

Death Rites and the Journey of the Soul Among the Manam

Introduction

This paper is a description of the death rites as practised traditionally and at present on Manam. It will also try to give the primary meaning of these rites according to the Manam People. The paper begins with a telling of two relevant death myths by the “spirit man” and the story teller of a village in Manam. A few remarks are in order before the description of the rites and the telling of the myth.

Background

Manam Island lies approximately ten miles off the North Coast of Papua New Guinea, 120 miles NE of the provincial capital, Madang. It is volcanic and has a history of continuous activity, the most serious of which resulted in complete evacuation of the 6,000 inhabitants in 1957. Fifteen villages are scattered along the coastal fringe circling its 30 km diameter. The Catholic Church has been resident there since 1925 and nearly all the inhabitants are Catholics. Manam is patrolled by the government from District Headquarters, Bogia. There are no resident government officials on the Island.

Manam being a regal society with a highly developed ruling caste, more elaborate and prolonged burial rites are performed for the *tanepoakukurai* (chief-prince-king) and his family.¹ Essentially, however, they are the same as those described below.

Beliefs About Life After Death

No idea of reward or punishment in the land of the dead seems to exist among the Manam. All find a good living. All find fulfilment. All find happiness pursuing the same kind of life as before but in a perfected or fulfilled manner. As they explain, ‘man i wetim meri,

tupela raun wakabaut. Olgeta samting i olsem hia long graun, tasol i nogat wari. Long taim man i dai mipela sori long bodi tasol.' (The husband waits for his wife. The two live together. Everything is the same as in this life but you have no troubles, no problems. When someone dies we are not worried, we weep over his body only).

Thus Ancestors do not enter into the life of the Manam. They have died long before and their memory is forgotten. Nor do the Manam people believe that random injury is caused by the spirits of the dead. On the contrary they do believe the recently dead can help them and it is customary to call for their help before major undertakings or in time of trouble.²

When asked about the place of the dead and whether any had visited it, my informants indicated that they were uncertain as to its locale, and that opinions varied as to whether it was near or distant. None of these informants claimed to have themselves visited *anua matemate*. However, they repeat a very old story of one man who did visit the *anua matemate* and returned to tell about it. When he returned he was half dead and told his relatives to give a feast to the inhabitants of the *anua matemate*. When the food was prepared and set forth a host of insects, birds and animals came and devoured it. This proved that the dead were no longer angry with the living for visiting the *anua matemate*. (See Myth B, below).

Ritual Specialists

The specialist performers in the ritual are the:

- aeno aine* (dream women)³ a shamaness who has the power to bring back the spirit-soul (*dewel*) of the dying man thereby cheating death.
- nanaranga awine* (Bigman),⁴ the deity or divine Bigman who grants passage to the *anua matemate* (land of the dead).
- mate marau*, who supervises the burial rite.

Among the people of Manam death is the beginning of a series of events directed primarily at facilitating and expediting the journey of the *mariaba* (spirit-soul) to the *anua matemate*.

Finally, it should be noted that not all the rites described in this paper take place at each death. The complete ritual cycle, many elements of which may be discarded, modified or simply ignored, is described here. It would seem even in former times there was great flexibility in the performance of the rites.

Two Relevant Myths from Manam

Origin of Death Myth

(As told by Mattras Saruka, aged 60, the village story teller and Wilhelm Sagem aged 65, the spirit man both of Kuluguma Village, May 1978).

Moresabia was a very old woman who lived with her grand-daughter in a house near the edge of the village. One day Moresabia said to her grand-daughter, "Let us go to the stream where the water is clear and cold. We will wash." Moresabia and her grand-daughter went to the stream. Moresabia went upstream and washed. Her grand-daughter downstream. The young woman could not see her grandmother.

Moresabia washed and returned. She told her grand-daughter that it was time to return. The grand-daughter looked up and didn't see Moresabia but a young woman. Moresabia had changed completely. She was again young and beautiful. The grand-daughter was frightened and said, "You aren't Moresabia. I won't obey you. You are a different woman. Your skin is smooth and clear, your breasts are large and firm, I won't obey you."

Moresabia was very angry. "I am Moresabia," she said. "I have completely changed, I will never die. I have a new body. You too can get a new body when you become old. You will never die."

Still the young woman was very sad. She began to cry and cry. "I want Moresabia to come back", she said. "I loved her very much. I don't love you. I want Moresabia to come back. I want to live with her and be happy with her."

Moresabia heard this and was very sad. She went back to the place where she washed and got her old body back. She came back and the young woman finished crying. She saw her grandmother Moresabia and was very happy. Moresabia then said, "The animals, the snakes, the wild beasts of the jungle, the creatures of the sea will not die; they will only change their bodies. Man, though, will die and die forever."

The Man Who Visited Anua Matemate

A long time ago a young man had a very beautiful lover. He vowed they would never be separated. Alas, one day she became very sick and died. The young man was very sad. He would not go and bury his lover. He thought rather that he would hide in the jungle and capture her spirit. He went deep into the jungle and hid in a place where man never travelled. After some time he saw the 'spirit' of his lover passing through the jungle. He crept up and captured her.

She screamed. She begged him to let her escape to the land of the dead. But her lover would not let her go. He replied, "I will never leave you. I will accompany you to the land of the dead."

So they set out on the journey to the land of the dead. When they came near the land of the dead the woman hid her lover near a group of banana bushes. She went inside the land of the dead alone. In the afternoon though when no one was looking she returned and brought her lover inside. She hid him in her parents' house.

Early in the evening her father returned and said, "I smell the smell of the living in the land of the dead. Who is hiding in my house?"

His daughter replied, "Never would I bring the living to the land of the dead." Her father was a powerful man, however, and forced his daughter to tell the truth. She admitted, "I have brought my lover and hid him in that room."

The whole family became very frightened. They said, "We must hide him well. If he is discovered we will all be in great trouble." After a long time they helped the lover to escape back to the land of the living.

All was quiet in the village when the young man returned. The people saw him and became very frightened. He was very thin. He had not eaten or drunk for many months. He was half dead.

After some time he told them his story. When he finished they took him to the beach and washed him with *gorgor* and *kawar* leaves. They cooked bananas and taro mixed with coconut milk and gave him this to eat. But, each time he tried to eat he vomited. They cooked their best and sweetest foods for him, but still he vomited.

Separation Rites

Word has been sent. The family arrives and gathers around the dying man. Intense low conversation can be heard. All are deeply involved in finding the reason for the sickness which has brought the man to his death bed.⁵ All believe that the *dewel* of the dying man has gone to the place of the dead and if found can be brought back and the sick person will then regain health.

As the conversation becomes more animated it is decided to call the *aeno aine*. Upon her skill will depend the future of the dying man. Arriving, the *aeno aine* tells the family to prepare food and bring it to the house of the sick man. Flowers are placed in the centre of the room and a basket placed near the flowers. Food is now brought into the house and all gather round the dying man in a large circle. The closest kin hold the dying man's head and shoulders while the *aeno aine* squats near his feet. Each relative now takes some *buai* (betel nut), *brus* (tobacco) or *daka* (pepper) and in turn places them in a basket in the centre of the room invoking at the same time the name of a deceased relative (parent, brother or child) asking his/her help in the search for the *dewel* in the place of the dead.

After the offerings have been placed in the basket the *aeno aine* rises and slowly joins those in the room with a *purpur* rope loosely tied around the neck of each. At the same time she begins a soft lulling song which places all in the state of dreaming. All enter a trance from the singing and swaying. Suddenly the *aeno aine* goes into a deep faint. This is the sign that all gathered are about to begin their journey to the *anua matemate*.⁶ They then join in the search for the *dewel* of the dying man. While searching for the *dewel* of the sick man they observe that everyone in *anua matemate* is dressed well,

that there are many beautiful flowers, and that all look well and happy. These visitors look in *anua matemate* for their deceased relatives to enlist their help in searching for the *dewel* of the dying man.

The search in the place of the dead continues. The *aeno aine* seizes the “spirit body” of the dying man and begins to pull him away from his loved ones. They resist. She cries “Why have you taken him to the place of the dead? What law has he broken?” The search continues. The *aeno aine* eventually finds the “spirit body” of the dying man being cut up and smoked by an aggrieved relative whom the dying man has offended in some way. Because of his offense his *dewel* has been brought to the place of the dead.⁷ The *aeno aine* tries to find out the offense of the dying man. If she is successful and can collect enough bones of his “spirit body” from the fire he will recover. Often the bones are scattered or hidden over a large area. If she is successful the dying man will recover. If not, he will die.

Death Rites

It soon becomes apparent to all present that the *aeno aine* has lost her struggle with those in the place of the dead. She has failed in her search. Her slumping body announces death and the ritual wailing begins. The relatives take the body into their hands, hold it, feel it, kiss it and caress it. Loud wailing pierces the house. A Christian prayer leader is now called to come and pray. All is quiet as a prayer is recited by the prayer leader.⁸ The prayer finished, wailing begins anew and the women are sent to prepare food. A vase of flowers placed in the centre of the room represents the dead man and announces to all present that he is still with them. He is very close to them and can help or harm them according to their conduct. The *mate maru* now takes charge of the burial procedures. He is the closest adult male member of the family, usually a father, brother or son.

Some men now prepare a *limbum bed* (wooden table) for the food which is being cooked by the women. Other men go and dig the grave. The body is dressed well, while the rest of the dead man’s clothing is placed near his body and later hung in his house. After some time these clothes may be worn in memory of the dead man or to seek his protection and help. If the dead man has a garden and pigs these are used to provide the food. The feast is not only to celebrate the memory of the dead man but also as a practical measure now that there is no one to look after his property. The food is placed in the dead man’s house for the dead man’s journey to the place of the dead. The deceased gets his strength from this food and only the “skin”, so to speak of the food is left to be eaten by others.

When all is ready the body is taken to the grave. Here again a

ritual expert is asked to pray over the grave. The body is covered except for the face and all throw flowers or earth into the grave. A few articles are thrown in the grave to help the deceased on his journey and to assist him upon arrival at the *anua matemate*. Often the *nanaranga* will demand pay to enter the *anua matemate*, e.g. a spear, *buai* (nuts) or canoe paddle. The grave is then filled with earth.

Those who buried the body go and wash with *gorgor* and *kawar* leaves in the sea. These leaves give ritual purity and ensure that the *mariba* cannot harm those who buried the dead man. When they return the food is distributed again. At dark a fire is lit on top of the grave. This is to help the dead man see his way on his journey and to mark the presence of the dead man in the midst of the mourners. At night many people come to the grave to sing and sleep till dawn. They then return to their homes. The women in the village who know many wailing songs such as those that follow are sought to lead the singing.

Three Wailing Songs from Manam

O tapero ngae, mangalo dirao zererake
meme rao, tapero.
Emate eno, emate eno; o kadodo, natono
Daingara, seke
(Like a great broken tree
brought to and fro by the sea,
so sleeps our mother who has died.
Daingara, like a small insect on a leaf, you sleep
O fallen one!)

Magone, natogo; Magone natogoko
Magone, natogo; Magone natogoko
Podarua, natogo; Podarua natogoko
Podarua, natogo; Podarua natogoko
(Magone my child, Magone my child lies here!
Magone my child, Magone my child lies here!
Podarua my child, Podarua my child lies here!
Podarua my child, Podarua my child lies here!)
(NB Magone and Podarua are the same person).

Deone Zamake Koadeko; Koadeko
Deone, Kadorame Tanepotino
Deone Zamake Koadeko; Koadeko
Deone deko, Anuakoko tanepotino.
(Will they kill him today or tomorrow?
Alas, they have killed him today, Kadorame our chief.

Will they kill him today or tomorrow?

Alas, they have killed him today, Anuakoko our chief.)

(NB Kadiorame and Anuakoko are the same man).

At dawn the people return to their homes but work is forbidden. At night they again return to sing and sleep, sing and sleep. This usually lasts for two weeks, at which time the *mate maru* gives a big feast for all involved to pay them for their work of wailing and sends them home. If he has trouble finding enough food the vigil may last another week until he has sufficient food to repay the mourners for their work.

Some months after the death, (especially if the death is from suicide), a relative of the dead man may dream that his dead relative is having difficulty finding the place of the dead. The *maribaba* is lost somewhere on the road. The relatives then must prepare a large feast at which food, smoke and *buai* are distributed. This will assure the dead man's quick, safe passage to the place of the dead.

Rites Today

The above description is of the death rites as they are performed on Manam today. Keeping in mind what was said in the introduction about the flexibility of the rites, very little seems to have changed in the total ritual process. The only part that has disappeared completely seems to be the ceremonial breaking of the eating plate (wooden) of the man by the widow or son. The broken pieces were used by the widow or child to begin the digging of the grave. After the burial the pieces of the plate were then inserted into the loose ground of the grave and left there as a memorial to the deceased. When questioned about the failure to continue the rite, the Manam people gave various answers, e.g., "We don't have wooden plates any more. We have shovels to dig the grave with now". As to why the rite was performed the only answer given was, "Who is going to use the plate of the dead man?"

The actual grave site has also changed from being under the house of the deceased to a graveyard. This change took place at the insistence of the government. Today graveyards are the accepted thing. The prayers at death and burial are a direct result of the influence of the church and of course were not in the traditional rites.

In general, it seems the present death rites are basically the same as the traditional rites except for:

- the breaking of the plate and the digging of the grave,
- the place of the grave
- the addition of prayer services at the death and burial.

Journey and Arrival

At death the *mariaba* begins the journey to the place of the dead. On arrival at the place of the dead the *dewel* will have to answer many questions before being admitted into the *anua matemate*. It will have to tell the whole story of its life. The *nanaranga* will ask for some payment and the *dewel* will then enter the *anua matemate*. The journey is usually simple and uneventful provided the proper rites are performed by the deceased relatives. Trouble seems to occur only if:

the proper feast is not performed,
the *nanaranga* sends the *mariaba* back to the land of the living, or
the *mariaba* gets lost on the road.

In all these cases, communication between the *mariaba* and the living takes place through a dream. If the proper feast is not performed the *mariaba* of the dead parent or grandparent or consort can steal the soul of a living person, usually a child.⁹ The fear of the stealing of the soul of a living person plays an important part in encouraging the deceased relatives to perform the burial rites.

The reasons for being sent back to the land of the living by the *nanaranga* (Big man) are less clear. It seems that if he is the Bigman his actions are not to be questioned and are accepted as being the correct way of doing things. A *mariaba* that loses its way, communicates its distress to the living relatives who are then under a serious obligation to help him. This appears to happen only in the case of suicide.

Conclusion: The Meaning of the Rites to the Manam

The text of the Preface of the Mass for the Dead in the Roman Ritual has this prayer:

'The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality. Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven.'

A *Manam* would pray:

The sadness of death gives way to the happiness of the *anua matemate*. Tamatabia (Lord), our life passes from Manam to *anua matemate*. While the *wari* (dead body) lies in death, *mariaba* rejoices in *anua matemate*.

To the Manam death is a passage, a journey from Manam to the place of the dead. Rituals, rites, ceremonies ensure a safe and quick passage. All possible must be done to facilitate the passage.

Once there, the *mariaba* enters a place of happiness, peace and joy. He joins his relatives, awaits his wife and children. He rejoices in a life of plenty. His troubles, his fears, his hunger are all a thing of the past. His earthly existence is not finished but fulfilled. His life is perfected. His death is not a separation or the completion of life, but the sign of beginning the journey to the *anua matemate* where fulfilment is reached.