is not the case. Confucius did not mean to disparage knowledge of the afterlife; neither did he mean, when he said to keep spirits at a distance, to disparage worship of Heaven and spirits. This saying can be interpreted in another way: Confucius valued worship of spirits, and he valued knowledge of the afterlife. He valued them so much, that he sternly admonished his listeners: you first must know life, then you will know what death is all about. Similarly, you first need to learn how to live a really human life, then you will be qualified to venerate the spirits.

We can also go one step further and come to two additional deductions: first, whoever knows life can understand death too; and second, that whoever wishes to learn about death, should learn it from those (such as the great sages) who have a deep knowledge about what life is. “Sacrifice implies presence. One should sacrifice to the spirits as if they were present. The Master said: ‘If I do not sacrifice with my whole heart, I might as well not sacrifice’” (III, 12). By this saying Confucius does not deny the existence of the spirits of the dead; in the above passage he is dealing with sincerity of heart in rituals. Later Confucian philosophers (especially Xunzi) have stressed that rituals are useful for the living rather than for the dead souls, something of which Confucius was well aware. In this passage, he is simply exhorting those taking part in rituals to do everything with a sincere heart, by trying to be fully aware of the actual (yet invisible) presence of the spirits.

“Secure the rights of the people; respect ghosts and gods, but keep them at a distance—this is wisdom indeed” (VI, 22). The above statement has been widely misinterpreted, to prove that Confucius did not believe in ghosts or gods. However, in the context of the whole book, these words cannot be taken as an expression of disbelief. This saying comes from a lesson on political behavior. In Confucius’ time, most feudatories were wasting their time and money in a lavish display of piety toward ancestors and gods. Confucius was advising his pupils to be wise in their policies and in their advice to rulers. A ruler needed first of all to show respect to ghosts and spirits and take care of the needs of the people. Once these two requirements were accomplished, there would be no fault in such a ruler (see, for instance, *Dialogues*, VIII, 21). Mencius will explain this idea even further,

7. *The Analects of Confucius*. Trans. and notes by S. Leys (New York: Norton & Company, 1997).

when he wrote: “The people are the most important element in a nation; the spirits of the land and grain are the next; the sovereign is the lightest” (*Mengzi*, VII B, 14).

“Yan Hui died. The Master said: ‘Alas! Heaven is destroying me. Heaven is destroying me!’” (XI, 9). Confucius had a very promising young disciple by the name of Yan Hui. He was planning to hand down his school to him at his death. Unfortunately, Yan Hui died very young, leaving his master in great sorrow. “The Master said: ‘A righteous man, a man attached to humanity, does not seek life at the expense of his humanity; there are instances where he will give up his life in order to fulfill his humanity’” (XV, 9). The ideal human being is one who prefers virtue to life, who is ready to sacrifice his life for a higher ideal. This implies that there is something more valuable than life. In the West this would be linked to the immortality of the soul. Confucius leaves it more vague, even though, from his whole outlook, we may deduct that this superior value is the concept of *ren* (love).

“The Master never talked of: miracles, violence, disorders, spirits” (VII, 21). Confucius did not like to talk about extraordinary events, such as miracles, awful crimes, strange phenomena, ghosts, and the like. We know very well that the Chinese have always been fond of writing and reading ghost stories. The *Zuo Zhuan* (or *Zuo Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals*), a book almost contemporary with Confucius, reports several instances of ghosts appearing to avenge wrongs received during their previous lives.

The philosopher Mozi (墨子, about 470–391 BC),⁸ in his book written not so long after Confucius, has a chapter to denounce the faults of the Confucians. The first fault is precisely that they do not mention ghosts; they do not talk about active spirits intervening in people’s lives. In his logic, it would mean that whoever commits evil is not going to receive a punishment from above. For Mozi, this is an extremely serious shortcoming in Confucian doctrine, enough to destroy humankind.

Mengzi

Mengzi (or Mencius, 孟子, 372–289 BC)⁹ is known as the second sage in Confucianism. Mengzi felt entrusted with the commitment to illustrate further the doctrines of Confucius. Elaborating on one of Confucius’ teachings—that one’s life, long or short, is decreed by Heaven—Mencius explains:

Everything is destiny (*ming* 命, it could also be translated as “everything is decreed by Heaven”). A man should accept obediently what is correct in one’s destiny. Therefore, he who knows destiny does not stand beneath a precipitous wall. Death sustained in the course of carrying out the Way to the limit is due to correct destiny. But death under handcuffs and fetters is not due to correct destiny (VII A, 2).¹⁰

8. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mozi>>.

9. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mencius>>.

10. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Trans. W.-T. Chan (Princeton University Press, 1963).

Mencius is not a fatalist. He makes a clear distinction between correct and incorrect destiny. Man can make meaningful choices by following his correct destiny. Whatever happens to him while he is doing his best, while he is pursuing the Way, is Heaven's Will. The evil that comes upon man because of his own doing is not Heaven's Will. Mencius' overall philosophical ideal in life is best condensed in the following passage:

He who exerts his mind to the utmost knows his nature. He who knows his nature knows Heaven. To preserve one's mind and to nourish one's nature is the way to serve Heaven. Not to allow any double-mindedness regardless of longevity or brevity of life, but to cultivate one's person and wait for (destiny to take its own course) is the way to fulfill one's destiny (VII A, 1).

Here Mencius develops a new theory of human nature (what distinguishes humans from animals is moral conscience) and points out a way to realize one's nature: i.e. developing the moral feelings instilled by Heaven. He further points to the way to know Heaven (through knowing one's moral nature), and to the way to serve Heaven: by preserving one's *moral* mind (or nature) and by nourishing it (i.e. by developing one's inner inclination to do good). Then there is a mention of death: regardless of longevity or brevity of life, one should not waiver in one's effort to do good. Only in this way can one fulfill his destiny. Mencius also elaborates on Confucius' idea that a human being can give up his life for the sake of righteousness:

I like fish and I also like the bear's paw (a delicacy in ancient China). If I cannot have both of them, I shall give up the fish and choose the bear's paw. I like life and I also like righteousness. If I cannot have both of them, I shall give up life and choose righteousness. I love life, but there is something I love more than life, and therefore I will not do anything improper to have it. I also hate death, but there is something I hate more than death, and therefore there are occasions when I will not avoid danger... Therefore there is something men love more than life and there is something men hate more than death... (VII A, 1).

Xunzi

Another ancient Confucian philosopher of importance is Xunzi (荀子, around 313–238 BC).¹¹ He is famous for opposing the Mencian doctrine of the goodness of human nature. He instead stresses that humans are innately evil, i.e. selfish, and they badly need education and discipline. In the book known as *Xunzi* there are numerous pages against belief in ghosts and superstitions.

11. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xun_Zi>.

12. In Beijing Roman pinyin this word is romanized as "Daoism," while in the past the spelling "Taoism" was used. When the word occurs in quotations, it is transcribed according to the original text.

THE DAOIST PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOL

According to a classic division, in philosophical Daoism¹² there are three historical phases. Yang Zhu (楊朱), between the fifth and the fourth century BC) is counted as the first of the Daoist philosophers. His principles, as referred to by Mengzi (孟子), are the opposite of those of Mozi (墨子). While Mozi advocates universal love, Yang Zhu strives for self-preservation (*weiwo* 為我); he leaves society and the pursuit of political ideals in order to lead a tranquil, peaceful and pleasant life. He thinks that if all were to follow such a path, there would be no violence or injustice.

As for the search for happiness, Yang Zhu feels that, while trying to live a life as serene as possible, one should accept one's allotted lifespan, because death is as natural as life, therefore it should instill neither fear nor awe. Funeral ceremonies are of no help to the deceased; they correspond to an invasive sense of duty which is not needed by human society.¹³ Yang Zhu is credited with the "discovery of the body:" in contrast to the Confucian view of man as a social being, whose world is the relationship with others in the complex setting of political, social and cultural life, the founder of the Daoist school highlights the importance of the physical dimension and the value of human life in the midst of the mystery of nature.

Such a frame of mind, by itself favors the meditation on the experience and significance of death, which becomes an important theme in the development of Daoist thought. The theme of valuing life, of preserving it and therefore the need to find for oneself a safe haven in some hidden recess is developed in the further stages of the school.¹⁴

Laozi

The second phase of Taoism is represented by the *Dao De Jing* (*Book of the Way and Virtue*), attributed to Laozi (老子, born around 604 BC).¹⁵ This book attempts to discover the laws underlying the changes in the universe, as a way to find one's rightful place in it.

It takes advantage of the achievements of the "School of Names" (*Ming Jia* 名家), namely the discovery of what "lies beyond shapes and features,"¹⁶ to propose the Dao (the Way 道) as the Reality that is beyond names, from which, somehow, all realities and names come. The Dao has a movement which, surprisingly enough, is reversing: "Reversing is the movement of the Dao" (ch. 40)¹⁷ and "To go further and further means to revert again" (ch. 25).¹⁸ Every movement turns into its opposite. To know the ways of the Way leads to perfect accomplishment. Seen against this background, death loses much of its

13. Y.-L. Fung, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. D. Bodde ed. (Toronto: Collier-Macmillan, 1966), 60–8; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yang_Zhu>.

14. Y.-L. Fung, *A Short History*, op. cit., 65.

15. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laozi>>.

16. Y.-L. Fung, *A Short History*, op. cit., 94.

17. Ibid., 97.

18. Ibidem.

darkness, and, since even ancestors are caught in such a movement which makes everything relative, they too lose their importance as a presence ruling practically all aspects of life:

He who knows other men is discerning; he who knows himself is intelligent. He who overcomes others is strong; he who overcomes himself is mighty. He who is satisfied with his lot is rich; he who goes on acting with energy has a (firm) will. He who does not fail in the requirements of his position, continues long; he who dies and yet does not perish, has longevity (*Dao De Jing* 33).

Men come forth and live; they enter (again) and die. Of every ten three are ministers of life (to themselves); and three are ministers of death. There are also three in every ten whose aim is to live, but whose movements tend to the land (or place) of death. And for what reason? Because of their excessive endeavors to perpetuate life. But I have heard that he who is skilful in managing the life entrusted to him for a time travels on the land without having to shun rhinoceros or tiger, and enters a host without having to avoid buff coat or sharp weapon. The rhinoceros finds no place in him into which to thrust its horn, nor the tiger a place in which to fix its claws, nor the weapon a place to admit its point. And for what reason? Because there is in him no place of death (*Dao De Jing* 50).

Governing a great state is like cooking small fish. Let the kingdom be governed according to the Dao, and the manes of the departed will not manifest their spiritual energy. It is not that those manes have not that spiritual energy, but it will not be employed to hurt men. It is not that it could not hurt men, but neither does the ruling sage hurt them. When these two do not injuriously affect each other, their good influences converge in the virtue (of the Dao) (*Dao De Jing* 60).

Those who want to follow the Way need to follow a path of humility, being willing to adapt themselves to its will:

I have three precious things which I prize and hold fast. The first is gentleness; the second is economy; and the third is shrinking from taking precedence of others. With that gentleness I can be bold; with that economy I can be liberal; shrinking from taking precedence of others, I can become a vessel of the highest honour. Now-a-days they give up gentleness and are all for being bold; economy, and are all for being liberal; the hindmost place, and seek only to be foremost;—(of all which the end is) death. Gentleness is sure to be victorious even in battle, and firmly to maintain its ground. Heaven will save its possessor, by his (very) gentleness protecting him (*Dao De Jing* 67).

Man at his birth is supple and weak; at his death, firm and strong. (So it is

with) all things. Trees and plants, in their early growth, are soft and brittle; at their death, dry and withered. Thus it is that firmness and strength are the concomitants of death; softness and weakness, the concomitants of life. Hence he who (relies on) the strength of his forces does not conquer; and a tree which is strong will fill the out-stretched arms, (and thereby invites the feller.) Therefore the place of what is firm and strong is below, and that of what is soft and weak is above (*Dao De Jing* 76).

In all this, it can be easily seen that the Way suggests means of escaping death and failure. The *Dao De Jing* proposes its wisdom as the way to tune in with the Dao and therefore to share in its power and eternity.

Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi (莊子, 369–286 BC)¹⁹ is the representative of the third phase of philosophical Daoism. While in the *Dao De Jing* (at least in some occurrences) the idea of death works as a negative possibility from which to escape, in Zhuangzi it is something considered in a neutral way, as one of the many changes brought about by the Way. At the beginning of his *Inner Chapters* (“*Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease*,” 1.1) he comments negatively on those who wish themselves a long life:

And Peng Zu is the one man renowned to the present day for his length of life:
if all men were (to wish) to match him, would they not be miserable?

In the *Inner Chapters* 2.3, he considers the hard labor of human life, which from his point of view does not differ much from death:

To be constantly toiling all one’s lifetime, without seeing the fruit of one’s labour, and to be weary and worn out with his labor, without knowing where he is going to—is it not a deplorable case? Men may say, “But it is not death;” yet of what advantage is this? When the body is decomposed, the mind will be the same along with it—must not the case be pronounced very deplorable? Is the life of man indeed enveloped in such darkness? Is it I alone to whom it appears so? And does it not appear to be so to other men?

On the other hand, Zhuangzi considers the change that the Dao brings about in death as something which is not negative, something worthy of human admiration:

Before long Zi-lai fell ill, and lay gasping at the point of death, while his wife and children stood around him wailing. Zi-li went to ask for him, and said to them, “Hush! Get out of the way! Do not disturb him as he is passing through his change.” Then, leaning against the door, he said (to the dying man), “Great indeed is the Creator! What will He now make you to become? Where will He

19. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zhuangzi>>.

take you to?"... Zi-lai replied, "Wherever a parent tells a son to go, East, West, South, or North, he simply follows the command. The Yin and Yang are more to a man than his parents are. If they are hastening my death, and I do not quietly submit to them, I shall be obstinate and rebellious... When we once understand that heaven and earth are a great melting-pot, and the Creator a great founder, where can we have to go to that shall not be right for us? We are born as from a quiet sleep, and we die to a calm awakening" (ch. 6.5).

In order to achieve absolute happiness, Zhuangzi proposes not to stop at appearances, at immediate feelings, but to strive to attain a higher point of view. One way of doing this is to use reason to analyze and dissipate emotions, especially those related to the four human miseries: 生老病死 (birth, old age, disease and death).

When Zhuangzi's wife died, Huizi went to condole with him, and, finding him squatted on the ground, drumming on the basin, and singing, said to him, "When a wife has lived with her husband, and brought up children, and then dies in her old age, not to wail for her is enough. When you go on to drum on this basin and sing, is it not an excessive (and strange) demonstration?" Zhuangzi replied, "It is not so. When she first died, was it possible for me to be singular and not affected by the event? But I reflected on the commencement of her being. She had not yet been born to life; not only had she no life, but she had no bodily form; not only had she no bodily form, but she had no breath. During the intermingling of the waste and dark chaos, there ensued a change, and there was breath; another change, and there was the bodily form; another change, and there came birth and life. There is now a change again, and she is dead. The relation between these things is like the procession of the four seasons from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. There now she lies with her face up, sleeping in the Great Chamber; and if I were to fall sobbing and going on to wail for her, I should think that I did not understand what was appointed (for all). I therefore restrained myself!" (ch 18.2).²⁰

This attitude is consistent with the overall trend of the third phase of the Daoist School, for which the attainment of unity with the whole universe is the highest purpose of life:

The universe is the unity of all things. If we attain this unity and identify ourselves with it, then the members of our body are but so much dust and dirt, while life and death, end and beginning, are but as the succession of day and night, which cannot disturb our inner peace. How much less shall we be troubled by worldly gain and loss, good-luck and bad-luck! (ch. 20).

20. Y.-L. Fung, *A Short History*, op. cit., 108.

THE SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY IN DAOIST RELIGION

According to Henri Maspero, ancient Chinese religion was mainly centered on social groups, the sum of the cults of the small states into which China was then divided. When the creation of the Empire caused this system to collapse, Daoism emerged as the Chinese attempt to create a personal religion, much as Orphism and the Mysteries did in the Mediterranean world after the fall of the city cults. Daoism spread all over China and reached its greatest popularity around the end of the second century AD with the Revolt of the Yellow Turbans. In a way similar to the Greek Mysteries, Daoism too eventually yielded to a foreign religion, Buddhism, which played a role similar to Christianity, only without ousting the traditional religions.²¹ The following brief description presents some ideas and rituals of Daoism during this founding period. They evolved with time and historical circumstances, and are still alive to the present days.

Daoism is a salvation religion, which promises the attainment of “long life,” an immortality which however is not spiritual but material and involves the physical body. A reason for this perspective is the fact that, while in the Greek world an opposition between spirit and matter was accepted from very early stages, in China it never materialized. For the Chinese the world is a continuum, which passes from void into materiality, and the soul is not distinct from the material body. Again, a reason for this is the fact that in an individual there are too many souls, so that none of them can be symmetrical to the whole body. In every individual there are two groups of souls, three superior ones (*hun* 魂), and seven inferior ones (*po* 魄), which invariably separate at death. Different from such a multiplicity and confused activity, the body is one; only through it can immortality be attained.

Two ways lead to such a bodily immortality: intercession for the dead, which however is not the general rule, and the conservation of the living body. The mortal body is to be prolonged, better, it is to be replaced during the present life with an immortal body “by bringing about the birth and the development within one’s living body of immortal organs (skin, bones, and so on) which are substituted little by little for the mortal organs. The Adept, reaching this point, does not die but ‘goes up to heaven in the full light of day.’”²²

To counter the contradiction of facts (everybody, even the Daoist, dies), the Adepts are said to give themselves only the appearance of having died. What is placed in a coffin is a sword, or a cane; the real body goes to live among the Immortals.

In order to make the body immortal, the Daoist must “nourish the body,” to transform it; and “nourish the spirit,” to make it lasting. This is attained by lots of practices, on two levels: on the material level, alchemy, diet, gymnastics, sexual and respiratory exercises help to suppress the material body while creating out of it an embryo endowed with

21. H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, op. cit., 265.

22. Ibid., 267.

immortality. On the spiritual level, concentration and meditation reinforce the unitary principle of human personality and keep within the body the numerous gods and spirits hosted in it. Their conservation is necessary for the presence of life in the body.

Before these two sets of practices, however, there is a preliminary first step, which is the pursuit of virtue and of acts of virtue, which are exactly counted and registered in the *Book of Life*. Only after this preparation, can the subsequent practices be successful. By this doctrine, and the connected emphasis on repentance and penance for past sins, Daoism contributed to the creation of individual morality, going beyond the limited social dimension proposed by Confucianism.²³

Dietary practices include the abstinence from cereals, which are held responsible for the presence in the body of the “Three Worms.” These cause decrepitude and death by attacking the three Cinnabar Fields;²⁴ they shorten people’s lives by reporting their sins to heaven. Elimination of cereals goes hand in hand with the gradual exclusion of other foods (meat, rice, wine, plants with strong odor such as onions and garlic), until one is nourished with an “ideal diet” which makes the body light and immortal.²⁵

This is given to the body by the “*feeding upon breaths*,” or “embryonic respiration (*tai si* 胎思).” One must first learn how to retain breath and let it nourish the body; then how to let it wander inside, without the need of guiding it. The taking of breath as food may be followed by the *immortality drug* par excellence, cinnabar (mercury sulfide, in fact a poisonous substance); but this should be first refined and made perfectly pure (by changing it into mercury and again into cinnabar), a very expensive, mysterious and difficult technique.

The circulation of breath goes hand in hand with the *circulation of human essence* (*jing*, in theory sperm in men and menstrual blood in women; not necessarily in a material meaning, but as a sort of dematerialized sublimation, which is able to blend with the breath). Through such a blending, breath and essence give birth to the mysterious embryo,²⁶ which in turn produces a subtle body, leading to non-dying.

Finally, *gymnastic practices* are meant to ease some difficult passages inside the body and make them viable for the circulation of the breath.

At a spiritual level, the Daoist Adept seeks to visualize the deities present in his body, and by means of meditation and ecstasy enters into contact with them. Indeed, the gods of the external world are present inside the body; by means of the “inner vision,” they can be sought, found and supervised in the many limbs or parts of limbs of which the human

23. Ibid., 323–24.

24. The lower Cinnabar Field is the *dantian* proper and is the seat of essence (*jing* 經). Different sources place it at 1.3, 2, 2.4, 3, or 3.6 inches (*cun*) below or behind the navel; the middle Cinnabar Field is at the center of the chest according to some authors, or between the heart and the navel according to others. It is the seat of breath (or “energy,” *qi* 氣); the upper Field is located in the region of the brain and is the seat of spirit (*shen* 神). F. Pregadio, Cinnabar Fields at <<http://www.goldenelixir.com/jindan/dantian.html>>.

25. H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, op. cit., 268–69.

26. Ibid., 345.

body is composed. To review them keeps them inside the body and ensures health. A further step is ecstasy, “sitting down and losing consciousness,” which leaves the spirit free; it allows it to see the Dao present in itself, to perceive to be one thing with the Dao, the state of union by which the body bursts its limits and becomes everything, the unique body.²⁷

Together with individual practices (accessible only to the wealthy ones), Daoism offered communitarian ways by which to be pardoned of sins and share feelings of oneness with the universe. Great festivals were held during equinoxes and solstices; there were other gatherings in which people prayed for the salvation of the faithful, confessed their sins, and did penance.

At the solstices, sacrifices were offered for the dead, while at the equinoxes offerings were made to the stove god and the earth god. A special ritual was also created in order to give the dead an immortal body, so as to help them escape the darkness of their abodes and become immortal. One way was the refining of the souls;²⁸ it was also possible to offer the dead the possibility of being reborn after a certain time, by burying certain objects with them, and by offering them food.²⁹

Some of the festivals were the constant target of Buddhist criticism, for their orgiastic character. This led to the termination of such rituals, at least in public.

In general, under the influence of Buddhism and Buddhist morality, Daoism slowly evolved: two classes of Daoists took shape. On the one hand, those who had time and leisure to give themselves to the individual quest for immortality were called Dao masters (*Dao Shi*) and thought to be the equivalent of Buddhist monks. They lived in communities with their wives and children; some of them even adopted the ideals of Buddhist religious life and practiced celibacy, which by the time of the Tang Dynasty would become

27. Ibid., 364–65: “The Taoist finds himself in quite a peculiar position, different from that of believers in any other revealed religion. For him there is no body of doctrine and stock of practises fixed once and for all through an entirely completed external revelation carried out by a god or a prophet who will return no more. Such an ensemble does indeed exist, but the knowledge of it comes to men piece by piece, gradually... Everybody has the duty of seeking out masters for himself, and his masters, if he knows how to search for them, will be great gods or Immortals of any rank always prepared to ‘transmit’ useful instructions to him. And he has two methods of entering into relation with these masters. One is external, by searching for the Immortals in the solitudes of the mountains where they like to stay, the other internal, by striving to get in touch with them inside himself, in the various regions of his own body where they reside... Rather than painfully searching for the gods throughout the world, it is within himself that the initiate can seek them and he may find them there, since they live with him always. He seeks and finds them through meditation and ecstasy, by what has been called ‘concentrating within the One’ or ‘concentrating his One.’ Like all the Taoist divinities of that time, the One is at the same time both inside and outside of man. The literal sense of the expression is ‘keep the One,’ *shou-yi* (守一). This One which must be kept is described to us as being three. But I believe that this is in fact the result of a recent elaboration and that it had really been one indeed, originally. In fact, as a celebrated phrase from the *Tao-te ching* indicates, the One was the first emanation of the Tao. The Tao produced the One, the One produced the Two (the *yin* and the *yang*); the Two produced the Three (Heaven Earth, and Man); the Three produced the ten thousand things.”

28. “The souls of the dead are raised to the Southern Palace; then with a broth of liquid fire the material of their phantoms is refined; henceforward they are transformed and become Immortals.” Ibid., 389.

29. Ibidem.

the rule. On the other hand, lay believers had simpler notions about Dao doctrines, and practiced collective worship in calmer and more balanced ways than in the preceding centuries. They still needed the intervention of the *Dao Shi*, but the influence of the latter on the religious life of common believers diminished, due to their separation. This can explain why, in the course of centuries, folk religion took shape, sometimes borrowing doctrines and rituals from the Buddhist tradition.

EARLY BUDDHISM IN CHINA AND DAOISM

The traditional date for the entrance of Buddhism in China is the year 2 AD. Its initial spreading occurred during the most flourishing period of Daoism. From the beginning, Buddhist monks devoted themselves to the huge task of translating Buddhist sutras into Chinese. This was done on a team basis: a foreign Buddhist explained in Chinese, as best as he could, the original text, which was subsequently written down in Chinese by a local disciple. The monks could not check the translation, and in this way the Chinese converts could, even without being aware of it, introduce their preconceived ideas into the translation. As a result “throughout the whole Han dynasty, Taoism and Buddhism were constantly confused and appeared as a single religion.”³⁰

This was due to another reason too: the Buddhists chose to translate texts that could sound appealing to a Daoist public, offering them alternative (but not too different) ways of attaining immortality.³¹ As a result, Buddhism was seen just as a new method of obtaining a long sought-after goal; its saints already in the Nirvāna were assimilated to the Daoist Immortals. Buddhism came to be considered as a new sect inside Daoism, stricter and at the same time more balanced and reasonable; it had the advantage of avoiding all the alchemical research, of being a purely moral and contemplative way.³²

What caused Buddhism survive as an independent set of beliefs and finally become acknowledged as a different religion was the continuous arrival of foreign monks, which went on for centuries, leading to a clear presentation of Buddhist doctrines in the Chinese environment. Although not on the same path as Daoism, Buddhism too offers a way to escape death. “Existence is suffering, and from life to life³³ that suffering grows. To get

30. Ibid., 405.

31. An example of translation: “In the stanzas of homage to the Buddha which begin the *Yogācārabhūmi* of Sangharakṣa, we read the following verses: ‘He helps us over (transmigration) through his unequalled intelligence; / Birth, death, and fear are brought to nothing. / The Buddha, the Law, and the Community, / The virtue of these three is without equal.’ Here is how An Shih-kao translates it in prose: ‘Those who had not been saved are saved. Those who died die no more. Those who were old are old no more. All that comes from practicing the Law of the Buddha.’ Quite clearly, this has to be understood in the Buddhist meaning: the series of transmigrations is stopped. But for neophytes who did not yet know anything about Buddhism, is it not the immediate meaning that the practice of the Buddha’s Law leads to not dying and not growing old? Buddhist Nirvāna and Taoist immortality tended to be confused in the minds of the contemporaries.” Ibid., 410).

32. Ibid., 411.

33. Buddhism accepts the doctrine of transmigration of souls, according to which all living beings, man

out of this accumulation of suffering there is but one way, the one that the Buddha has discovered. It is the way that leads to Nirvāṇa, which is existence unconditioned, the only mode of existence which is permanent and which does not lead on to death followed by rebirth.”³⁴ A first step on this way is faith in Buddha, in the Law and in the Community, together with leading a moral life, abstaining from the five sins (of which lust is the first) and from killing living creatures. However, to follow these practices alone does not lead to liberation from rebirth, since this is produced by thirst for life. When this thirst is terminated by the discovery of the impermanence of all things and even of the self, which therefore does not deserve any attachment, when there is only pure contemplation, then Nirvāṇa, a mode of unconditioned existence escaping both impermanence and non-existence, can be attained.

In the same way as for Daoism, such profound doctrines were understandable only for few people. Lay devotees were content with pious works and good rewards. Buddhism has indeed a picture of Paradise, which is vividly depicted in the Pure Land teachings: “Whoever, once in his life, thinks fervently upon Buddha Amitābha will go after death to that Pure Land of the West, where the soil is of gold and silver, where the plants bear the seven precious stones as fruit, where a delicious breeze stirs the jade leaves of the trees into a charming music, where one is not born but blossoms in a lotus bud, thus at one stroke avoiding birth and death, and freed from transmigration.”³⁵

In order to attract the masses, Buddhism too started ceremonies of the Daoist kind, in a special way those for the ancestors, where a bonze would reenact the journey of Ti Tsang (Di Cang 地倉) Pu Sa³⁶ through the various hells, in order to save the damned caged up in their prisons and let them cross back over the infernal river. In the course of centuries, before the great persecution of 843–845 AD, Buddhism became more and more powerful, with numerous centers and scores of monks, and rich donations from all kinds of people, emperors included. As a result, Buddhism and Daoism were opposed to each other:

Taoism, which had had considerable success in the Han and Three Kingdoms periods, did not easily forgive Buddhism for seizing from it a sizable segment of its followers. For their part, the Buddhists were irritated to see themselves constantly represented as Taoists who had misunderstood the doctrine of their master.³⁷

Their discussions, however, generally addressed only points of detail, perhaps because those were the points capable of winning over the wider public. One of the hottest issues

included, after their death are reborn into other bodies for another existence, which will be happy or unhappy according to the deeds of preceding lives.

34. Ibid., 41.

35. Ibid., 43.

36. On Ti Tsang Pu Sa, see: <<http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/history/tstang-txt.htm>>.

37. H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, op. cit., 46.

was the relationship between Laozi and Buddha: was Laozi a disciple of Buddha, or were things the other way round?

A special point over which a discussion arose, and leading to no result, was the immortality of the spirit (*shen*). Basically, all agreed that something of man survived death.

For the Taoists, the human soul (three *hun* and seven *po*) lived on and went to dwell within the Dark Prisons of Agent Earth. The Confucianists, for their part, called *shen* the spiritual element which lived in the funerary tablet during the sacrifices to the ancestors. And the Buddhists, who believed in transmigration, recognized the existence of something that transmigrated, although they were hard pressed to explain in Chinese what this thing was.³⁸

To express their conceptions, the three parties used the same word, albeit with different meanings. For the Daoists, the spirit, produced at birth by the union of the original external breath with human individual essence, disappeared at death; for the others, the *shen* needed to survive death; but the Confucians were only interested in finding some doctrine supporting funerary sacrifices; the Buddhists originally borrowed the word *shen* to designate the mysterious element transmigrating from life to life, and then abandoned it, when they realized that in Daoism such a notion was unimportant.

Indeed, the purpose of Daoist practices was to avoid death and they knew how to make the spirit last endlessly inside the body. Rather, they were afraid of the impossibility of entering paradise and of the punishments of hell. So, for Daoists the extinction of the spirit was a possibility, whereas Buddhists and Confucians opposed it for different reasons. A discussion which dragged on indefinitely without result.³⁹

For the public, Daoism and Buddhism were mainly ways to obtain salvation. Daoist immortality, in the Heaven of Sublime Purity could theoretically merge with the Buddhist paradise, one step before the Nirvāna.

Between these paradises, both concrete and incomprehensible (and both alike situated in the West), they made little distinction. Buddhist like Taoists, desired above all to be saved, to obtain salvation whatever it was, a blissful eternity; and the difference between the two religions was never very clear outside certain learned circles.⁴⁰

Needless to say, syncretism was looming: besides Buddha being a disciple of Laozi, and Laozi a Bodhisattva, and Confucius in turn a disciple of Buddha who came to China to teach the Law, practices and notions of the two religions introduced themselves into each other's realm.

Taoist monks practiced celibacy; the doctrine of transmigration was more and more accepted throughout the population; the Daoist conception of the gods inhabiting the

38. Ibid., 47.

39. Ibid., 48.

40. Ibid., 49.

body gave way to an entirely new vision of the deities, with titles borrowed from Buddhism.

Out of this jumble of Buddhist and Taoist ideas modern popular religion commenced to take shape little by little, a religion in which these ideas were arranged as well as they could be within the framework of traditional practices. Mythology was transformed; the divinities took on a particular character under this double influence. Indeed, for Taoists as for Buddhists, the gods were men who had obtained a divine status by their merits. In the Taoist hierarchy, the petty earth gods of the ancient religion—divinities of rivers, of mountains and so forth—came to be ranked below the Immortals: they were among the faithful who had not succeeded in winning immortality and avoiding death but whose merits nevertheless deserved some recompense. Having died, they had escaped the hells and received these divine positions, from which their efforts would allow them to rise to the rank of Immortal. Likewise the Buddhist gods were men whose good works had merited the felicity of the heavenly paradise for a time. For the one group as for the other, the situation of these gods was only temporary, though with the difference that the Taoist god left that status as soon as he had acquired new merits which allowed him to rise higher, while the Buddhist god lost his position when his earlier merits were used up. Thus the notion was gradually established in the Chinese spirit that divine titles are functions which successive incumbents fill in the course of the ages. The gods were only men made divine. In heaven, the Lord on High yielded place to the Jade Emperor; on earth, the earth gods became gods of walls and ditches (*chéng-huang ye* 城隍爺), who were historical or legendary heroes turned into gods. Finally, in the world of the dead, the Buddhist hell, with its judge of the dead, king Yama, *Yen-lo*, and his cells in which the various kinds of sins were separately punished, was substituted for the Taoist hell of the Dark Prison, in which all the souls of the dead were crowded together in darkness, good and wicked higgledy-piggledy, under the dominion of Agent Earth, *Ti-kuan*.⁴¹

Such forms of syncretism continued to be present on both sides and are still visible: on the Buddhist side the development of myths about the world beyond death, the travel of the soul after its departure from the world of the living, and all the connected rituals which make Buddhist monks one of the necessary figures in death rituals and funerals. On the side of Daoism and popular religion, the expectancy of reincarnation, which contradicts the cult of ancestors: if their souls do really transmigrate, what need is there for their prolonged veneration and all the ghost rituals?

Transmigration of souls until reaching the Nirvāṇa and the cult of the ancestors are mutually exclusive; yet they thrive together, to the present day, as if the reasons for their

41. Ibid., 51–2.

credibility were to be found less in doctrinal tenets and more in the magnificence and impressiveness of the rituals the two religions are able to create.

THE CHINESE PANTHEON

The kind of syncretism hinted at above is well illustrated by the representations of the world of the gods the three main religious traditions have, or create. First, the category “syncretism” must be qualified. In Maspero’s words:

It is often said that the Chinese have three religions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. And by that is understood, not that some are Taoists, other Buddhists, and still other Confucianists, but that each individual Chinese is a believer in all three religions at the same time. This is one of the many false ideas which circulate regarding China. The reality is quite otherwise. The Chinese are no more capable than we are of believing in three separate religious systems at the same time: for example, of simultaneously believing a) as Buddhists, that there is no supreme deity governing the world, the gods being insignificant creatures with limited powers, subject to birth and death, and inferior to the Buddhas who have won through to perfect enlightenment: b) as Taoists, that the world is governed by a trinity of personal, omnipotent, eternal supreme deities, the Three Pure Ones; and finally, c) as Confucianists, that the supreme power which governs the world is Heaven, impersonal though endowed with consciousness... The people practice neither the three together nor each of the three separately. A popular religion has taken shape in the course of the ages, and this has borrowed various ideas from all three; but it is clearly distinct from them and must be considered a separate system.⁴²

As for the different titles given to supernatural beings, although in the different religious systems they had nothing in common, in popular religion they came to be considered as of the same nature, distinguished from one another practically only according to the power (*ling yan* 靈驗) they possess.⁴³

Every god, great or small, is a man who, after death was promoted for various reasons to the dignity of god.⁴⁴

It is possible to become gods, by following the paths laid by the different religious traditions. Divinity, however, is more a title, a responsibility, a function, than an ontological status; those who occupy it can succeed one another; only the highest in rank sit on their thrones forever, with no need to leave them vacant, after a while, for others.

Divinity is so much an office that some gods delegate it to others, especially when they

42. Ibid., 77–8.

43. Ibid., 85.

44. Ibid., 86.

cannot, or are not in the mood of being present in all the statues they have in the many temples honoring them.

Even bad spirits can usurp the place of a god in an abandoned temple, till the original god of the shrine comes back and punishes them. Although the external festivals may widely differ, the pantheon is much the same. There is an innumerable swarm of gods, represented in different ways; their counterparts, which are obscure and impersonal powers play an equally important, sometimes even more important role, and affect the life of people more than individual gods of the pantheon.

As for the heavens, there are 26 of them, the highest one (the *Da Lou*) being the dwelling place of the Jade Emperor, together with the two other deities of the Daoist Triad, The Celestial Venerable of the Original Beginning, and the Celestial Venerable Jade Dawn of the Golden Gate. The Jade Emperor is surrounded by his whole family. From his palace in heaven he controls the whole universe, the lesser heavens, earth and the hells. Besides his family, the Jade Emperor has a heavenly imperial court at his service: ministers, generals, officials, whom he entrusts with specific functions and bound periodically to report to him.

All the gods have as their sole purpose man and his material and moral welfare, which is one of the necessary conditions for the proper working of the world. But according to whether their functions put them more or less directly in relation with human society, they can be divided without too much difficulty into three categories: gods of nature (rain, wind, thunder, mountains, waters, and so on), gods responsible for the living (social groupings and individuals), and finally gods responsible for the dead.⁴⁵

Numerous deities are in charge of localities, family life, house and fields, professions, trades, guilds, the military, and the lives of individuals.⁴⁶ This complex system receives a different, more philosophical interpretation in some Confucian circles, under the influence of the Five Great Masters of Song dynasty. According to them, the main role is attributed not to an Emperor of the past, however divinized, but to an impersonal power called *Tian* (天, sky, or heaven), which is not the material and visible sky, but its essence; it embodies the active principle of reality, the *Li* (理); by its union with the Li, according to the two modes of repose (*yin* 陰) and movement (*yang* 陽), the passive principle, the *Qi* (氣), produces the Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth), and all things in general. In this system, no personal divinity is necessary, and indeed Zhu Xi, the most famous of the Five Masters, explicitly denies any deity of such a kind.

45. Ibid., 92–3.

46. Among them: Guan Di, Dou Mu, the Three Agents (of Heaven, Earth and Water), who keep the register of good and evil acts, (Ibid., 158); the Three Stars or gods: of happiness, of dignities, of longevity (159–60); the Eighteen Arhats, the Eight Immortals (161); then there are the gods and goddesses who protect women: the Sacred Mother, called also Lady Mother; Guan Yin, who is also venerated as the giver of children, the Immortal Zhang who gives male children; then there are gods of illnesses, and healing gods (158–76).

Nevertheless, Heaven has still retained, if not something anthropomorphic, at least a certain awareness, which causes it to control not only the physical world but also the moral world.⁴⁷

It is to such an entity that imperial worship was directed, through the sacrifices made by the Emperor at the Temple of Heaven four times a year. This leaves the question open about which kind of locality is thought of as befitting the existence of the gods: where do they live? It seems that their space still shares something of the human space, no matter how far away from common experience their realms may be located.

The existence of a different space becomes more clear with the gods of the dead. First, their world is more orderly, systematic and coherent:

if the gods who are concerned with the living, picked at random from various mythologies and lumped together incongruously by popular religion, make up a rather incoherent pantheon, it is not the same for those who govern the dead. Even though modern Chinese ideas on this point likewise derive from a mixture of Buddhism and Taoism with old native notions, just as Taoism itself borrowed the general framework of its infernal world from Buddhism, the whole structure is relatively well ordered and systematic.⁴⁸

Hell, Paradise, Death and Rebirth

There are ten hells, ruled by ten Kings. The first of them controls the other nine; when the souls of the deceased arrive, he judges them according to their deeds, and assigns them to their different places of punishment. The other eight Kings are in charge of each one of the places of punishment, while the tenth King supervises the departure from hell and directs the souls on the different paths to transmigration.

If a dead person's merits and demerits balance one another, that soul is sent back to the world of the living without punishment. Those who are found guilty are first brought to the Terrace of the Mirror of the Wicked (*Xie Jing Tai* 邪鏡台), where they are made to see all their victims; then they are led to the other eight Kings, who, each in his turn, judges and punishes them. The first king sends back to earth as famished demons the souls of the suicides, until they have completed the allotted span of life which was originally assigned to them and which they, by their suicide, have shortened.⁴⁹

When they come back to hell, they are sent to the City of Those Who die by Accident,⁵⁰ from where there is no way back to life again, unless they find some substitutes to stay there in their place. This is why the souls of these people try to lure others to die the

47. Ibid., 94.

48. Ibid., 176.

49. They may however adduce some serious reasons to justify their suicide: loyalty towards a prince, filial piety, chastity for young women and widows.

50. It is widely believed that such fate awaits all who die, even by chance or fortuitous accident, before their presumably allotted span of life has elapsed.

same death they died, in about the same places. Although the first king does not directly punish anybody, he still holds dishonest monks in a dark pit, until they have finished all the prayers they did not recite during their life, although they had promised to.

The second king punishes dishonest marriage go-betweens, faithless trustees, ignorant doctors, those who wounded or mutilated animals; the third punishes lying officers, those who betrayed their superiors, or slaves who injured their masters, shrewish wives, slanderers, forgers, those who escaped punishment, or sold family burial grounds.

In the fourth hell greed and egoism of all sorts are punished: those who did not give alms to the poor, or did not divulge methods for curing disease; merchants who used false weights and measures, or those who shifted boundaries; blasphemers, temple robbers. In this hell there is also the Lake of Foul Blood (汚血湖), where women who died at childbirth are plunged forever. Popular belief supposes that, if a woman dies in this way, she must have committed very serious crimes, at least in one of her past lives.

The fifth hell punishes religious sins: killing living things, destroying pious books, unbelief; it punishes also whatever sins are connected with prostitution and lust. Before being sent to their particular torments, the damned are sent to the Terrace for Looking on the Village, from where they see the misfortunes they have heaped on their descendants by their wicked behavior.

In the sixth hell sacrilegious persons are punished: those who curse the elements of nature, who lack respect for the statues of the gods, or of their temples; those who keep obscene books.

The seventh hell chastises those who violate tombs, who eat or sell human flesh, or sell their girlfriends as slaves.

The eighth is the hell of those who lacked filial piety.

The ninth is the hell of abortionists, of obscene painters, writers, or readers. It is also the place where those who killed themselves without reason are punished. They are condemned to eternally reenacting their suicide, without any hope of being born again. Together with them are those who committed crimes even in hell. They are condemned to death, after which they even cease to be souls (*gui*); they become shades of souls, (*jian*), incapable of being reborn. For all these crimes, in each one of the ten hells there are sixteen little hells where the dead suffer atrocious punishments, vividly depicted in written texts and through visual arts under the eyes of all, in the temples.

Finally, the tenth king is in charge of turning the wheel of transmigration. He has twentyfour offices and innumerable employees (who are spirits of the dead) under his command. They keep track of the reincarnation of those who leave hell. According to each dead soul's actions, the king decides whether it is to be reborn as man or animal, which rank and happiness it is supposed to receive, and the conditions of the next life. Then the souls, upon leaving the tribunal, are laid in front of the tribunal of Dame Meng, in the main hall of her huge palace.

Demons separate men's souls from women's souls, have them drink a broth of oblivion, so that they forget what they passed through in the hells, lead them to the Bridge of

Sorrow, where two other demons throw them into a stream of vermilion-red water, which flushes them away into a new birth.

There are three kinds of good rebirth: among the gods, for great merit; among men for middle merit; and among the Asuras for weak merit.⁵¹ Then there are three ways of bad rebirth: in hell, for great demerit; among famished demons, for middle demerit; among animals, for little demerit. While paradise is only for gods, spending a great or small amount of time in the hell is a fate awaiting practically every human being.

For Chinese today... every man, every living being passes through a series of existences in this world, separated by sojourns in the hells, or in various divine tasks. The old Hindu idea of successive rebirths imported by Buddhist missionaries since the first or second century of our era has been imposed upon the Chinese mind but has suffered a singular change in character. The term metempsychosis, which is sometimes applied to this theory, is absurd in Hindu Buddhism, since that doctrine denies the existence of a personal soul, of a continuing Me, and only accepts the existence in each individual of successive instantaneous Mes, distinct from one another and one being born from the other as time unfolds. Yet this term metempsychosis is nearly accurate when applied to Chinese popular religion; for there indeed a soul (if not in the Christian sense of the word, since for the Chinese souls are material and not purely spiritual) passes from body to body with each new existence.⁵²

Each soul brings to the new existence its basic characteristics (e.g. the fact of being male or female) together with its merits and demerits of preceding lives. Those who lived virtuous lives are reborn almost immediately (not less than twentyeight months after death, however) in happy situations. This shows a basic attitude towards human life in Chinese culture: present life is considered as the most positive state of existence, superior even to holding posts in the heavenly bureaucracy.

As we have seen, a living human has two groups of souls, three *hun* and seven *po*.⁵³ These two groups are considered as a unit, so that practically it is as if a human had simply two souls. At death they part from each other. The *pos* remain with the body: they cannot leave it because the gate gods of the mortuary chamber do not allow them to go away; the *huns*, in contrast, are led away by messengers of the God of Walls and Ditches;⁵⁴ its sum-

51. In Buddhism the Asuras are beings endowed with divine powers, superior to humans, yet still not free from passions. See: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asura_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asura_(Buddhism))>.

52. H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, op. cit., 182.

53. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hun_and_po>.

54. An important god in Chinese pantheon, who is in charge of localities. While Tu Di Gong is in charge of the business related to the lives of the inhabitants of its district, the god of Walls and Ditches is in charge of matters related to their death. He sends two of the emissaries of the kings of hell, Ox-head (*niu tou* 牛頭) and Horse-face (*ma mian* 馬面) to seize the soul of the dying; in some places people believe that they need the help of the soul of a living person. This person suddenly falls into catalepsy, follows the demons, gets the

mon warrant serves as a pass to allow the beginning of the long voyage to the underworld, heading towards a new rebirth.

The trip takes forty-nine days. The soul's first stop is at the temple of the Walls and Ditches. There

the god makes a brief inquiry as to its conduct by examining his registers, where he has noted the monthly reports of all the kitchen gods⁵⁵ and, depending upon how it has behaved, he either leaves it free or punishes it more or less severely, with the cangue or the bastinado.⁵⁶

On the thirty-fifth day after death, the soul is brought back to its family, to see its relatives for the last time. Some say it is Buddha himself who comes from the paradise of the Pure Land of the West—since he is not a *gui* anymore, he can cross the different worlds with ease, invites the soul of the deceased to board his Ship of Benevolence, and has it cross into the world of the living, until evening, when the soul is taken back to the temple of the god of Walls and Ditches.

When fortynine days have elapsed, the dead person's soul (or a report about it) is brought to the Jade Emperor, to ascertain whether it has lived all its allotted lifespan. If everything is in order, the soul is then led in front of the first tribunal. There are ten lists of sins, about which it has to be judged and punished in the different hells. Only after all the punishments have been inflicted, the soul can be reborn, unless the family has redeemed its shortcomings and set it free in a shorter time.

Life in hell is similar to life on earth: there are houses and cities around the palaces of infernal kings, where people live in ways similar to their stay on earth. In view of this, about the forty-ninth day after death, paper houses with all the necessary furniture, with cars and attendants, and bundles of money, together with certificates of the Buddhist prayers recited for them are burnt, so as to provide the soul with all the necessary measures for a comfortable life in the nether world.

The souls of those who have died by accident, not having been summoned officially and having no infernal attendant to guide them, do not find their way to the hells and

dying man's souls and hands it over to them; after that, he awakes again. See H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, op. cit., 105–10; 183–84.

55. The kitchen god, (*Zao Shen* or *Zao Jun* 灶神) is the most worshiped among the gods who protect the household and family. Traditionally, every Chinese household would have a paper effigy or a plaque of Zao Jun and his wife (who writes down everything that is said in the household over the year for her husband's report to the Jade Emperor) above the fireplace in the kitchen. This tradition is still widely practiced, and offerings of food and incense are made to Zao Jun on his birthday (the third day of the eighth lunar month) and also on the twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month, which marks his return to Heaven to give his New Year's report to the Jade Emperor. On this day, the lips of Zao Jun's paper effigy are often smeared with honey to sweeten his words to Yu Huang (Jade Emperor), or to keep his lips stuck together. After this, the effigy will be burnt and replaced by a new one on New Year's Day. Firecrackers are often lit as well, to speed him on his way to heaven. If the household has a statue or a nameplate of Zao Jun it will be taken down and cleaned on this day for the new year. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitchen_God>.

56. H. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, op. cit., 184.

remain wandering and hungry upon earth. The great ceremonies of the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, the month of the wandering souls, are meant to help them to re-enter the wheel of transmigration.

People believe that the Bodhisattvas Di Cang (地倉), and Mu Lian (目蓮) are endowed with special skills enabling them to deliver the souls from the torments of hell. In order to more perfectly accomplish his vow, to enter Nirvāṇa only after saving all souls, Di Cang has taken the six different forms in which people are reborn, so as to be present at that key moment of their transmigration.

The Chinese like to imagine him traveling unceasingly through the hells and, each time he passes, delivering the damned so as to allow them to be reborn... One needs not believe that he is at war with the infernal gods and must struggle against them; they are under his orders and must obey him. What is the power of a god before that of a Bodhisattva? His mission was acknowledged by the Jade Emperor, who bestowed upon him the title of “Instructor of the Dark Regions”, *Yu-ming chiao-shih* (獄暝教師). On his birthday, the twenty-fourth day of the seventh month, all the infernal gods come to pay him homage, followed by their assistants, and on that day, he lavishly distributes favors to the damned.⁵⁷

A rite to Di Cang for the deliverance of the soul of a deceased from hell is carried out on the hundredth day after death. Monks come, chant a hymn to the Bodhisattva, burn incense in front of the temporary tablet and call the soul away from hell, to progress towards paradise:

“With a concentrated heart I pray that the perfume of this rod of incense may penetrate all the worlds of phenomena (*dharmadhātu*), so that the messengers of the hells may bring the soul here!” And they end with a final appeal to the soul: “Three times I pray the soul of the deceased to come; come back and be seated to listen to the text of the Sacred Book.” The ceremony ends with the reading of the Book which destroys the hells, and with the invocation to Amitābha, master of the Pure Land of the West (*Sukhāvatī*), where the soul is invited to be reborn, and to Ti-tsang, who will assist it to go to Paradise.⁵⁸

A scholar who, mistakenly summoned by an infernal clerk, died, went to the nether world, then revived again, wrote a book in which the average of after-death judgments is given.

He himself, during the several days that he remained saw only three who ascended to Paradise, and some forty who were condemned to various infernal ordeals (again, about ten of these got a bad human birth as a remission of their

57. Ibid., 188–89.

58. Ibid., 189–90.

penalty), while seven hundred and fifty-two had to take up human existence again.⁵⁹

As for Paradise, the predominant imagery comes from Buddhism. The World of Delights of the Western Region (*Xifang Jile Shijie* 西方極樂世界) is the reign of the Buddha Amitābha, who reigns in consequence of the vow he made:

I vow that I shall not take a Buddha Land which is impure. I pronounce the vow that, when I attain to Bodhi, in my world there shall be no birth, neither in the hells nor among famished demons, nor among animals, and that all beings shall be freed from birth, from death, and from sorrow, that all beings shall be the color of gold, that being born by transformation they shall enjoy life that will last eternally, that this world shall be pure and unsoiled.⁶⁰

This paradise is located West of this world, at incalculable distance; millions of worlds are in between, each presided by a Buddha.⁶¹ It is imagined as a wonderland, with all sorts of beautiful landscapes, flowers, songs of birds, scented breezes and precious stones, where those who have invoked the name of Amitābha live joyfully forever.

Analogous, yet different, is the fate attending the Daoist Immortals: they are summoned to the Kun Lun Mountain, the middle of the world, around which sun and moon turn, where the Queen Mother of the West (*Xi Wangmu* 西王母)⁶² reigns together with her husband, Lord King of the East (*Dong Wanggong* 東王公). Through the practices to obtain immortality, they have liberated their subtle body, endowed with supernatural powers, which is now capable of flying, walking upon the clouds, crossing fire and water. They have escaped the cycle of rebirths, they live among the Immortals.

It is only with great hesitation that a somehow comprehensive interpretation of the varied and often incoherent traditions of popular religion can be proposed, starting from what is most striking to an external approach. Why are some people, who cannot be accused of personal misdeeds, condemned to the most severe punishments in hell at their untimely birth? Why should a woman who dies at childbirth receive a “never to return” sentence?

Among the few possible answers, one can be considered: the traditional way of life is endowed with a character of absoluteness. What is absurd, inexplicable in the frame of the ordinary flow of tradition (a woman should give a male heir to her husband’s family, ordinarily one should reach old age) and therefore becomes a challenge to the solidity of its system of values, potentially disruptive of it, is sanctioned with the heaviest penalties, removed, forgotten in hell. Positively, what the tradition considers normal and positive in

59. Ibid., 190.

60. Ibid., 191.

61. Ibid., 192. Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, the Paradise of another Buddha, located in the East, was also popular, then it faded into oblivion.

62. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xi_Wangmu>.

view of its permanence, is projected in the world of the gods and (as in the case of state bureaucracy) even becomes one of its basic structures.

In the midst of such selective projections, some highly treasured values emerge. Life on earth is considered the best way of existence. The very insistence on the penalties of hell, besides its moral function, conveys the feeling that a price has to be paid to surface again among the living, to spend some days more in the joys and troubles of human life. Paradises are so far away, more to be desired than enjoyed. What matters is long, and possibly happy, healthy, successful life. The same can be gathered when considering the interactions the living have with the dead in their ordinary life.

THE CULT OF ANCESTORS AND ITS RITES

An important step in order to get closer to the view of death and the worlds beyond in Chinese culture is to observe what the living actually do when approaching such a mysterious realm. We can distinguish spaces, times, actions and actors: places, occurrences, performances and performers of the rituality surrounding death and ancestors, or, better, the rituality by which Chinese are surrounded, and even overwhelmed.

Underlying all these dimensions is the perception that the dead, and among them the ancestors in a special way, are tangibly present in everyday life, and they see, participate, and sanction the behavior of the living, in a symbiosis that emphasizes the absoluteness of the culture, and in special way of the family tradition. In the words of Emily Ahern:

In studying the reciprocity that is at the heart of ancestor worship, we shall find that the living are expected to care for the dead in payment of the debts they owe them. Beyond this, in the act of meeting this obligation, the living hope to inspire a further reciprocal response from the ancestors, to obtain through them the good life as they perceive it: wealth, rich harvest, and offspring who will ensure undying memory and sustenance in the afterlife... Far from being an abstract expression of agnatic relationships, the cult of the dead decoded reveals the basic design of society in this Taiwanese village (Ch'inan 溪南 close to San Xia 三峡 in Taipei County). All the most important social relations can be related to each other through this medium.⁶³

Lineage Life and the Dead. Ancestral Halls

A key feature of ancestral worship, the way it is or it was performed among Taiwanese, is that it takes place in a hall (the *kong thia*, Ch. *gong ting*) that is the common property of

63. E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1973), 91–2. The Author provides abundant information on a small village not far from Taipei, the traditions of which, however, can be considered mainstream among the Taiwanese in Taiwan. In her book, some names are given a Romanization of their pronunciation in Taiwanese language. I added the Chinese characters and the pinyin Romanization of the Mandarin.

a lineage. The importance of such a building is a reminder of the times in which clearing, tilling, defending the land involved by necessity more families, usually of common ascendance.

The ancestral hall functioned and in some places still functions as a representation, a symbol of the lineage as a whole, both in view of an internal and domestic cult, and when facing the world outside, in a special way other lineages of the bigger community (e.g. a village).

Ancestral halls have a large and high wooden altar, in the centre of the main hall, against the rear wall. In front of it a table or tables are located for the food to be offered to the ancestors.

The right side of the altar serves for the worship of the gods; on the left side are boxes for ancestral tablets and an incense pot. The boxes contain wooden slips or large boards with the names of the ancestors written on them.

Where ancestral hall are still at the centre of the social life of a lineage, there are no tablets in the private houses where the lineage members live. This means that the ancestors, gathered together in the hall, are felt as a common heritage of the clan; it is in front of them that the most important moments of a family life show their ultimate value. As for death rituals:

Shortly before or immediately after a lineage member dies, his body is placed in the ancestral hall. Here the rites for the recently dead are carried out; here the coffining takes place. The funeral rites are held both within and directly in front of the hall, and the funeral procession leaves from the hall. After the burial, a temporary paper tablet is set up on the hall altar along with a separate incense pot. In about a year, this tablet is burned, and the name of the deceased is written on a wooden tablet and placed in the correct box. At all times, both immediately after death and after the permanent table has been made, the descendants make offerings in the hall in front of the tablet. Just as there are ordinarily no tablets in the home, so there is no worship of ancestors in the home.⁶⁴

That the nuclear families define themselves in the frame of their lineage is made visible by the fact that virtually all the family rites are performed in the common hall, even those related to the stove god.⁶⁵ In the same line, the sending off of a daughter who marries into another family, or the reception of a daughter-in-law who enters into the family is marked by rites taking place in the ancestral hall.

64. Ibid., 94. Ahern reports what she saw during her fieldwork in a Taiwanese village before the publication of her book about forty years ago. Nowadays, the picture is much more varied, the domestic ancestors altars being more and more common, due to the changes in the patterns of family life.

65. "The domestic symbol of the kitchen god has only one primary location for all the households in each lineage. It is as though the ritual idiom for delineating the distinctness of households is used to demonstrate their common place within a single lineage. When, at New Year, all the household heads present offerings to the kitchen god in the same place on the same day, they are expressing their common identity in the lineage, not their separate identity as distinct residential and economic units." (Ibid., 95–6).

There is also a correspondence between the variations in the way the names of ancestors are kept in the boxes and the kind of internal relationships among the families belonging to the lineage: the most closed and solidary group chooses the variant with least divisions; the group with the most marked differentiations among individual families chooses the system with the most divisions.⁶⁶ In the course of time, new ancestor halls may be built, without losing contact with the original ones, “when a group of agnates forms a distinct political force, operating to further its own ends and to gain power either independently of or in opposition to the original settlement.”⁶⁷ However, it seems that another condition must be present, namely, a different physical location of the new group. A new hall would not be built by members of the same lineage in the same place where the original hall is still standing.

This in turn shows the strong connection of a human group to the land they till and live on, as if their life, in all its expressions (family, social, religious), were seen as necessarily tied to the physical conditions of its presence, the land and its produce. If, due to external events (e.g. the opening of a new road), the land reserved for the maintenance of the hall becomes unavailable for its original purpose, the fact may result in the abandonment of the ancestral hall, and in the consequent transformations of the patterns of lineage relationships depending on its presence.

Ancestor worship is then relocated into the family shrine, the feeling of belonging to the same lineage fades, and with it the ability to act together in larger groups. At the same time, other aspects of the experience of death come to the limelight, aspects more closely connected with interpersonal relationships within the nuclear family: sadness for the loss of a dear one, questions about his or her fate after death, incertitude about one's ability of making up for the absence of somebody with whom a deep relationship had been built...

The Seat of the Deceased in Their Families. Ancestral Tablets

Ancestral tablets are believed to be the rest place of one of the three *hun* of the soul of deceased persons. They are placed on the altar either in the common hall or a lineage or in nuclear family houses. They receive offerings of food, candles and incense.

The lineage hall... is the center of the corporate life of the lineage. Built with lineage funds in most cases, it represents the material benefits left from the efforts

66. There are two types of ancestral boxes: a single box for the ancestors of the whole lineage or different boxes, one for each branch of the lineage. In the same way, there are two types of ancestral tablets: generation boards, on which the names of the individuals belonging to the same generation are inscribed, and individual tablets with the name of each individual. With reference to the boxes and the tablets, the choice of the first of the two options signals an attitude of closeness and solidarity inside the lineage, while the choice of the second signals a tendency toward differentiations among the single families of the lineage (Ibid., 103–4, 113). The same can be said for the ways the founding ancestors, and the ancestors of the different branches of the lineage, are worshipped (Ibid., 116–19).

67. Ibid., 110.

of the ancestors. A tablet located in the hall is literally a seat for the soul of the person it represents. Only those persons who have a right to enjoy the legacy of the lineage ancestors can have a tablet and hence a kind of reserved seat in the hall... In general... the right to enjoy a seat in the hall of the ancestors is dependent on two conditions: an actual or potential contribution to the property or membership of the lineage and possession of the lineage surname.⁶⁸

The discussion of the many possible variations on these parameters shows how much ancestral rituals not only reflect, but much more provide an unwritten code which regulates family relations among the living by means of the sanction made visible in the presence, position or absence of the tablets on the ancestor boxes and altar.

In the case of males, the paradigm is that of a direct descendant of the lineage ancestors, who has married and left property to his male children. "His sons are obligated to make a tablet for him as a parent and as a bequeather of property. He has contributed to the fullest measure to the lineage, giving it new life in the form of sons and enriching those sons with property."⁶⁹ If a male has no children, he may adopt somebody, or arrange for some lineage members to be obliged to him by letting them inherit his property.

If a man dies before marriage, or if he dies when he was still too young to get married, he is still given a tablet and worship by his relatives, because it was not on purpose that he deprived the lineage of his own contribution. If it was on purpose (e.g., a man married uxori locally, residing with the wife's family and allowing some of the children to take her surname), the right to a tablet in the hall of the original clan might be lost: "Once you leave through the big gate, you can never come back."⁷⁰ However, uxori locally married men would never have their tablets in the hall of their wife's lineage, because of their different surname.⁷¹

When a male son dies young, he is excluded from the hall altar: he is not considered a potential ancestor and by dying young has committed an unfilial act.⁷²

However, if some misfortune in the clan is attributed to the activity of the child, this means that he is attracting attention: therefore he must be a genuine clan member, a potential contribution of its welfare, and therefore entitled to be duly worshipped and have his tablet placed in the hall. In the case of women, the paradigm is that of a wife who begets (male) children to the family where she has entered. She is given full status as a member of her husband's lineage. This holds even if she is the second or third wife, and even if she has no children. Her commitment and her potential contribution are acknowledged by the lineage she has entered. However, when socially mature women

68. *Ibid.*, 121.

69. *Ibidem*.

70. Saying quoted in *Ibid.*, 123.

71. Unless he takes even the surname of the wife (*Ibid.*, 125 reports of one such cases).

72. "In Chi'nan, a child who dies young is held to be the incarnated soul of somebody to whom the parents owed a debt. 'He is born and lives with us for a few years, eating our food until the debt we owe him is paid. Then he dies, having no more to claim from us'" (*Ibid.*, 125).

die before marriage, their tablets cannot be placed in the hall, because from their birth on they were meant for other lineages, for the houses of other people, where they were supposed to die.

Some even held that the tablet of an unmarried girl cannot be positioned anywhere on lineage property; they insisted that her tablet must be housed in a special temple for unmarried girls, or that the girl must be married posthumously so her tablet can be placed on her husband's family altar.⁷³

Uxorilocally married women, on the other side, acquire the right of sitting on the altar of their family ancestors, because they proved, by residing with the lineage and by having offspring bearing their surname, to have given it their contribution. As for girls who die prematurely, their fate is similar to that of boys: no tablet unless they signal, after death, their authentic belonging to the family. Even in this case, however, the rule established for mature women holds (in any case they were meant for others), so that no seat is given them in the hall. But if the deceased is a *sim-pua* (*xifuzi* 媳婦仔, little daughter-in-law, a girl adopted with the perspective of marrying inside the adoptive family), her tablet has a place there: she belongs to the lineage where she was adopted. On this point, many more variations, of the most unpredictable kind, find a solution on the ancestral altar, by which some unexpected presences are accepted, in any case without weakening the special status of the lineage members.

There are also ways and forms which witness the shifting of ancestral worship from the hall to domestic altars. Three factors may be operative: geographical distance from the hall; economic superiority; genealogical distance (the inability to provide a line of descent to the lineage). This goes hand in hand with social changes, and the many factors that loosen the feeling of belonging to a family lineage. After the tablets are moved outside the hall, ritual ties to the hall may still be retained, but the tablets themselves can never return there. Two cults emerge: worship of closer ancestors on domestic altars, worship of the most remote ancestors in the common hall.⁷⁴

Another reason for the presence or absence of ancestral tablets is inheritance. A descendant feels obliged to worship his ancestor only if he receives from him an inheritance. A Chinese proverb says: "No inheritance, no tablet." Depending on the extension and quality of the land inherited, there may arise disputes about who is the most obliged to worship a given ancestor. This may also work the other way round: worshipping an ances-

73. Ibid., 127. Ahern tells of alternative solutions she found in some houses: in one the tablet of an unmarried girl was hung in a dark corner behind a door, without literally a resting place at home; in another it was placed to sit on a high, small shelf, again in a corner. Behind the proposal of sending the tablets to the temple the concept looms of temples as places where cases which would pose a threat to the stability of family codes can be solved, without infringing them. Again, a sort of absoluteness of such codes is made visible, a non-negotiability connected with places and property. This also means that in situations in which lineage ties become weaker, temples become more and more important.

74. Ibid., 132–38.

tor may in certain cases give the right to till land which belonged to him.⁷⁵ In general, the acts of worship (making of an ancestral tablet, and worship on death-day anniversary, or on a fixed calendrical holiday) depend on whether the dead has left descendants and on whether he has left property. Descendants who inherit property are the most obliged.⁷⁶

The Powers of the Dead. Funeral Service and the Grave

If it is true that the living carry out their acts of worship as a means to repay their debts to the dead, it is also true that the dead have the power to demand the care they require: even after their death they are able to exert their influence in the world they have left. Ancestral halls, domestic altars and tablets, offer a real, yet symbolical space to the ritual, timeless re-enacting of what takes place in the unique time and space of the coming of death and of what follows it. Both kinds of events have the same purpose: to ensure an all-embracing harmony where living and dead, in their *yang* and *yin* worlds, are well catered and behave according to propriety and etiquette. The rituality surrounding real deaths however is of critical importance, as it deals less with the process of transferring the deceased into the nether world in the safest way possible, and more with the intention of making the ancestor satisfied so that he would not harass the living, or, worse, turn into a monster persecuting them.

The ancestral hall is the proper place to await death. The sick person is placed there, in front of the ancestral tablets. When breath ceases, paper money is placed under the head, the body covered with a coverlet red on top and white on the bottom. A bowl of rice full to overflowing, with an egg on top and a chopstick is placed below the feet, with an oil lamp, to prevent the soul from starving and to lighten the road to the nether world. Sons and grandsons will sleep by the corpse, to show their filial piety and prevent unhappy events. Some coins are placed in the sleeves, and then let drop into a wooden rice measure, collected by the family head and then divided among the family members, as a good omen. The corpse is then washed, death is announced (without pronouncing the word). The relatives prepare mourning clothes and food for the guests. Before placing the deceased into the coffin, only the closest relatives come to give their condolences. A temporary tablet is made of paper, in the form of a blunt-tipped sword.

On this are written the surname, the personal name, and public appellation of the deceased, together with his rank, posthumous name, the year, month, and day of death. This is placed before the deceased for his soul to receive the prayers of the survivors. Buddhist and Taoist priests are asked to set up this "soul-silk".⁷⁷

75. Ibid., 154.

76. Ibid., 161.

77. J. Paper, L. G. Thompson, *The Chinese Way in Religion* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), 47. Their summary, rich in detail, provides a report of solemn funerals at the end of the fifties of the last century.

The body is placed in the coffin by the evening of the day of the death. The first part of this ceremony takes about two hours and is left to Taoist priests, who stand around the corpse, playing bells and gongs, and chanting. Rice is put in the mouth of the deceased, sometimes with the addition of jade or jewels, for protection against the demons. An old ritual follows: a long hempen rope is tied to the wrist of the deceased, then passed on and held by all those who are present. The portion held by each one is then cut off, wrapped in silver paper money and burnt.⁷⁸ The ceremony is called “the cutting off” and signifies separation between the living and the dead, also as a means to prevent possibly dangerous contact with the corpse, because of the risk that it may become a monster and harm anyone it would meet.

Then the relatives transfer the body to the coffin, with a paper hat and boots. The coffin is stuffed with paper money. The coffining is a delicate, potentially very unlucky moment. The relatives then start a continuous vigil for some few days and nights until the funeral.⁷⁹ A geomancer chooses an auspicious day: in other days monsters (usually originating from dead bodies due to improper burials) may harm the corpse which, because of its transitional state, would be vulnerable to their attack. Funeral ceremonies are long and complicated, lasting about five hours.

The body is placed outside the hall, and tables are laden with food in front of it; close friends and descendants pay their respect to the dead, then, after the coffin has been symbolically nailed shut, the procession to the grave starts, at the sound of traditional music and even of Western music. At the grave, the coffin is placed in a shallow trench and aligned by the geomancer, then covered with a mound of earth. After three days, some of the descendants return, “to see that everything is all right.”⁸⁰

Upon returning to the hall, the temporary tablet is placed there, sacrifices are offered and Buddhist monks and Taoist priests invite the spirit of the deceased to settle in the tablet. After this, every seven days, for seven times, rituals are held in the hall for the deceased, who is said to come and inspect.

On these occurrences, special rituals are celebrated seeking forgiveness for the sins of the deceased.⁸¹ On the seventh occurrence of the seventh day, or on the one-hundredth day after death (or after one or two years) the rite of “expelling the spirit” (of the deceased) is celebrated. The paper tablet is burnt, the table and the oil lamp are thrown

78. P. Thompson, *The Chinese Way*, op. cit., 48. In the same ritual (observed by E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 172) the pieces of rope are gathered in a basket, before being burnt to ashes.

79. E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 164. According to P. Thompson, *The Chinese Way*, op. cit., 48, the interval between the coffining and burial may vary: from one to three days for poor people, to months and even years for wealthy families. This may be the traditional pattern; at the present, more and more funerals take place after only a short time after death, the time for the necessary preparations and for the relatives living far away to arrive.

80. *Ibid.*, 165.

81. P. Thompson, *The Chinese Way*, op. cit., 51–2.

out of the door, a permanent wooden tablet takes its place on the ancestor altar, and the “dotting of the 主 (*zhu*)” ceremony is held.⁸²

The next visit to the grave need not occur before the Tomb Sweeping Festival, the next spring. The tomb is then visited annually, until the sixth or seventh year, when, on an auspicious day, the coffin is disinterred and opened. If the flesh is sufficiently rotten from the bones, they are removed, cleaned and placed in a ceramic pot, about three feet high and one foot in diameter, called the “golden peck-measure,” stored temporarily at the grave site or in small temples destined for the purpose. Then the bones may be buried in another auspicious place chosen by the geomancer, sometimes in elaborate housing.⁸³

Grave worship is different from worship at the hall, because the dead at the grave still retain their dangerous potential. Unlike the hall, the grave is an open, uncontrolled space, where all sorts of uninvited guests and ghosts roam around. “At the hall only the ancestor comes to eat, though he might bring along a friend; it is like the feast that the living have after the offerings. But at the grave there might be flocks of ghosts around trying to eat the offerings we make to our ancestor.”⁸⁴ Food offerings are but a small part of the care due to ensure the well being of the ancestors in their graves. Another important factor is the geomantic location of the grave, and the condition of the bones in the burial pot. Not optimal situations may easily lead to dissatisfaction on the side of the ancestor, and he will manifest it by heaping disgrace on his own descendants.⁸⁵

Behind the fear for ancestral interference in the life of the living some hidden factors seem to be at work. On the one hand the mixed feelings (of satisfaction and guilt) intervening when death has given a son the inheritance and authority he desired instead of his father; on the other hand the perception that however far from the world of the living, ancestors never yield totally the authority they had when alive, possibly because their fearful image as agents of punishment remains within their descendants forever.

82. The conventional funerary inscription on a tablet ends with the two characters: *shen* (神) and *zhu* (主), which however is written without its apical dot, so as to become another word, *wang* (王). In the “dotting of the *zhu*” ceremony, the last dot is added, by somebody well acquainted with the deceased, of upright character, facing the east when writing, and concentrating on the image of the dead person. M. Caltionhill, *Private Prayers and Public Parades. Exploring the Religious Life of Taipei* (Taipei: Department of Information, Taipei City Government, 2002), 21.

83. P. Thompson, *The Chinese Way*, op. cit., 53; E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 165.

84. E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 173. At pp. 166–71 Ahern discusses the different kind of food offered the ancestors at the hall and at the grave, as a sign of the perceived difference between their two modes of presence in the two different places. At the grave they are offered dry food, not easily edible, twelve different kinds. On the basis of the fact that higher ranking gods receive the least transformed (least human) food, and that the ancestors at the hall receive a food that is immediately edible (the most human kind), the offering of dry food of all sorts points to the belief that the corpses of the ancestors at the grave are closer to the netherworld than their souls in the tablets in the hall.

85. It is not totally clear, however, whether geomantic forces operate independently from the feelings of the ancestor, or his reaction to the geomancy of his grave is the key factor influencing the lives of the descendants. According to E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 189–90, the two opinions “are not so much incompatible as different in emphasis.”

CARING FOR THE DEAD IN THE UNDERWORLD

After the Funeral

Although many of the rites that occur before burial are not directed to the ancestors in any particular form or place, several rites and offerings made after the funeral are directed specifically to the ancestors in the underworld. Whereas he is not expected to behave much differently there from the way he behaves in the grave or in the tablet, his descendants show a markedly different facet of their relationship to the dead in this context. Care of the ancestors in the underworld is characterized by solicitous concern and affectionate remembrance.⁸⁶

Practically nobody is believed to go to heaven; all the dead must await the time of their reincarnation. In the meantime, in order to help them escape the punishments of hell, on the eve of the funeral the rite of the *kong-tiek* (*gong de* 功德) is celebrated, by Taoist priests with the help of their assistants. A sort of opera is staged, where a puppet of the deceased is led on his/her way to the underworld, where *Tho-te-kong* (*tu di gong* 土地公), the god of earth, helps him to cross the bridge and reach a comfortable place in the world of the dead. During the ceremony considerable amount of paper money is burnt, to provide him with funds for his living expenses while there.

The offerings made every seventh day, seven times, have the purpose of helping the deceased make the necessary emotional adjustments to his new kind of life.

Early in the morning of the seventh day, Tho-te-kong leads the ancestor to a lake in the underworld where he must wash his hands. When he sees that the water has made his fingernails turn black (i.e. begin to rot), he knows for the first time that he is dead. From there he is led to a mountain from which he is allowed one last glimpse of his living relatives. In anticipation of the terrible grief and sorrow the ancestor must feel on that day, the descendants rise very early to make offerings and to weep for him. They say, "If we get up early enough to wail before the ancestor finds out he is really dead, then his own sorrow will be lessened. The more we weep, the less he must."⁸⁷

Other offerings during the seven celebrations are meant for the rulers of the underworld, in the hope they will not be harsh with the ancestor; the last rites show the concern of the living for the welfare of the deceased. Paper replicas reproducing the house, servants, cars, objects which the deceased used or liked are made. A small doll representing the dead is then moved into the new house, which is burnt on the forty-ninth day, marking the end of the string of rites. Caring for the dead will then continue on a more ordinary

86. Ibid., 220.

87. Ibid., 225.

basis, on the death-day anniversary at the hall, on other recurrences and anniversaries, and on the Sweeping Tomb Festival at the grave.

Food for Ghosts

When ancestors are not cared for, when nobody provides for their needs in the underworld, they may become Hungry Ghosts (*e gui*) and haunt the living. It is to these entities that on the beginning and the middle of the lunar month sacrifices of food and incense are made and joss money is burnt outside the doors in the streets. Besides monthly offerings, a great festival is held on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, the month when the gates of hell are opened and the ghosts are free to go wandering around in the world of the living. During the month festivals are set up in order to entertain them; they are offered lavish food, and enjoy opera plays.⁸⁸ “Floating or hanging lanterns are also displayed to guide the returning ghosts. Buddhists and Daoists both celebrate this event, and ceremonies officiated by monastics and priests may last several days.”⁸⁹

The great celebration of the fifteenth day is meant to send the ghosts back off again to the sea, from where they are believed to have come. A boat is built, sometimes of considerable dimensions, and filled with paper money. Then it is sent to the sea and burnt there. Temple or mass celebrations involving great personalities, heroes of the past, or simply ordinary ghosts are witness to a larger dimension of popular religion, the one involving the cultural community as such. Their effect is to reinforce social cohesion around shared tradition. Although the material conditions of life behind such rituals have evolved in time, till the major changes brought about by market culture, the beliefs involved in these rituals still accompany people in their daily life, and offer it some meaning.

Visiting the Dead—Calling Them Back

The perception that ancestors are still relevant for the lives of their descendants even after their departure is signalled also by the contacts between the two worlds, in two ways: either the living go to the nether world to visit their dead relatives, or they summon them up, to be present in the *yang* world. Besides seeking to renew the interactions of the time when they were alive, both ways are mainly finalized to ask and receive advice about pressing matters which involve the family, therefore also the ancestors.⁹⁰ In order to obtain this, the help of some medium is needed, who can send the living to the *yin* world,

88. A detailed description of a performance of the ritual in the Kitchen God Temple in Sa Kiat Village, Yi Lan County, Taiwan, can be found in W. L. Barnett, *Dealing with the Dead: Rituals of Trance, Transition and Transformation in a Taiwan Temple* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 2004), 122–28. Noteworthy his comment at the end of the description of the celebration: “The ghosts had been fed and dispersed for another year” (p. 128).

89. M. Caltionhill, *Private Prayers and Public Parades. Exploring the Religious Life of Taipei*, op. cit., 133.

90. Answers to questions involving a more-than-natural knowledge are sought in many ways (see, *ibid.*, 70–87). Some of them, as spirit-writing, involve gods and ghosts which however may not necessarily be ancestors.

guide them in their trip and call them back when time has expired; or summon the souls of the departed for a talk in the temple precincts.⁹¹

In order to have the living fall into a trance, the medium (*tang-ki* 乩童 *ji tong*) makes them sit blindfolded, their feet touching the ground. He starts beating a wooden clapper on a table, chanting names of gods, inviting them to be present. After repeated invitations to “go,” somebody starts shaking, until he begins describing the underworld in which he feels to be. The medium then guides him, until he finds the relatives he asked to see. Sadly enough, they either do not recognize him or do not want to talk to him. Therefore he comes back, recalled by an injunction of the medium. Somebody else, going down to the underworld, sees a prison where evil-doers are punished. A man is crushed in a rice-grinder, his blood flowing out in constant stream, another is tied to a red-hot iron pillar. In the underworld, some houses and trees directly reflect the physical conditions of the bodies of the living, that in this way can be improved by some treatment there. This second man, the assistant of the medium, is then suddenly recalled because, attracted by some girls, he is the danger of remaining there forever.

However close the distance between the living and the dead may be, the living feel that a great change has taken place:

when a living person sees a loved one in the underworld at such a distance and describes the experience to the others present... he is outwardly and publicly admitting what he has known inwardly since the death: the close, emotion-laden ties of dependence and support between kin can never be renewed.⁹²

In the ritual for soul retrieval the medium is the one entering into a trance. From there he announces the presence of the souls summoned on request of the petitioners:

“There is/I have a dead person by the name of x. Is there someone here who knows him?”... The family replies in the affirmative. They all enter the sanctuary and crowd around the medium. The assistant burns a charm as the master stands. He sits back on the form and falls limply backwards into the arms of one of the family members. There ensues a lively conversation between the living and the dead. The conversation ends when the soul has departed.⁹³

Due to many factors, there is however an amount of uncertainty in the operation (not all the souls summoned respond, and they are not necessarily the ones called): the other world is not completely under control of the living, not even of the deities.⁹⁴

91. The following story is taken from the detailed description given in E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 229–37.

92. Ibid., 244.

93. W. L. Barnett, *Dealing with the Dead: Rituals of Trance, Transition and Transformation in a Taiwan Temple*, op. cit., 44. Most conversations last no longer than four minutes (Ibid., n. 16).

94. More elaborated rituals, designed for the rescue of souls, are described in Ibid., 81–118.

CONCLUSION

The impressive amount of data available in the literature shows how much Chinese culture is concerned with the world of the dead. The three religious streams that concur in shaping the popular vision have all contributed to some aspects of it; they have also endowed it with some major contradictions (e.g. cult of the ancestors and reincarnation)⁹⁵ that cannot be solved theoretically, but nevertheless are able to shape ritual and enrich its significance.

The worlds of the living and the dead, although separated by clear boundaries, are interrelated and influence each other. Such a close relationship results in reinforcing the family, lineage and social structures which connect the living to each other, the perception of the roles everybody is supposed to perform, and of the sanctions that should be expected as a result of good or bad behavior.

The materials collected are clearly witness to the fact that Chinese culture values present life and feels death and afterlife as a parenthesis from which to emerge again, as soon as possible.

Pantheon, judgment, hells, heavens, and nether world, besides being patterned according to the structures of present life (the imperial bureaucracy), receive their importance from the fact that they are a necessary pause or preparation for the next round of experiences among the living.

People seem eager to enjoy another life, even at the cost of disappearing from the relational horizon of their descendants, and of losing the most distinctive personal features acquired in the previous life. Or, what matters is what the living like to think about the dead, without being really interested in the final consequences of their doctrines, being satisfied with the performance of rites and with the ensuing emotional experiences.

The rituality of popular religion places great emphasis on the figures in charge of connecting the world of the living with the underworld, mediums and geomancers. In turn, they rely on a knowledge that has been accumulated in the course of centuries and embodies the effort of Chinese civilization to tackle the question of what is beyond human daily experience. In this sense, Chinese culture is the real medium in control of what is before death and what is imagined beyond it.

What is described in the literature—basically only religious aspects of the theme have been touched—usually refers to people and communities still living in traditional ways

95. E. M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead*, op. cit., 237: on the basis of her data, offers a tentative solution to this problem: "That the dimly remembered dead cease to be visited in the underworld and that rebirth takes place from the underworld is an entirely appropriate conjunction. Regarded in this way, the apparent inconsistency between the concept of reincarnation of the dead into another personality or form of life and the concept of their continued existence on ancestral altars and in the graves is lessened. The ancestors live on in the underworld as intimately remembered loved ones. When that facet of their existence is lost, they disappear from the underworld both by reincarnation and by relegation to oblivion. Their disappearance does not conflict with their continued worship at altars and graves, for, as we have discussed, other aspects of the ancestors' personalities are reflected in those places."

on the land inherited from the ancestors, practicing their way of life. The trends of the changes induced by the transformations that have been taking place at a very swift pace are not easily predictable, also because traditional religion shows a considerable resilience in front of any kind of challenge. In any case, changes are under way, especially at the level of extended families.

Perhaps, just as social trends progressively dismantle the lineage level and its relevance, both inwardly and outwardly, we may expect that the rituality centered around the symbol of the lineage, the ancestral hall, progressively loses its importance, as is already visible in many places. Just as people seem to flee the obligations of life as members of a lineage in the countryside, in order to enjoy the freedoms of nuclear family or life as a single in the city, so it may be expected that religious celebrations, especially those centered on ancestral worship, move from the ancestral hall to the domestic altar, or, more probably, to the temples; and that the sacral atmosphere permeating daily life in traditional environments takes the form of short, emotional moments in the anonymous setting of grand celebrations, or in the solitude of the graves in the fields.

If traditional religion is studied under the perspective of evangelization, unsuspected possibilities are discovered, *in primis* the role of Jesus as ancestor of the lineage of the Church and medium to God's world, and then all the aspects connected with the communion of the Saints in heaven and on earth, and the corresponding rituality. (In general, the Chinese way of ritual performance helps Western Catholics rediscover the flavor of traditional liturgies).

A presentation of the Christian faith in the frame of traditional Chinese religion would also let some seeds of truth already sowed in it grow: a sacral way of living all aspects of daily life, in the shadow of the Great Ancestor; the relevance of mutual obligations inside the family; existence as persons beyond the limits of traditional rituality.

Christ's love charges each moment of life with an absolute, infinite value. Beyond the myths of reincarnation, which in the end rob life of meaning and make it an enslaving fixed set of behavioral patterns, in Him life, death and resurrection, solitude and communion touch each other; everything is continually born new.

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Conclusion

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Of death and of its secrets and mysteries we will never know anything for certain. And yet it is undeniable (and the previous pages seem to confirm it) that human curiosity, fear or intuition surpass their fragile human boundaries to come up with descriptions and images of celestial domains, meticulous maps of heavens and hells, in depth details of punishments and rewards, vivid descriptions of bliss or horrifying situations of terror and suffering.

Of the other who crosses the threshold of death we know next to nothing, for death is the disappearance of those expressive movements that made one appear as living, those movements that were always *responses*. Death can only be sensed by proxy, for the face of the other has lost all its expressiveness and has now become a simple and impassible mask, a total stranger to us. At the same time death is a departure, a decease: a departure toward the unknown, a departure without return. And yet it is surprising and fascinating at the same time to see how humankind with all its history, tradition and customs, with all its faith, superstition

and reason, went beyond itself to reveal and describe the new identity of the deceased, its novel feelings and perceptions, its new role with which it is now invested, elected or simply doomed...

Our relationship with death is a non-knowledge on dying itself, a non-knowledge that is nevertheless not an absence of relationship. Can we describe this relationship? Obviously this becomes very difficult not only for the particular topic at hand, but also because the previous pages have dealt with different cultural and religious Asian contexts. Nevertheless we feel that we can extrapolate some common elements from these contexts regarding death and those who are beyond.

The simple existence of human beings seems to be overcrowded by the presence of the dead: ancestors interfere with the moral decisions of the single components of the family; in times of uncertainty and doubts, of problems and riddles without answers, the dead are summoned and questioned in order to get some meaningful response; if not respected or properly fed forebears may punish or haunt their own relatives; etc. In all these and other cases, the main relationship the dead entertain with the living is that of distance, and yet of close proximity: they are distant in that they should be more honored than disturbed, they are near in that their very existence depends on the well-being of their extended family or village.

Furthermore, our studies reveal that there seems to be not much interest on the topic concerning the afterlife, in the sense that there is no clear-cut definition or even simple descriptions of those states of beatitude and bliss which usually accompany any definition of paradise, arcadias, utopian lands, seraphic regions etc. This in turn reflects the fact that more than a religious phenomenon, death seems to be described only through some basic anthropological traits devoid of any transcendent or god-like qualities. Paradoxically this last aspect gives also way to the idea of the de-personalization of the subject in death: after a certain period of time the deceased seems to lose any identity, any distinctiveness and it vanishes into a not too well defined idea of "ancesthood" after death.

This latest aspect leads us to underline one of the main striking elements which seem to permeate all these Asian cultures and anthropological settings: that of the almost total absence of any presence, intervention or intercession of God (or of a Supreme Entity) in human affairs and the total lack of any discourse concerning a transcendent realm. No God seems to really participate in human happenings (neither in this life, nor in the otherworld): salvation or liberation is purely a matter of the living taking care of the dead, of condescending to the whims of their ancestors in order to gain protection or simply peace of mind or, again, of the condition that sees the transferring of merits as the only remedy for balancing the pains and sorrows endured by the departed.

Furthermore, any paradoxical idea (or reality) of a God who dies like any other human being is not only absent but also totally alien from those cultures untouched by the Gospel. Indeed: God is far high up in the sky (or in whatever mountain, dwelling universe or cosmos God is residing), and we poor humans are right down here on earth, in this precarious and desert-like-place full of dust and tears.

And yet, from a missionary viewpoint or pre-comprehension, could it not be precisely this new incredible divine intervention in our human history, this new Mediator who reconciles Heaven and Earth, what human beings “worship in ignorance” (*At* 17:23)? This Mediator certainly inaugurates a new relationship with God, a relation in which our subjectivity is exalted rather than diminished, a connection in which the all too vague status of ancestor is transformed into that of a communion of saints surrounding our finitude like a great cloud of witnesses who encourage (rather than scare) us to persevere in the race marked out for us while we fix our eyes on Jesus (*cf. Heb* 12:1–2), a union marked by the promise to all those who have decided to leave their former religion in order to believe in Him that they should not be worry about the fate of their parents or ancestors, since that by his cross and resurrection Christ has freed all those who were held hostage by the shadow of death.¹

It is in this way that Jesus, as the true and only mediator of God, sheds new light on the relationship with others and with our ancestors, a relationship not so much based on fear, but rather on the concrete bonds of faith, hope and love with one another. A relationship that in order to begin does not have to await the sorrowful presence of death, but can start in this very life, in the love we share with one another, and that will find fulfillment and completeness on the other side, in that new, final and definitive spiritual region in which God will be all in all and death will regain once again its true dimension and measure: that of a simple passage toward the fullness of Life.

1. *Cf. 1Pt* 3:18–20: “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who once were disobedient, when the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water;” and *1Pt* 4:6: “For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.”

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Death and Those Beyond

This book deals with a set of arguments related to death: funerary rituals, care or cult of the dead, familial and social dimensions of death, cosmological and mythological backgrounds, roles and functions of intermediaries in the process. However, beyond a simply phenomenological level other aspects loom of the ways the different cultural environments cope with death. Apparently, the dead person represents a liminal reality which might nourish opposite attitudes towards the living ranging from relative benevolence (Taiwan, Japan, Philippines) to utter enmity (Bangladesh and possibly Indonesia), before acquiring the stage of an ancestor, and even as after becoming an ancestor. Consequently, rituality is generally devised to compensate for the liminality of the deceased and establish a new correct relationship where a kind of positive mutuality is maintained and where overstepping borders between the living and the dead is controlled.