

A GRANARY IN THE EARTH: DYNAMICS OF MORTUARY RITUALS AMONG THE KAPSIKI/HIGI

Walter E.A. van BEEK

ABSTRACT

Death rituals are a highlight in Kapsiki/Higi culture. In this privacy oriented, fragmented society the mortuary rituals form an important integrative factor in village society, reflecting a long history of intra and intervillage relations. The burial proper comprises three days of intensive ritual, in which the scale of participation gradually increases: from family to village, and from village to region. In dancing the relations of the living to the deceased are expressed, in adornment the exploits of the deceased are shown. All major categories of the village population have a mutually complementary place in the ritual, symbolically portraying the village as an integrated, harmonious social unit, which effectively masks a fair number of social tensions. The burial rites are terminated, with the building of the grave; the second part of the mortuary rites, at the end of mourning, has a fixed place on the ritual calendar. The symbolism of these two parts of the mortuary rites is complex, and forms part of the larger system also present in initiation and marriage rites. The grave itself is a central symbol, and forms the strongest link between the living and the dead.

Keywords: burial, mortuary rites, Kapsiki, Higi, North Cameroon, mourning funeral, death, agnate, (black)smith, dance, kin, in-law, symbol, granary.

RÉSUMÉ

UN GRENIER SOUS TERRE : DYNAMIQUE DES RITUELS FUNÉRAIRES CHEZ LES KAPSIKI-HIGI.

Les rituels funéraires sont un moment capital de la culture des Kapsiki/Higi. Dans cette société fragmentée, tournée vers la vie privée, les rituels de mort sont un important facteur d'intégration pour la société villageoise et le reflet d'une longue histoire de relations dans et hors du village. Les rituels d'enterrement proprement dits occupent trois jours intenses où le degré de participation s'élargit graduellement: de la famille au village, du village à la région. La danse exprime les relations des vivants avec le mort, les parures témoignent des exploits du défunt. Les principales catégories de la population villageoise occupent des places complémentaires dans le rituel, donnant du village l'image d'une unité harmonieuse et intégrée, ce qui masque en réalité bon nombre de tensions sociales. Le rituel d'enterrement prend fin avec la construction de la tombe, et la seconde partie des rituels funéraires, à la fin du deuil, se tient à une date précise du calendrier. Le symbolisme de ces deux phases des rituels funéraires est complexe, et s'intègre dans un système plus large en œuvre aussi dans les rituels d'initiation et de mariage. L'un des symboles centraux, la tombe elle-même, est le lien le plus puissant entre le monde des vivants et celui des morts.

Mots-clés: enterrement, rites funéraires, Kapsiki, Higi, Nord-Cameroun, deuil, funérailles, mort, agnats, forgerons, danse, parenté, alliance, symbole, grenier.

*

* *

INTRODUCTION

As in many societies in Africa, death rituals are among the most elaborate of Kapsiki/Higi culture. The many days of mourning, wailing, dancing and (eventually) burying make up the ceremonial highlights in the village. Given the general characteristics of Kapsiki culture, with its privacy orientation and the relative absence of means for control of the individual by the collective body of agnates, these rituals purvey both the tensions between individual and the village society, and serve as a dialectical binder of the village. In fact, they stress a mutual we-feeling and belongingness, perhaps an overdefinition of harmony, that does not overtly characterize the village social organization beyond ritual times. So in the analysis the mortuary rites can serve, against the background of general Kapsiki culture, as an entrance into inter- and intra-village relations, as well as historical interaction with surrounding groups. In this contribution, I would like to highlight the "container" element in the rituals: i.e. their function as a repertory of old relations and practices, in which both the internal contradictions of Kapsiki society come to the fore, but also its struggle with outside forces.

Overview of Kapsiki burial

As a detailed description of the rituals would take too much space here (cf. van Beek 1978: 350-376), an overview will be given.

- day 1: death, limited mourning, announcement of death
- day 2: body decorated for the first time, village mourning
- day 3: body decorated for the second time, big dance, digging of grave, burial proper
- day 4: sacrifice on the burial mound, joint meal; widow's sacrifice, termination of burial mound first phase
- day 6: final sacrifice on mound, second phase of mound
- day 15/16: libation on mound, settling debts, final phase of mound.

After the death of, say, an old man, that very first day mourning takes place on a limited scale; close relatives announce the death throughout the village, that has already been alerted by the intermittent drumming. Lamenting the death of the loved one, the nearest of kin walk slowly through the village, singing: "Amaa, where am I now? What shall become of me? Oh, son of the sun, where did you go?" In the compound of the deceased a crowd slowly gathers, joining in the laments and dancing. The chief blacksmith, warned by drums and neighbours, comes along with his son, the chief drummer, and people slowly start dancing, shuffling without to much exertion to the sounds of the single drum. The women of the clan get their *li vu*, the iron skirt they received at their first marriage, and sustain the beat of the drum with the scraping of a calabash over the iron rings. After some time, a few more blacksmiths come along with drums and *shila* - flutes, and the dance livens up. The kind of flutes used, depends on the season; in the beginning of the wet season the *zuvu* is played, a different kind of open flute, performed by non-smiths in larger groups. The smiths

take care of the body, clothing it in a blue gandourah, the head wrapped tightly with several cloths, and then put the deceased at the place of honor in the entrance hut. A bowl of millet and sorghum is put at his feet, with some arrows and the tail of a cow in a calabash; the grains, by the way, are carefully handled lest any grains spill on the earth and cause an epidemic among kin. The classificatory sister's sons of the deceased fan out into the different villages with which their father has had dealings in his life, while the women of the house and ward sustain a nightlong wailing and singing. At night a small ritual is performed if the deceased is a true autochthonous in the village (*ndegwevi*). His daughter calls out the names of all the mountains that dot the Kapsiki plateau in that village, starting at the South East; each time the mountains answer through the mouth of a neighbour, saying that her father moved on to the next mountain. At last, in the North-West, the large outcropping of Mcirgue "answers" that the deceased has entered the earth. Mcirgue has taken him; and the daughter bursts out in wailing.

The next day is for dancing and mourning on a strict village basis. In the early dawn the young men of the village gather at the deceased's compound, armed with clubs and swords, to get two grasses, *safa* and *haze* (respectively *Combretum* and *Symbopogon*) from the outlying bush. In fact, they tend to gather them from just over the village border, often provoking quarrels with a neighbouring village. At the house during the morning the dancing crowd gradually increases, while inside the compound the body is decorated by the blacksmiths.

Decorating a body in order to prepare it for the dance is a serious business, and strictly a blacksmith affair. The deceased is first washed in order to stip his epidermis off him: the deceased should be buried "white". Then, the body is robed in a large darkblue gandourah, a long one which is made into a pair of trousers, and a short one tied around the middle. Clanmembers come and bring the coloured cloths, woollen tresses, arrows and porcupine quills with which their "brother" is to be adorned. Assisted by some sister's sons the blacksmiths criss-cross the breast and back of the body with the many-coloured scarfs, finishing with the crossed arrows and quills, and over his shoulders the large polychrome woolen tresses. It is the head that the smiths focus on. In the scarfs tied around the head they put some symbols indicating the identity and personal history of the deceased. A red felt hat, with two more bonnets tied against them, finishes the head make-up. Important is to leave an opening for the eyes, as the deceased has to be able to see the proceedings. The young men who had left earlier for the field, then return with the *safa* and *haze*, which the smiths join with the arrows crossed at the corpse's breast. Before his eyes dangles a cow tail, put upright in his breast gear, as well as four rooster feathers, put in the arrow shafts. At both sides of his mouth, and crossed under his nose as a kind of moustache, two porcupine quills.

The deceased now has his finest hour, impressive and regal. The blacksmiths do take their time to make up the body, though often admonished by kinsmen of the deceased to hurry; however, they for once control the proceedings in the village and hold center stage, which they do not surrender willingly.

Outside the house the crowd has grown, and as in most funeral proceedings, the specific ornaments of the dancers indicate the relation of the dancer to the deceased. Especially in the case of the mourning women this is clear: the skirt of iron rings (*livu*), the grating sound of which sometimes dominates the dances, is worn by this year's brides, the daughters of the lineage as well as women married to clanbrothers of the deceased. These latter women also dance with a hoe.

Matrilateral kinswomen have a calabash in their hands, and the bilateral kin, the so-called *hwel efwe*, wears either left or right fibers of *rhweme* beans in their girdles. Personal belongings of the deceased are carried by his male descendants; thus, the grandsons dance with his quiver, wearing a porcupine quill in their hats, plus, in the case of first borns, a red bonnet. All this, as addition to the general male outfit of large boubous, scarfs, swords and tresses.

In fact, the whole morning is spent decorating the body, while the kinsmen and co-villagers dance outside the compound. At noon the smiths are ready and settle for a good, long and well-deserved beer, as a son destroys a part of the compound wall, forcing an opening for the body to leave through. When finished, the chief blacksmith heaves the body on his shoulders, dances a few rounds and puts it in the breach in the wall. A young smith outside the compound takes the deceased on his shoulders, aided by some sister's sons, and joins the dancing villagers. Behind him the immediate kinsmen of the deceased climb through the wall as well, the women wearing their *livu* over their shoulder. The dancing crowd gathers around him, greeting the dead by brandishing spears and swords, shouting, wailing and singing. With the blacksmith dancing in the middle, the dance nears its zenith; all the people participate, wailing at full voice, singing the war songs (*geza*) and mourning dirges, dancing and running behind the corpse, which is carried by young smiths working in relay. The time spent in this apogee of the dance, depends on the age and social importance of the deceased. With a very old man, who has outlived his social excellence, a quarter of an hour suffices, whereas the mourners of a young ward chief once danced for well over an hour. Immediately behind the corpse dances the widow, holding a cow tail, with the other kinsmen around her. Only in the case of extreme grief -like the above mentioned case- the close kinsmen do not dance at all: too much grief precludes dancing, however normal the dance is as an expression of grief. After the dance the deceased is put inside the forecourt of the compound, the social space called *derha* (see van Beek 1987), to sit on his place of honor. A kinswoman chases the flies with a broom and cow's tail, softly wailing and mourning: "You went away without saying farewell; I am now a slave of the others; here are the people to greet you; if you are over there, please tell my people there that I suffer here".

The dance itself can now gradually change its character; mourning and wailing give way to dancing as such, while the blacksmiths disrobe the body and stow the cloths and decorations away in some wooden trunks, which the kinsmen then put on top of one granary, both to signal the fact of death and to keep the clothes from being stolen. The deceased himself, clothed in a black boubou, remains seated in the forecourt, "receiving" the greetings of all new mourners; all people from the village come at least once to pay their respects to the dead in person. During the night the body is kept on a *gelinka*, the roof of a shed inside the compound.

The next day, the third one in Kapsiki reckoning, has by and large the same program: preparing the body for the dance, and dancing with the deceased. This day, however, the dance is larger than before, as now all neighbouring villages have been alerted. Especially all villages where the daughters of the deceased reside or have passed through in marriage, have to show up at the funeral. The sons-in-law, assisted by close kinsmen, have bought some meat or (if they fathered a child by the deceased's daughter) butchered a goat; with beer and millet mush these in-laws, some 30 to 100 men and women, set out for the deceased's village and compound, accompanied by some local blacksmiths with drums and flutes. The sons-in-law are clothed at their very best, with large gandourah, quivers, bonnets, woollen tresses and ostrich feathers, in fact the very same outfit they dance in as newly weds in the yearly *la*-festival (van Beek 1978).

At the compound in question that same morning the sister's sons of the deceased have gathered. They are quite busy these days, supplying food and beer for the blacksmiths, just as they helped in decorating the body and stayed the night in the compound, guarding the body. Now, armed with iron tipped digging sticks, adzes and old calabashes they follow one old smith, the *mazekwele*, chief of the grave, to the burial ground. There, the old smith draws a circle around a calabash, and the young men start digging. The narrow opening of the grave has to be enlarged in all directions, resulting in a cone-shaped chamber, measuring about a 1,5 meter. The work should be finished at noon, when the sun touches the bottom of the grave. The diggers then gather their belongings, change clothes and rejoin the dance, to ask the arriving sons-in-law for money.

Inside the compound the body has been prepared for this day's performance, more or less like yesterday, if possible still more elaborately adorned. Outside the compound the dancing proceeds, with heightened tension each time a delegation of the sons-in-law arrives. The groups from neighbouring villages gather themselves just before checking in at the dance, and then enter the dance as a body, brandishing spears and swords, yelling and shouting war cries in a convincing mock attack on the dancing villagers. With the various delegations from the neighbouring villages joining, the dance grows in size and complexity: each village has its special wailing dirges and war songs, which are all performed with great gusto. The sons-in-law do form the main element, and receive most of the blacksmiths' attention, as they have to show that the daughters of the deceased were well placed with them, and -possibly- to convince the onlooking women that they

are suitable candidates for husbands. So the present son-in-law in full adornment dances on top of a granary, in full view of all men and especially all women, throwing coins into the throng of drumming and flute-playing blacksmiths below. Just as yesterday, the dance has its high point when the body is brought out, the same way as yesterday, to join the dancing kinsmen and in-laws, a joint dance that lasts even longer than the day before.

After the dance with the corpse, the dance changes gradually into a get-together dance for the youngsters of the different villages, especially if the deceased was old. Depending on the season various "ladies-excuse-mes" may be held, which for the younger people do form the highlight of the day, offering them a unique chance to become acquainted with foreigners, in the ritual immunity of the funeral dance. In fact, a fair number of marriages, of the run-away type, do follow most large funeral dances.

Just before sunset the dance has lost its social appeal, most people wandering off to their villages and houses. With just the close kinsmen present, the blacksmiths prepare the body for the burial proper. Clothing it in a *rhamca* (litt. bull's skin), they either envelop it in a real bull's skin (if the deceased was rich) or a goat skin. The animal for this *rhamca* has to be killed by smothering or breaking its neck: no iron may touch it. Whereas the smiths have eaten all of the meat of the animals given them the last two days, this time the meat of one leg has to be kept for the sacrifice of the morrow. The corpse is clothed in (again) a large blue boubou, the pockets of which are torn out, and the sides sewn together: a dead person is allowed no pockets. This time too, the head is wrapped carefully with another goat skin. In-laws of the deceased, usually the close family of one of the wives, have given a goat to their kinswomen. After butchering, two legs are for her, the rest of the meat for tomorrow's sacrificial meal, the skin for wrapping the deceased's head. Of his huge dance adornment, only two rooster feathers remain, fixed in arrowsheaths, waiving above his head. This last preparation for burial is the work of the chief blacksmith who may be -and will be- urged to greater speed by the kinsmen, but usually retorts that in that case he has to get more meat and beer. As the last farewell, the chief smith puts some millet mush on the corpse's head, and eats it with the other smiths present. The nearest of kin then face up the corpse when the chief smith offers his plaited cap with beer to the deceased: "Here, be healthy, very healthy; beget yourself many children, I am not jealous." Another smith takes the corpse on his shoulders and leaving the compound now through its proper exit, walks past the remaining dancers to the grave; there he puts the corpse down, sitting on the edge of the grave.

What happens next depends on the suspected cause of death. If an ulcer might have been the cause of death, surgery is performed on the deceased by removing all the internal organs. If not, burial proper starts straight away. The smith then cuts off strips from the corpse's boubou, to serve as mourning bands (*shingli*), to be worn around the wrists till next February. The smiths then lower the corpse into the grave, keeping the right arm stretched high, the thumb extended. One of the proper sons or daughters of the deceased then takes the two arrowsheaths with feathers, rubs off the

thumb and leaves for home, fist firmly closed, without looking backwards. He or she has inherited the character (*ngki*), of the deceased, viz, riches, intelligence, cunning and success. Arriving at the grave side the smith cuts a few fibres from those keeping the corpse's mouth shut and wraps them around a special bracelet of his. When the burial is finished he will touch the left breast of all the kinspeople with it. The chief blacksmith descends into the grave to put the corpse in its proper position: head to the South, feet towards the North, lying on its side facing East. When finished the smith climbs out, and rubs all kinspeople with the bracelet and the fibres. The younger men close the pit with a large stone, and move some earth over it, leaving the digging stick and the adze handles, without iron, on the small mound.

Variations in funeral

As any funeral is also an expression of the deceased's identity in Kapsiki culture, there is some variation in the proceedings. Women's funerals, besides having some different wailing songs and dances, have one central difference, especially for those women who had sons and assisted in the brideprices for their brides. Then not only the woman's corpse is adorned with some of the male symbols of porcupine quills, but also with *safa* and *haze*. For this a group of women from the wars, accompanied by the wife of the chief blacksmith, go out into the bush, dressed as men in large gandourahs, bonnets and swords, the smith's wife with a headdress of catskins, a drum in hand. Like young men they gather the two plants, as well as some termites to present to the deceased.

Other variations include the funeral for a leprosy patient (buried at night in white), small children (buried sitting upright with their hands on their heads), recent initiates (buried in initiate garb), soon to-be married girls (buried wearing their *livu*-skirt) and twins (all people concerned wear special plants around their heads). More complex is the case of suspected sorcery. Among other things, the bilateral kinsmen of the deceased do not wear the beans fibers, called *rhweme*, which do form a central symbol in mourning rituals. After the proper burial, one brother of the deceased traces with an iron implement a cross on the mound and gathers all belongings of the dead person, above all his epidermis which may have been washed off before the dance. All this, in order to prepare for the revenge ritual called *wuta* (van Beek 1978, 1991). Blacksmiths' funerals tend to be short, as nobody will pay for a prolonged proceeding. On the other hand, the dance then is very special, as not only in all functions only smiths are present, but the non-smiths will be scared to enter the dances. The blacksmiths flout their force in carrying the corpse, as well as their magical prowess, showing off their *rhwe*, the medicinal and magical means in the dance. No other will even approach them. A very special case is the burial of a village chief, like the one of the rainmaker, who are buried in great secrecy, after elaborate rituals. However, for our purposes here, these variations are not relevant, as they pertain more to the office than to the Kapsiki view of death and its symbolism.

The closing rituals

Next day after burial the kinsmen repair the compound wall, and the classificatory daughters of the deceased walk with the chief smith to the burial mound, carrying some fat, beans and meat from yesterday's *rhamca*, in the calabash used for digging. Singing mourning dirges, they walk over to the burial mound, and start building the little wall flanking it. After half finishing the job, the blacksmith sprinkles a few morsels of food over the back of the hands of the women and a sistersson, on the mound, after which all -except the smith- eat the rest of the food.

Back home the clanmembers of the deceased have gathered in the compound to collect the scarfs and tresses. Before they are served, the bilateral kinsmen, the *hwelefwe* of the deceased, eat a mixture of beans, couch and sorghum, an important ceremonial dish called *zhazha*; both halves of the *hwelefwe* eat apart, the "patrilateral part" outside, while inside the hut the "female" side eat their portion. When the *zhazha* is finished, the clansmen eat what is left of the mush (not much anyway), and wait for the distribution of the clothes. Most family members have their heads shaven by the blacksmith. Again a sistersson does the job. Handing each his borrowed clothes, he extends a sorghum stalk with sauce over his hands, strokes the scarfs with it and leaves with his belongings.

In all this, the widow is not the focus of the proceedings. She has not been at the grave yet, but later on the day cooks some mush for her part, with the meat of the head-wrapping goat. Half way to the burial grounds, she eats the food at the side of the road, and then smashes her husband's calabash in which she has carried the food, and returns home.

This in no way terminates the proceedings. After two days a similar ritual on the burial mound is performed. The mound itself is finished after two weeks, when the kinsmen of the deceased gather again at the burial grounds, and adorn the burial mound with an upright stone symbolizing its male occupant. Then the most important debts of the deceased will be settled, and all people who have some claims outstanding have to speak up now or forgo their rights. In case of people with many children this may be complemented with one more ritual, to put the stone on the mound upright. Anyway, several more small-scale rituals of this kind follow in the period between the death and the concluding rites in February.

In this month the last rites, called the *shingli*, beer of the mourning bands, are held. In this month all funerals are terminated, each individually on its own date. The night before, some sons leave with the blacksmith for the burial grounds carrying a jar of beer. The smith pours a libation of beer onto the stone and the mound: "May your children be healthy and beget many children". The deceased's offspring then drink another calabash, and the rest of the beer is left in the jar on top of the burial mound. The next morning old men from the ward, friends who have assisted at the funeral, in-laws and other kinspeople gather in the entrance to the compound. From the early morning the smith is busy shaving the heads of the kinspeople and cutting the mourning bands of all concerned. Hairs and bands are burned

afterwards. With the descendants of the deceased, and one of their mothersbrothers, the chief leaves for the grave, a woman carrying another jar of beer and some sacrificial jars for the sons, to pour on the mound (see photo 1). Pouring some beer in his cap, he mixes it with part of the couch. Giving some ground couch to all descendants, he shuts all new jars with it, and decorates them with *safa* and *haze*, the two herbs of the corpse, taking great care not to leave any grains on the mound, lest they germinate and children die. The chief smith pours the mixture of beer and couch on the



Photo 1 *The tè shingli, end of mourning. The chief black-smith (at right) mixes the beer for his final farewell of the dead.*

stone, letting it fall over the hands of the children, saying: "Be good, do not be jealous you have been well mourned, take care of your children. They have to beget many children themselves, do not stand in their way." The children then rub the stone with cailedrat oil and ocre, as well as their own heads and legs. The rest of the beer and couch is drunk by all present, and all the children, most of them almost adult, step on the burial mound. The chief smith spits beer over them, blessing them in the name of the deceased with health and posterity. One by one the children are carried from the mound on the shoulders of their mothersbrother, who puts them down a little further, carrying them in exactly the same fashion as the corpse was carried to the grave some months before. The blacksmiths smash the old jar,

leaving the pieces on the mound. Back home their friends are waiting for them with beer, for a first sacrificial use of the jars. The son who inherits his father's house distributes tobacco to his friends and neighbours, and resumes his normal life in the old house. That afternoon, the widow for the first time goes to the grave side, pours a libation of beer on the stone, swears to her deceased husband that she has been true and faithful to him, and claims that this situation has lasted long enough now, asking his forgiveness if she marries one of his brethren or some other man.

A granary in the earth: symbols of identity in death

In order to interpret the manifold symbols used in the complicated burial ritual of the Kapsiki, the meanings and uses of the various symbols have to be established. Let us first consider the symbols used by the living, the dancers and mourners, kinspeople of the deceased. The women dance with hoe handles, with the iron skirts, calabashes and cow's tail (the latter only in case of a deceased husband). Thus, the various ways of attachment of a woman are expressed: the hoe for the women married with clanbrothers, the *livu* skirt for the same plus for the daughters of the lineage and the brides of that year, the cow's tail, which is for males a symbol of affluence and importance. The masculine symbols of mourning are different. For those with close ties to the deceased, sons and grandsons, the red bonnet and the quiver are the signs of immediate kinship. For all other relations a more or less standard attire is required: flowing clothes and weapons. One crucial difference in male and female mourning symbols is the much greater differentiation in female relations: widow, partners of lineage-brothers, matrilineal relatives and descendants, all are symbolized as different in the dance. In contrast, among the men the only distinction expressed is between descendants and all other men. So, whereas the men are ritually defined as a homogeneous body, as one social corpus, the ritual depicts women as a loose corpus of individually attached persons. When the whole of male and female mourners is identified, different symbols are used, most of them food symbols. For the various groups either *rhwempe* (a mixture of ground peanuts and couch) or *zhazha* (cooked beans and sorghum) serve as ritual meals, not exclusively linked with the mourning rites, but general symbols of collective unity; for one thing, they serve as a symbol of friendship. So the collectivity eats together foods expressing closeness and friendship.

However, it is the deceased who is the center of the burial, both in the actual dance proceedings, and in the symbolism. His or her manifold adornments have a definite polysemy. The deceased is depicted as a warrior, a worker and a rich person. War is indicated by the arrow shafts, the feathers of a black rooster, and by the two major symbols of *safa* and *haze*, the plants taken from the bush, by the porcupine quills either white or red. Sashes, ostrich feathers and eventually cow's horns form a straightforward indication of riches, while the millet or couch presented at the feet of the deceased, as well as the same *safa* and *haze* in their polysemy indicate work in the bush as well. Additionally, some specific features of the deceased may be portrayed at the funeral dance; in the case of a herdsman

or cattle owner cow's tails will be present, just as accacia leaves adorn the head of someone who has worked for the *Eaux et Forêts* of the Cameroonian government. So the deceased is portrayed both in traditional and in actual eminence, as a man or woman of the bush, worker, warrior, taker of slaves, rich and important.

The body is carried on the shoulders of the blacksmith, held by the sleeves of the *gandourah* which constitutes its basic clothing. High above the dancing crowd, it should be seen and greeted; at the same time, the deceased should see its mourners, so the eyes are left uncovered, accentuated nowadays by sunglasses. During carrying, the blacksmith should move fast, the folds of the *gandourah* flapping in the wind, mourners and dancers running and wailing behind it. In some way, the deceased symbolically 'flies' to his grave, reenacting one of the founding myths of the village:

When Hwempetla, the culture hero of Mogodé, who by his exploits had freed the village from its enslavement to neighbouring Gouria, was dying, he specified in his last will (midimte), the way he should be buried. After being wrapped in the skin of his favorite bull, the blacksmith should hoist the body on his shoulders. Then Hwempetla's bride (makwa) should cling unto the tail of the bull. After his death the funeral proceeded according to his instructions; Hwempetla's body took flight from the smith's shoulders, his wife flying behind him. Stunned, the people ran after the two, and searched in the bush. At the place where many flies gathered, as Hwempetla had indicated, they found two tombs, a high and a low one, one for Hwempetla and one for his wife. The people finished the tombs, and since that time use the spot to pray for rain.

Though the myth is not primarily a founding story of the funeral, it is quite recognizable. However, not all symbols refer back to this founding myth (the text given is but a fragment of the whole corpus), but the general way of dancing with the corpse definitely does.

The musical instruments used in funeral rites are either connected with death in general, i.e. the drums, or refer to the season in which the burial takes place. In the wet season the *zuvu* flutes may not be blown, while the *shila* flutes, a prerogative of the blacksmiths, may not accompany a get-together dance (*kwaberhewuzha*). Some instruments pertain to the status of the deceased, especially his age, but that is the exception rather than the rule. The rationale for the musical taboos lie in the connection between instruments and the growing of crops, in particular between the flutes and the wind. No flutes may be blown when the tender crops start growing in the fields. Only when the millet stalks are straight and strong, may the risk of wind be taken. On the other hand, a clear-cut taboo forbids any agricultural work during funeral proceedings; when death is announced in the early night of the village, the habitual warning is that nobody should take the handle of the hoe in his hands; no one should depart to the fields, before the dead kinsman is buried. During the busy season, weeding time, however, the taboo is often broken by not-too-close kinspeople. So, death and agriculture

do not mix well. The reason for this, as we shall see, is not so much because they represent totally opposite systems of meaning and values, but because they are discourses that may be expressed into one another.

In the digging of the tomb some of the antithetical relations with agriculture comes to the fore. The digging itself is done with the habitual agricultural implements, digging iron, hoe, adze, etc. After finishing the underground chamber, however, waiting for the burial to be performed, the handles of the implements are put on the hillock of sand, after carefully removing all iron blades. The same holds, in a way, for the adornment of the corpse for dancing. In its full decoration no pins, needles or anything made of iron may be used: the shafts of arrows are used without the iron arrowtips. When a corpse has to be operated upon, in case of a suspected ulcer, the blacksmiths first puts a *duburu* iron stave, half-product of the traditional iron making process - on his forehead, before proceeding with the dangerous job of cutting open the body; afterwards he will discard the *duburu* and never use it again; never will it be left near the tomb. Finally, when killing the goat for the funeral, the *rhamca* (it is usually a goat, but should be a bull), the beast is suffocated, or its neck broken, but iron is never allowed to touch, cut or kill the animal. So iron clearly has a very ambivalent relationship with death: where death is, iron will not be, at least where the corpse is, iron is absent. One seeming exception is the *li vu*, the iron skirt girls dance in during funeral. Two reasons for the use of iron at this spot are given: first, it is a female issue, which has no bearing on the antagonism of male agriculture versus death. Secondly, and more important still, all iron forbidden at the rites is cutting iron: knives, adzes, hoes, axes. The female attire consists of interlinked iron rings, with no cutting edge at all, and as such must be considered on a par with the whole range of bronze (brass) ornaments (van Beek 1991b); theirs is a symbol of fertility.

In order to explore further the meaning of the symbols used in Kapsiki funeral proceedings, we shall have to delve into the range of meanings associated with the central pair of symbols, the two plants *safa* and *haze*. They are always used together and as a pair have a wide range of connotations. Their first general meaning is the association with the bush: during the funeral proceedings the *safa* and *haze* have to be taken from the far away bush, if possible from enemy territory (i.e. another village). If conflict is provoked, so much the better. Both plants function in slave rituals as well: whenever a slave is captured, he is adorned with *safa* and *haze*, as well as with arrow shafts and black rooster feathers, and brought into the village, where people force him to sing the praises of his captor. The association of slaves with corpses is close and recognized. The same holds for hunting. In both the ritual of the first hunt of the season and in private hunts the plants function as central symbols.

The second, and maybe more fundamental equation, is with agriculture, i.e. with sorghum cultivation. Among the various granaries the Kapsiki build for storing their grains, the straw plaited *tame* is by far the most important. A marvellous piece of straw plaiting, the *tame* is the quintessential granary. A complicated ritual as well as a set of tales and myths surround the *tame*,

rendering it the ritual core of Kapsiki agriculture. The clearest instance is the "initiation" of the *tame*, i.e. the ritual of putting it into first use. In fact most of its fabrication is done in a communal work party, culminating in the ritual "initiation" or "marriage" (same word in Kapsiki). For our purposes here the role of the two plantsymbols is opposite. During the ritual the *tame* is decorated at its top with *safa* and *haze*, "like a corpse" the informants claim (see photo 2). At the same time the putative connection with the brideprice is mentioned, and the expressed association with cattle (the grains stored in the *tame* should pay for a cow some day) serves as a mediator. When the granary will be filled, also *safa* and *haze* are used to decorate its top, which by the way is likened to the "head" of the granary.

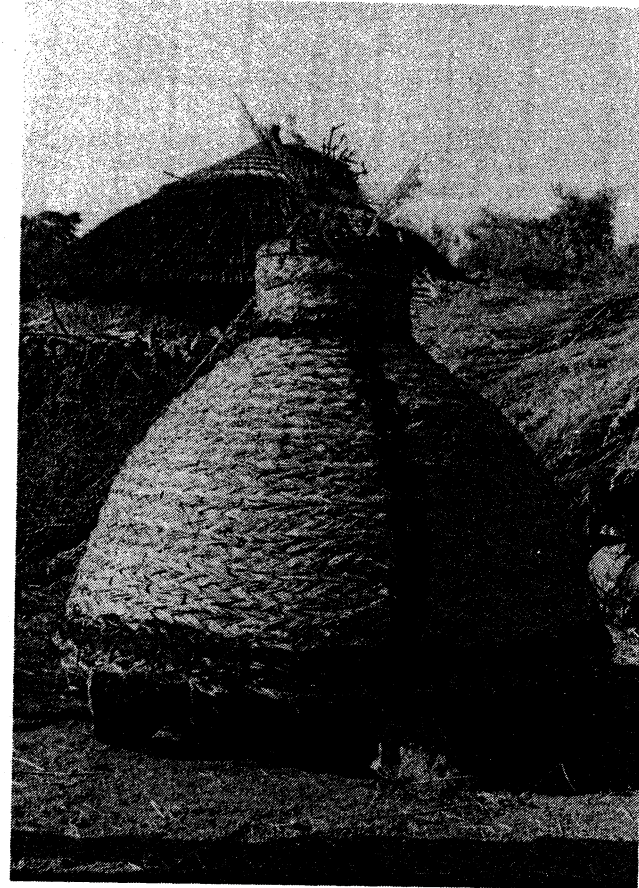


Photo 2 *The tame, plaited granary, after "initiation". Decorated with cow dung it is topped by safa and haze, the dominant Kapsiki plant symbols.*

Furthermore, the two herbs are used in combination whenever one has to swear an oath, and they individually make part of several magical means to protect property and to cash in on old debts. So, on the whole, the range in meaning for the *safa* and *haze* is quite large; when questioned, the informants define its general meaning in terms of "luck" and "prosperity": when the plants are gathered from the foreign fields, the other village loses some of its luck. Anyway, luck or prosperity is deemed to be in short supply, a kind of limited good that should not leave one's territory. The crowning of the corpse's head with the herbs sometimes is constructed as an admonition to the deceased to part with his personal luck on behalf of his descendants. Actually, in the final burial proceedings as we have seen, the direct inheritor strokes the thumb of the corpse and leaves with the luck (then in the concept of breath) in his closed fist.

So through the general symbols of *safa* and *haze* corpse and granary are linked. Both symbols also have a general meaning of masculinity, male the filling of a granary, as well as through the just as masculine magical means. As such the two symbols are closely connected with the patrilineage (*kayita*), on any level of segmentation. Characteristically, when non-linear kinsmen are indicated the ritual, fibers from wild beans (*rhweme*) are used, which are easily equated with the *safa* and *haze*. The beans fibers are used by the deceased's cognatic stock, *hwelewe*, in which the matrilineage forms a core. Also are the *rhweme* used in a small rite separating the placenta from the new born baby; thus in the plants and fibers the opposition patrilineal - matrilineal relatives finds expression. For the patrilineage the equation between the male activities as expressed by the total outfit of the corpse (cultivation, war, riches and marriage) focuses on the two plant symbols, and finds a similar focus in the *tame*: there, too, cultivation, riches, initiation-cum-marriage and slaves come together in the ritual and general meaning of the granary.

A look at the tomb itself confirms this symbolic equation (see figure 1). The tomb, dug by the sisters' sons is a hole in the ground, enlarged at greater depth to a round chamber, resulting in a cone shape space, with a narrow opening at the top. Shut with a stone, the mound is built on top of it with the earth from the tomb, surrounded by a stone wall. On top of the structure the old sacrificial jar (*melè*) of the deceased's father is abandoned, after the closing rites of the funeral. A *tame*, built by close kinsmen among which the sisters sons have to be especially active, has exactly the same shape, its narrow opening at the top shut with a straw plaited cone-shaped cover. The granary rests on a round structure of about one meter high, a stone wall with a wood and mud cover. Inside this so called *citelè* the master of the house keeps his sacrificial jar, in fact the very one that will end up on his tomb. So both in morphology and symbolism the identification of the tomb with a granary is strong: a Kapsiki is buried in his granary under the earth. Even if my informants never stated symbolism identifications, they wholeheartedly agreed when I identified a tomb with a *tame*: "At last, you are getting inside the matter".

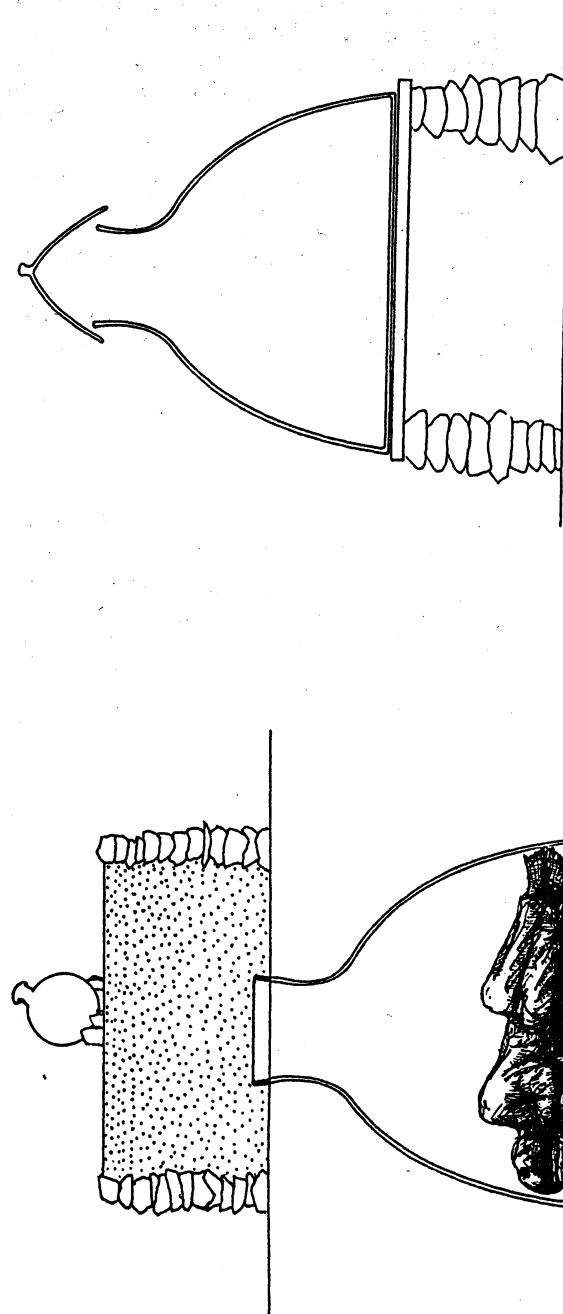


Figure 1 Grave and granary

Given this symbolic equation, some transformations between the two seem evident: the *tame* is above the earth, disconnected, with the cylinder-like structure supporting it, towering above and hiding the sacrificial jar. In contrast, the tomb is under the earth, topped by the structure and identified by the sacrificial jar: here the structure is hidden and the jar is in full view. But, the jar is broken. So, in a way, the deceased's full identity and his personal relation with the supernatural world comes into view only after his burial, when the dominant sign of his masculinity, his granary, is no longer in full view on top of the *c i t l è*, but hidden under the massive "*c i t l è*" of the tomb; though it is the earth, dug out, it is a *tame* all right. And where a *tame* is thought to conserve and keep grains, the grave should conserve and keep the body of the deceased, his broken identity on top, no longer the consumer of the grains but the consumed of the granary.

University of Utrecht, Pays-Bas

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BEEK W.E.A. van, 1978. *Bierbrouwers en de Bergen, De Kapsiki en Higi van Noord-Kameroen en Noord-Oost Nigeria*, Utrecht, ICAU 12.
- BEEK W.E.A. van, 1986. "The ideology of building, The interpretation of compound patterns among the Kapsiki of North Cameroon", H. Fokkens, P. Banga, T. Constandse & M. Bierma (eds.) *op Zoek naar Mens en Materiële Cultuur*, Groningen BIA: 147-162.
- BEEK W.E.A. van, 1987. *The Kapsiki of the Mandara Mountains*, Prospect Heights, Waveland Press.