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FUNERAL AS RITUAL:
AN ANALYSIS OF ME'EN MORTUARY RITES
(SOUTHWEST ETHIOPIA)

by J. Abbink (*)

(63)

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The problem

Anthropological studies of death, mourning and burial among 'tribal', non-industrial, pre-literate people have usually emphasized two aspects: 1. the way in which it is tried to 're-establish the social order' in the face of the disappearance of its constituent individual members (cf. Goody 1962, Bloch 1971, Huntington & Metcalf 1979, Urban 1988); 2. the way in which the death ritual can re-affirm the forces of life as against death, and thus uphold the 'cosmological' order (cf. Thomas 1968, Bloch & Parry 1962, Humphreys & King 1981).

The trans-cultural comparison of funeral rituals shows that there are many similarities in the rites of death and burial, partly correlated with the mode of subsistence, rules of property transmission, or in general with the social relations of production of a society. On this infrastructural basis, burial ceremonies across cultures have been ritually elaborated as 'celebrations of death' with their own specific form and pattern of meaning. As such, they are 'total social facts' (as defined by Marcel Mauss in his *Essai sur le Don* (1923-24): systematic, integrated social phenomena with a sociological, historical and physio-psychological dimension. They are embodied in the experience of members of a society in an individual and collective sense.

The aim of this paper is to describe and explain the practice of

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Me'en burial as a collective ritual pervaded by cattle symbolism in a predominantly agricultural society. The Me'en are an unknown ethnic group in the Ethiopian Southwest. Their burial ritual is described here for the first time. In a later stage of analysis, the similarities and differences of their ritual with that of other Surmic-speaking peoples in the Ethio-Sudan border area (which can be said to form a 'culture area') have to be explored (this will not be attempted in this paper).

In order to make sense of burial rituals in theoretical terms, one might look at some recent works, like that of Strecker (1988), offering a new perspective to interpret the symbolics of ritual. Strecker (closely following the seminal work of Brown and Levinson 1978 on universals in 'politeness behavior') views ritual as a complex of symbolic statements which are multivocal, indirect but intentional. The 'statements' express the creative use of objects and ideas (e.g. of analogy) by members of the culture studied, building up a meaning which escapes definitive interpretation or explication (Strecker 1988: 212, 222). Rituals can be seen in terms of 'politeness strategies'. In analyzing a Hamar rite of transition, Strecker describes ritual as "... strategy to reduce social danger in a situation where people have control over one another. The intention of control generates as it were the symbolic output". (ibid. 1988: 212-213). Strecker thus focuses on rituals in 'crisis situations' having an underlying power structure in terms of which the ritual may be understandable.

The question of whether this fascinating theory can be useful in explaining a funeral ritual: a funeral ceremony may, at first sight, be less of a socially risky situation (i.e., less face-threatening for the parties involved) than the *ukuli*-ritual in Hamar society analyzed by Strecker (which is about the control of a young man's labour power by senior Hamar, cf. ibid.: 208-209). In describing the Me'en burial ceremony it remains to be seen whether and to what extent there is an underlying social tension which might account for the form the ritual has taken, as well as for the 'meaning' the people give to it.

To begin with, therefore, I will take another definition of ritual. In a recent paper, Roger Keesing (1988) has described ritual as "communicative behavior framed by premises of fictionality", but, unlike play, governed by "scripting". Thus for him, ritual is "... serious, scripted play". This is a very parsimonious and effective characterization of ritual acts, as repetitive sequences of behaviour of a collectivity of people on critical social moments. Keesing here emphasizes the 'staged' element of ritual — the fictional component and some degree of

improvisation — while at the same time pointing to its intentional aspect: there is a 'script', and an idea of appropriateness shared by the participants/performers (it is 'rule-governed' predictable and purposeful⁽¹⁾). Starting with this notion we may, after the presentation of the empirical material, return to the 'social politeness theory' of ritual.

Me'en society

As this study contains new ethnographic material on a very little-known group, a brief sketch of the people involved is necessary. The Southeast-Surma-speaking Me'en are shifting subsistence cultivators in the lowland and intermediate highland zones of Shäwa Gimira and Biro-Shasha *awrajas* (= provinces) in the South Käfa Region. They live in what might be called exogamous patrilineal groups (in Me'en: *du'ut*, or seed), members of which live in and around a nominal 'ancestral' area. The ancestors of the Me'en originally (in the 19th century) were transhumant cattle-herders (according to oral traditions, cf. also d'Abbadie 1890: 122), but nowadays the Me'en only have few cattle. In the lowland-zone along the Shorum (Shärma) and Omo Rivers (on the western side), the tsetse fly has killed all livestock in the past decades, so that the Me'en in this area only practise slash-and-burn cultivation and horticulture. Their only domestic animals are chickens and dogs. Thus, the Me'en do no longer 'follow the cattle', as they always say they used to do in the past, they now follow the crops (maize and sorghum, the staple foods, as well as some t'eff and lentils), cultivated every year on a freshly cleared plot of bushland. This latter factor contributes to the high geographical mobility of the local groups: on average, a new site for the fields and living quarters is chosen every two years. An obvious result of this is a very flexible and dispersed settlement pattern of domestic units. It also shows that there is no land-scarcity among the Me'en. Indeed there are never any quarrels about land-distribution and land-use. The highland-Me'en are more sedentary, but also rotate their fields every year, returning to a site after ca. four

(1) An explanation of the burial ritual might also tell us why (past) efforts by Ethiopian government officials and political cadres to abolish this ritual as a 'wasteful, harmful practice' (i.e. killing valuable cattle, the way of killing them spending many days 'in unproductive singing and dancing') was a mistake: as a core practice in Me'en society the burial ceremony has some 'functional' aspects bound up with their present social organization.

to five years fallow (rotational bush fallow). Rainfall is insecure, crop failure frequent. The level of technology is low. Few Me'en use the ox-drawn plough. They clear the land in large work-groups, made up of relatives and neighbours, using imported machetes, use digging sticks for planting, and hoes for loosening the earth and for weeding. They have no access to transport, agricultural extension services, credit facilities, etc.

Although the Me'en traditionally had no overarching hierarchical authority structure they had *komoruts*, ritual chiefs without coercive powers, who were acting as guardians of the land and as rain-mediators with Tuma (Tuma, the Sky-God, is seen as responsible for the fertility of land, livestock and people). The *komoruts* were active in blessing the land, asking for rain in drought periods, and as mediators in inter-lineage murder cases and other conflicts. Nowadays, a few men have been established as government representatives (e.g., one powerful man was, until very recently, chief of the *awraja* federation of peasant associations). However, traditional Me'en society is loosely structured, in terms of power lines, social organization and personal mobility.

The basic domestic units are nuclear or polygynous families. A man, his wife (or wives) and their children live a compound of several huts. Their fields (for maize, sorghum, some t'eff and wheat) are at a short distance, their gardens (for cabbage, beans, spices, coffee, onions, etc.) are around the huts. The location of the compound is decided upon every year by the husband and is often (but certainly not always) in or near the 'lineage'-territory of his (grand)father or ancestors. Through his marriage(s) with women of other *du'uts* (whereby cattle bridewealth is transferred) he (or his lineage) has established alliances with those *du'uts*. These remain important throughout his life, not only for him, but also for his agnates. As a result, some *du'uts* have, by virtue of either local proximity or preference (based upon an 'historical agreement'), a fairly durable socio-economic relationship⁽²⁾. They assist each-other in times of conflict with other groups and on various ceremonial occasion (e.g., some healing rites). Also they form cooperative labour teams (clearing, harvesting, house-building). These collective labour performances are not occasional happenings only intended to help out people in busy periods, but are an essential feature in

(2) There are some *du'uts* or *kebuoc* (i.e., old clans from which the *du'uts* emerged) which are forbidden to intermarry. This goes especially for the clans of the original *komoruts* (the former rain-mediators): "they cannot take each-other's daughters". See Abbink 1992 for more details.

the productive process. Collective work on a more or less reciprocal basis is the cornerstone of Me'en productive arrangements (although women take over the less labour-intensive, but time-consuming chores of tending the fields and especially the gardens after clearing, burning, planting and/or sowing).

Burial

In this section a sketch of the main phases of the Me'en burial rite (*jingen*) is presented⁽³⁾. Burial among the Me'en is, as in most other societies, the 'final rite of passage' in a person's life: the transition from life to the empirically unknown "realm of decay and darkness" (as Me'en often say). The Me'en view on death is as follows: the body consists of two entities: flesh (*acuk*) and the 'life-essence' or 'soul' (*sbun*). They have to be separated after death. Burial is the series of acts that guarantees the proper transfer of the *sbun* to the realm of Tuma as well as the appeasement of the *k'alua* or lineage spirit (in a sense, the collective spirit of the *du'ut* ancestors). A proper burial is therefore the responsibility of all *du'ut* members and cannot be done hastily and poorly, because — as informants time and again stressed — the welfare and internal peace of the *du'ut* will be affected if proper care is not taken. The period between death and actual interring is also a typical 'liminal' period.

If a person is about to die, he⁽⁴⁾ is brought to a special death, close to his house, and laid on a specially constructed bed. He is taken care of by sister, wife and/or daughter(s). After death, he is wrapped in a white cloth⁽⁵⁾. (In the past, a gourd of milk or water was brought to the dead man's mouth: it was said to be an offering to his

(3) Based upon informant's statements and observation of five cases during fieldwork in late 1989 — early 1990. I will present a description of the most common burial, i.e. for an old woman or man, i.e. a full, adult member of the society, having children and grandchildren. The burials for a young child and for a traditional *komorut*-chief are different. There are also some notable differences between the burial ceremonies of the Me'en (or 'Tishana') in Käfa and the lowland Bodi-Me'en, across, the Omo River.

(4) I write here about the male person, as *du'ut* member. Women marry into the *du'ut* of their husband and are buried in his *du'ut* area, because she has effectively become a member of her husband's *du'ut*. As the connection with the agnates of the *du'ut* is of vital importance, I must focus on a male. But in essentials, the burial for women is the same as for the men. Some differences will be indicated in the text.

(5) An innovation taken from Amhara culture.

sbun ['soul'], and through it to the *k'alua* of the family. After this, the rest of his family would drink the milk). The corpse is kept in the hut until all the consanguinal relatives, especially the sons, have arrived. They have been notified by messengers. Other people are informed and invited to come to the burial by a ritual praise song (called *kakisi-day*) of the oldest affinally related female of the deceased, together with female friends and relatives. She performs it while travelling along the various hamlets in the area. Gathering of the relatives (consanguinal and affinal) may take up to four or five days.

When the eldest son of the deceased has arrived, the burial proceedings can start. A token palisade (often three to four poles are enough), reminiscent of a cattle corral, is built to delineate the burial and dancing ground. This may be some 200 metres or more away from the compound of the deceased. The first son must bring a cow and kill it by hitting it on the forehead with a big stone. This is the first cow to be killed⁽⁶⁾. If the deceased is a middle-aged woman, this cow should always be a milking cow (Me'en: *bi de uroñ*). The stone is then placed near the entrance of the dead man's hut. The oldest ranking male of the lineage, called *tia*, is then called upon to make the first cut (in the neck) to skin the cow. The blood is caught in the hands of the oldest son and one other son or agnate. They smear it on the killing stone. This is seen as an offering or sign of respect to the *k'alua* spirit. If the deceased is a woman, blood may also be applied to the center pole of her hut.

The hide of the cow is carefully taken off, folded, and brought inside the hut of the deceased. This hide (Me'en: *daktac*) will be used to wrap the corpse for burial⁽⁷⁾. The cow's head is cut off and pinned on one of the fence poles erected earlier. In the hut, close relatives from the *du'ut* tie up the corpse in foetal position.

Subsequently, the intestines (*c'oloc*) of the cow are taken out and laid out to be 'read' by an expert. They carry a message about the future state of the land, rain, the crops, the family or lineage, or about community conflicts. If the intestines tell a negative story about the family or lineage of the deceased, the hide can, strictly speaking, not be

used to wrap the corpse, and ideally a second cow must be killed for the same purpose. But this is often omitted because of poverty of the family.

The meat of the animal killed is to be eaten only by the sons or brother's children of the deceased. If the dead person has died from a sudden, mysterious disease, it is said that s/he must have been 'cursed', and no one will eat of the cow's meat. Close relatives and *kokos* (a *koko* is a 'ritual assistant' of a marriageable lineage) might in such a case also hold a small ceremony to cast out the disease. Leaves of two wild plants (from the lowland area) and some meat of the killed cow are chewed and then spit into the fire. The chief *koko* then implores Tuma, the Sky God, to prevent the disease from affecting other family members.

The layer of stomach fat (Me'en: *kuda*)⁽⁸⁾ of the cow is also carefully cut out. The *tia* offers it to the first son and daughter of the deceased, who have to wear it around their neck. Also the other children of the dead man can wear part of the *kuda*. In former days, the *tia* would spray some milk on the ground before cutting the *kuda*.

At this moment, the meat of the cow(s) can be roasted and eaten. Nowadays the meat is usually not consumed until later, often on the next day. If it is eaten on the same day, some bits are thrown near the grave (the bones of cows or oxen killed are gathered and put in a basket in a tree to dry. They are to be burned some months later). In former days, the sons and brother's sons of the deceased partook of the meat after it had been first blessed and tasted by the oldest son. Following this, the oldest son could give the sign for the real dancing to begin.

The grave is dug within the compound/dancing ground marked off earlier. At about the same time, women have started singing the wailing and praise songs about the dead, and grieving by close male and female relatives can be heard for some hours. The digging of the grave is begun by the *tia*, who pours specially boiled coffee on the place of the hole, takes the first bit of earth and puts it apart. Also a *koko* may be present to bless the grave site and pour coffee on it.

The circular hole is dug by male relatives and can be up to four or five metres deep. All 'improper' objects like roots, branches, stones, leaves, etc. are removed: the grave must be totally clean (otherwise, it

(6) And nowadays often the only one, due to the scarcity of cattle among the Me'en. In the last 15 to 20 years the Me'en have somehow lost, or been forced to sell, most of the cattle. The reasons for this cannot be discussed here.

(7) In the case of a woman, a goatskin is used for wrapping the corpse, either together with a cowskin, or as its replacement (nowadays).

(8) In Amharic: *mora*. It may never be torn or damaged, lest misfortune strikes the family.

is said, the ripening of the crops of *du'ut*-members will be endangered). In the meantime, close relatives, most of them females, are assembled in the hut of the dead. Also the oldest son is there. They mourn the dead person, kneeling in front of the bed. In former days, the oldest son (the one who is going to 'inherit', i.e., part of the livestock, and some personal belongings like tools, bracelets, rings or musical instruments) received leaves of the *ch'ima* plant to chew (this is *ch'at* [= *Catha edulis*], a well-known stimulating plant of this region). He then spits (a blessing act) on his younger brothers and sons-in-law present in the hut (the *ch'ima* which might stick to the forehead of the men could not be wiped off: only some days later it could be washed off with cattle-blood). This spitting was done shortly before the body was to be taken to the grave.

The burial ground has been filled with dancing and singing visitors, mostly *du'ut*-relatives and their spouses. It is important to note that in this dancing and singing men and women may be said to follow a 'ritual division of labour', evident in what they wear as dancing outfit and in what they do (the dancing, singing, weeping and drumming, etc.). At the one end of the dancing ground the women play the big drums (the first drumming has — ideally — to be performed by the wife of the *tia*). The burial dance called *moy* (= 'look', 'watch') is initiated and led by the men (a son or brother of the deceased may blow a horn to signal a new round of dancing). This dance goes on for many hours, with different groups performing at a time.

In the funeral dress of men and women, the following differences can be noted. The most important men wear special strings of dancing bells (called *yisba*) tied to their lower legs, set in antelope, buffalo or zebra-skin; hold spears or special dancing sticks (*li'ach*) with tufts of cow hair, and wear a decoration of long white feathers on their head. During the dancing, the men also blow the *otoon* horns (made of wood or of antelope horn), which produce a low, penetrating blast. Women (i.e., the sisters and sisters-in-law of the dead man) have a different dancing outfit: they dress in old goatskin skirts (called *shingillit*); their hips are covered with a coloured bead belt (called *dafa*), and they carry an old buffalo-hide shield (*longon*). They can also wear small strings of dancing bells on their ankles. The *shingillit* is a piece of female Me'en clothing which was worn in the lowland days (the comparable male leather clothing called *senya* has now completely disappeared). The *dafa*, nowadays also a rare object, is an essential decoration

for female relatives of the dead person. Once attached, it cannot be removed while the burial ceremony is in progress. If it is taken off or falls off, a *kokoy* (affinal relative, e.g., her husband) must tie it on again. The *longon* is held above their heads while they dance and encircle the groups of male dancers. Some women may also carry an old wooden club (*uli*). During the dance, the typical ululating refrains are only sung by women.

* * *

As said, the dances are started by *du'ut*-members. Later in the day, the dancing already well in progress, the affinal relatives arrive, usually led by the husband of the oldest daughter of the deceased. It is expected of him that he should give at least one cow to be slaughtered in honour of his father-in-law. Usually he also brings an additional cow or (preferably) ox to the burial ground. This animal is chased around the grave several times (in Me'en: *pushiday*), in the midst of the men. This is part of a kind of charge dance: after arriving, the in-laws storm the dancing ground in what appears to be a mock attack, charging towards the drumming and singing women at the far end. They encircle them from the right side and then return to the other side, their leg bells beating the rhythm, their spears and sticks held aloft. This circle dance (called *ananat moy*) may be repeated several times. For such a dance to be good or 'hot', this chasing of a cow or oxen is indispensable. During the dance guns may be fired, and in the old days some men also might break their spears in two.

When the sun is about to set, the dancing stops for a while when the first son-in-law of the dead person, together with other men (either *du'ut*-relatives or affinal relatives), break into the hut of the deceased, cutting an opening opposite the door to take out the corpse. Under wailing and weeping, the corpse is taken to the grave, which is encircled three times. The men then lower it into the hole with ropes. The first son-in-law and his associates may descend to position the corpse properly. When the deceased is his mother-in-law, he (the son-in-law) may only touch the legs of the body (i.e., "... he should never be able to look at the part of the body from where his wife was born"). The corpse is positioned with the face to the West (toward the setting sun) and covered with layers of stone and earth (sometimes only earth is used). The grave-site is then marked with stones. The stone with the blood of the first cow killed is put in the middle. The grave-diggers

and other male relatives then gather at the grave mound to receive water poured out over their hands. The remains (the roof) of the hut of the dead person are placed over the grave. It will serve as a shelter for the relatives (of the lineage) during the three-month vigil near the grave⁽⁹⁾. Later, a tree (of the fig species, *Ficus vasta* or *sycomorus*) may be planted on the spot.

After the burial, coffee and bean-corn mash (called *shotil*) is served. By this time, the sun has set and the *shun* of the dead is considered to have left the body. It is sometimes said that it has "gone up to Tuma"⁽¹⁰⁾, but this may be in contradiction with other informants' statements that the spirits of the dead ancestors may hover in the vicinity and may visit the descendants in dreams or give them other signs (e.g., causing ill luck or misfortune).

In the evening and during the next few days, the relatives of the dead men continue the *moy* dances. Occasional newly arriving groups of relatives (mostly agnates) from outlying areas are expected to bring an additional cow for killing (they have been called upon to do so by female *kakisiday* singers, see above).

Three months later, when according to the Me'en the corpse has disintegrated and the 'cannibal' *gamtut* people will no longer threaten it, the shelter is torn down and burnt. Also the accumulated bones of the cattle killed at the funeral are burnt then. Female relatives of the deceased will bring local beer (*sholu*) to the grave site. The first drops are poured on the grave by the *tia* of the lineage. The commemorative drinking of the *sholu* is to signify that the burial is over, that the *shun* is at peace, the *k'alu* spirit appeased, that lineage-members have fulfilled their obligations toward one of their kind and has restored the chances of renewed prosperity and fertility for the near future.

Interpretation

The preceding statement already hints at one possible meaning of the Me'en burial ritual (which is of course much richer than the description suggests): regenerating life (i.e., of the descendent of the deceased and of his *du'ut* in general) and fertility; and — in a ritual, in-

(9) They fear the 'cannibalist grave robbers', called *gamtut*. See Abbink forthcoming a.

(10) Probably a Christian influence. The Me'en do not have an idea of a life after death.

direct manner — restating underlying group ideals or reasserting social continuity (i.e., of the multi-stranded relation between various *du'ut*).

There are several points providing clues for interpreting the Me'en burial ritual in such terms.

1. There is, first, the role of the medium of ritual: cattle. It is the central 'natural symbol' in this rite of passage, indispensable in any burial. Cattle not only stands for wealth, status and independence, but also for life, for the possibility of procreation: only exchange of cattle can establish the link between males and females of various groups. Lineages are interlocked in a network of wife/cattle exchange (see below). This is a familiar notion, known from many other studies on Eastern and Southern African peoples, and it is easy to argue that this is a 'relic' of the days when Me'en used to be transhumant cattle herders in the river valleys. But the idea has remained valid for the present, cattle-poor Me'en. This may be due to the fact that the Me'en 'social person' is still constituted through cattle: in their view, social status, personal prestige, and *du'ut* and family prosperity (by securing wives through bridewealth exchange, by sacrificing a cow or an ox in certain healing ceremonies), continue to depend on the 'ritual manipulation' of cattle: in a concrete social — and psychological sense — they "cannot live without the cattle", as they often say. Thus, the 'script' of the burial ritual (see Keesings definition above) could not be discarded; a burial is considered a risky failure if it is not followed. Of course, every burial differs in minor respects from another, i.e., there are 'intentional' omissions, additions or inventions (which cannot all be presented here). They do illustrate Strecker's point (1988: 226) that some ritual performances are more impressive or beautiful than others (though they follow the basic script). In the case of the Me'en burial this refers not only to the number of cattle killed, or to their particular coat colour (some are much more valued than others), but also to the use of various elements of the cattle body. For instance, the milk-offering is not common. Neither is the use of the *ch'imaplant* during the eldest son's blessing of his siblings in the hut of the deceased. The presence of 'dancing cattle' is neither guaranteed at every burial. Also the 'quality' of the praise and wailing song-texts can be very different. Occasionally there may be an additional element, like a ceremonial dance of two men of two affinally linked *du'uts* (one of the deceased), just before the corpse is taken out to the grave, whereby they face each other ritually in a threatening way with their *li'ach*-sticks, but then proceed to reconcile, e.g., by kissing each other's cheeks. But despite such varia-

tions, the basic meaning of the ritual is never altered, because the range of interpretation of the participants is socio-culturally circumscribed.

If we look to the concrete 'ritual manipulation' of cattle, we notice the obvious meaningful use of blood, milk, fat, meat and the hide at various junctures. This is derived from this underlying idea that cattle makes life and birth possible: through it only, the marital link and the chances of procreation can be established.

Blood is used as an offering (smearred on the killing stone and put in the deceased's grave) and as a purifying substance (cf. the washing of the *ch'ima* from the forehead of the sons). The milk is also an offering (to the *shun* and to the lineage spirit). The intestines read at the burial reveal something about the future state of the *du'ut* which has lost a member, giving information about its chances of well-being. The burial is one of the rare occasions on which cattle meat can be consumed. It is the meat of the cow providing the burial hide and can only be eaten by the sons of the deceased: it strengthens them, and it may 'restore' them to life.

2. It follows from this that the cow's body is the model and means of metaphorically expressing central concerns related to the continuity of social life, specifically those of fertility, well-being and growth of family, lineage, and corps. Metaphorically, because parts of the cow are seen as standing for these encompassing, general ideas. The fertility connection is no surprise: it is a common theme in burial rites of tribal groups, and also a very real one. In Donham's recent study on the Maale people of South Ethiopia (1990: 94, 104, 108), this fertility connection was also seen to be the central cultural metaphor of their traditional society, although centered around king and chiefs.

One can detect this concern with fertility in various details of the ritual described: the wrapping of the deceased in a cowskin (this in itself is seen to establish a connection with birth); the wearing of the *dafa* bead belt on the hips of the woman, attached by her husband or another affine⁽¹¹⁾; the 'cleaning' of the grave before the body is put in order not to 'endanger the crops'. Also the wearing of the cow's stomach fat by the first son and first daughter show this concern with fertility of the descendants of the dead person.

3. In the ritual, the bereaved descendants 'communicate' with the

(11) I noticed that the *dafa* belt is also worn by women outside the context of funeral; "just for beauty", they would say. But in all these cases, the women appeared to be pregnant.

dead (and the supernatural) offering them (i.e., the *shun* of the deceased as well as the ancestral or family spirit, the *k'alua*) parts of the sacrificial cattle at various stages of the ceremony: cf. the smearing of blood from the cow's neck on the killing stone or on the central pole of the hut, the offering of milk to the dead man's *shun*, the offering of coffee and bits of meat near the grave site (i.e. to the *k'alua*). If the living do not seek to placate the ancestral spirits, it is implied, they may return to cause them misfortune afterwards.

4. Important to emphasize is also the extent to which the affinal relatives are called upon to perform their 'duty' to the (*du'ut* of the) deceased, as the Me'en say. To refuse to come or to give a cow for sacrifice would be a great shame, tantamount to dissolving the affinal bond (informants could mention no such cases).

In one way, the role of the *kokoy* indicates the bond of cooperation and mutual dependence between descent groups. They live mostly in each-other's vicinity, partly in each-other's lineage territory (in some areas, new settlers have to have some permission from the 'owners' (i.e. elders or *komoruts* of certain old lineages or 'clans') of the land to live there and join in collective work-teams and beer parties throughout the agricultural year. They assist each-other also in the afore-mentioned disease rituals and in certain harvest ceremonies⁽¹²⁾.

In another way, the role of the *kokoy* in the ritual gives vent to the latent tension⁽¹³⁾ there may exist between them (e.g. as wife-givers and wife-takers): this is suggested, for instance, by the way the affines, led by the first son-in-law, storm the dancing ground (it is also part of the game that they should formally be 'refused' entrance at the gate); and also by the way in which the men, led by the first son-in-law, break into the dead person's hut to 'steal' away the corpse for burial. This tension may also be related to recent incidents between the groups, e.g., insults, cattle debts, or a homicide (or even to the time when various Me'en lineages or clans were in violent conflict with each other in the course of their conquering the highland area from other ethnic groups, in the last decades of the 19th century, (see Abbink 1992). But more basic appears to be the inherent ambiguity of the links of reciprocity (i.e., the chain of giving, receiving and giving back)

(12) I would argue that, in this sense, burial is (at least for the individual *du'uts*) more important than, e.g., the so-called first-fruits ceremonies, held at the time of the corn and sorghum harvests.

(13) Also evident in several other social contexts, e.g., the marriage ceremony.

between lineages: in this kin-ordered society they are never in a perfect equilibrium; outstanding 'debts' and expectations cause a delicate underlying strain with a potential for disruption. At the same time they cannot break their links because of the bond established through wife and bridewealth transfer.

Conclusion

It stands to reason that the four elements mentioned are interrelated in the context of the ritual and in the minds of the Me'en having 'scripted' it. Me'en burial as a 'total social fact' is focused on an individual, but as member of a group, and it is celebrated by a group (or groups) ideologically reconstituting itself. In the words of Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 234), the ritual is also an 'experiential gestalt', expressing coherence of values and conceptual linkages in Me'en culture. It relates to this master metaphor of life continuity and fertility through cattle, the medium which has always made it possible.

An exhaustive analysis of the Me'en burial — or another major ritual like the 'firts fruits' ceremony — would reveal the ultimate ecological and economic determinants of such collective ceremonies (this would require more quantitative data concerning the domestic economy and the relations between the various units and lineages). Notwithstanding this, the 'ideological' dimension has a dynamic of its own; indeed it is the domain of intentional scripting and analogical thought in its own right. In our analysis, therefore, the purely economic factors cannot be given priority above the 'ideational' factors. Economic aspects can neither be determined apart from the other spheres of life, nor (if they could) would they have a direct determining impact on the ritual (as a communicative performance set in premises of fictionality). Part of the reason is that Me'en society has always been a decentralized society without chiefs, and is not (yet) characterized by pronounced relations of economic inequality. In addition, the purported 'descent groups' (lineages) are not solid economic corporative groups like in many other African agricultural societies, e.g., the Merina (Bloch 1971), or the Lodagaba (Goody 1962), where there are important inheritance rules concerning land, property, possessions. Among the Me'en, there is no substantial property to be transferred. The cross-lineage networks are more important than any solidary corporate groups. In the same vein, though the concern for ancestors is evident

in the Me'en burial ritual, one cannot speak of a territorially-bound ancestor cult with a complex of rules and an economic importance akin to that of the African peoples mentioned above.

Summarizing the four basic elements discerned in the ritual one can note that:

— Cattle has remained the prime ritual medium because it is the epitome of Me'en socio-cultural ideals and social personhood.

— Fertility and well-being of the family and wider lineage group is a dominant concern underlying a proper performance of the burial.

— Communication with and appeasement of the lineage spirit as well as the 'soul' of the deceased is indispensable to avert misfortune for the descendants.

— Acting out and re-affirming the underlying social, ritual and economic links with affines is an implicit motive of the burial ceremony as staged by the *du'ut* members, conscious of the tensions which may arise or exist between them and other *du'uts*. In this sense, following Strecker's lead, one might see the burial ritual in terms of a socially motivated (and at the same time 'scripted') strategy to avert strain between individuals and groups; the burial ceremony forces the diffuse lineages, in a stylized, 'playful' manner, to come to terms with each other within the common 'ideological' framework of the society (grafted upon socio-economic motives which are only implicitly present). In other words, ritual, as 'serious, scripted play', allows the individual anxieties as well as the collective ambiguities and tensions to be staged in an indirect, multivocal way, avoiding direct confrontations, and upholding some shared basic assumptions of Me'en culture and behaviour.

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SOMMARIO

In assenza di altre grandi cerimonie collettive nella società Me'en, la sepoltura è stata elaborata da questa etnia Surma sud-orientale come un evento culturale per difendere la tradizione del gruppo e la sua continuità di lignaggio.

L'articolo intende fornire, innanzi tutto, una descrizione dettagliata e un'analisi dei loro riti funebri nella prospettiva storica della loro antica cultura fondata sul bestiame; in secondo luogo cerca di spiegare le sottese metafore e la sopravvivenza di tali riti con le attuali caratteristiche. In quanto tale l'analisi non è altro che un elemento in uno studio comparativo della cultura e società Surma, effettuato nella regione di Kaffa nell'Etiopia sud-occidentale.

RESUME

En l'absence d'autres grandes cérémonies collectives dans la société Me'en, la sépulture a été élaborée par cette ethnie Surma comme un événement culturel afin de défendre la tradition du groupe et sa continuité de lignage.

L'article entend fournir principalement une description détaillée et une analyse de leurs rites funebres dans la perspective historique de leur antique culture fondée sur l'élevage du bétail; dans un deuxième temps il essaie d'expliquer les sous-tendues métaphores et la survivance de tels rites par les caractéristiques actuelles. Cette analyse est seulement un élément dans une étude comparée de la culture et de la société Surma effectuée dans la région de Kaffa en Ethiopie sud-occidentale.