



Widow lying on a funeral pyre, Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea, c. 1956.

Photo courtesy of Alwyn Campbell.

Funeral Practices in Papua New Guinea

MILTON HOOK

Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Numerous clans comprise the population of Papua New Guinea. Prior to the advent of Christianity to these communities, anthropologists noted that each clan had their own distinctive ritual for the burial of their dead. Some similarities emerged, however, when clans were grouped and studied together. This limited article can survey only a selection of practices now generally replaced by Christian burials. It must be understood that

foundational to all early Melanesian funeral practices was the prevailing animistic belief that everything in the natural world possessed a spirit. With respect to humans in particular, death was considered to be the most important stage in life, it being the transition from the visible form to the invisible form. Coastal Papuans, especially clans around Kerema, believed that the living were blind to the spirits, but that after death one's spirit could see everything.¹

Spirits in the Melanesian Cosmology

Among the Huli clan in the Southern Highlands there was a belief in a supreme spirit named Dadagaliwabe, who gave rise to everything in the world.² Their animistic spirits, called dama, were found in the rivers, caves, forests, and mountains and believed to be ones who assisted the living but could turn malevolent if they were not placated with proper rituals. Less-powerful spirits, including those of ancestors, were called dinini, most of them benevolent but a few were spiteful.³ The Huli cosmology therefore carried some similarities to the Hebrew model of one creative spirit, Yahweh, and numerous lesser spirit beings or angels, both good and evil.

The Kaluli clan near Mount Bosavi believed in three general orders of spirits. Kindly spirits who assisted humans were the spirits of ancestors called ane kalu. Those whose ceremonial dances caused the thunderstorms on Mount Bosavi were called mamul and had little to do with the living, but others called kalu hungo, in waterways and near their dwellings, were dangerous and ill-intentioned. In addition to these three orders it was believed that every human had an unseen spirit or ghost that sometimes took the liberty to wander in the forest. Death permanently released these spirits from the human form.⁴

Belief and Practice

Funeral practices were determined by the belief that life is stronger than death and therefore continues on in the spirit form. The spirits of ancestors, especially those ancestors within living memory, were thought to remain an integral part of the community, living a different existence within it. The treatment of the corpse and any later communication with the spirit of the deceased was conducted as if the individual was still a vibrant member of the community.⁵ Ancestral spirits, together with any other spirits, were not thought of as gods and not worshipped. Any communication with them was considered to be between equals, one visible and the other invisible, the invisible living as normal individuals in a parallel sphere.⁶ It is incorrect to think of the activity as ancestor worship, spirit worship, or devil worship. Anthropologists have written of the indigenous Chimbu clans, for example, as ones who "had no organized priesthood or worship."⁷ Worship of a deity did not feature in any funeral practices. Indeed, the very concept of worship and adoration and praise was a Christian accretion.

The clans of Papua New Guinea were accustomed to living among their dead. Children witnessed funerals and played around the mortuary platforms on which lay the corpses of their relatives in full view. At initiation ceremonies they were made aware they were being given passage into a community that included both the

living and the dead. In adulthood men frequently faced death as warriors and women often faced death in childbirth. Older people thought of themselves as growing closer to their dead ancestors. They did not fear a natural death, because it was regarded as merely a transition to a different form of life, one that was not dependent on life's morality or immorality but, rather, was simply a normal progression of the human spirit.⁸

The Huli clan, among others, believed that many malevolent spirits inhabited the soil and rocks. For that reason burial of their loved ones was out of the question. They would not dare to deliberately expose the corpse to danger. Instead, they lay the body on a wooden platform at eye level in their garden and allowed decay to take its course.⁹ The Biami cannibals situated between the Nomad and Rentoul rivers built similar platforms for both their ancestors and victims.¹⁰ In the Goilala district north-west of Port Moresby the mortuary platforms were twice the height of a man, a deliberate custom to enable easy passage of the spirit to the heights of Mount Albert Edward on the distant eastern horizon.¹¹ After the corpse was fully decayed, the bones were often left for a considerable period or removed to a nearby cave. Some clans, such as those in the Kandep district and the Purari River watershed, demonstrated their abiding memory of a dead relative by saving a bone and wearing it as a pendant. The bones of a hand or a foot were often bound together and worn for the same reason. In this way the sense of ongoing community with an ancestor was perpetuated.¹²

Among the Foi clan in the Lake Kutubu area the corpse was first placed in the central corridor of the longhouse before removal to a mortuary platform and the women sat and huddled over it, caressing it and swaying back and forth while wailing and singing laments accompanied by rattles similar to maracas. The laments traced the life of the deceased person, highlighting their favorite haunts and pastimes to please their spirit.¹³

In 1938 anthropologists observed that the clan at Kese village, Lake Kutubu, placed the corpse in the longhouse to wait for the arrival of an uncle who would take charge of the funeral. The widow, covered in a large bark cloth or kosaka, positioned herself at the foot of the deceased as her peers wailed and sung of the spirit eventually meeting up with those of their ancestors. The uncle arranged a short funeral procession by canoe to a high mortuary platform called a deve that was ready for the occasion. Having manhandled the body to the top of the platform, the deceased's hair was tied together and a string was attached to a springy sapling designed to lift the scalp off the skull bones during decomposition. A new bark bag was hung on the fence surrounding the platform. It was meant for the spirit to use when gathering wild berries on which the deceased was expected to subsist. Following the death a series of three feasts were held. To begin the final feast, the kigi-yahabu, a relative visited the decaying corpse to retrieve two bones of the little finger from the right hand and wedge them in a cleft stick to carry the spirit on a hunting expedition for cuscus, snakes, and rats. The catch was regarded as delicacies for the clan ceremony.¹⁴

As a general rule burial aboveground on mortuary platforms was practiced only in the Southern Highlands, extending westward into Irian Jaya. Elsewhere it was customary to bury the body. In the Trobriand Islands, for example, an all-night vigil was held over the body prior to burial, the men singing traditional songs and the

women and children crying as a community. After burial the spirit was thought to migrate to the most distant island in the group, uninhabited Tuma, but would periodically return to monitor the welfare of the clan as an ongoing responsible community member.¹⁵

Another example of a burial ritual was recorded by anthropologists in 1924 at Korisata village, Oro province, near the Kumasi River northeast of Kokoda. The corpse was placed under a house built high off the ground, and clan members were summoned by blasts on a conch shell. They came as mourners daubed in white clay to hold the deceased by the hands or feet, some flinging themselves in grief on the body and others beating themselves on their backs with heavy stones. On the second day after death the body was wrapped in pandanus leaf and bark cloth and buried in a shallow grave within the thatch hut of the deceased. The widow remained secluded in the hut for several months, sleeping on top of the grave and periodically burrowing her fingers into the loose soil to remove maggots that may be a source of discomfort for her loved one. As a sign of mourning she wore a hood, or pohu, of bark cloth and a jacket, or baja, both decorated with the gray pods of the coix plant called Job's tears. A little ceremony named a gorukari that culminated in a melancholy dance was held to mark the end of her seclusion.¹⁶

One of the most complex rituals was the Kongar ceremony performed by the clans of the Wahgi Valley. Originally they buried their dead in fenced enclosures high on the mountain slopes where they believed the spirits lived. By 1930 they had adapted to burying them alongside their ceremonial grounds. A low thatch house was built over each grave. Periodically a major pig-slaughtering festival was held to remember the recently departed ones, a ceremony called the Kongar. The ritual was meticulously directed by the clan mapilie, or master of ceremonies. A small grandstand was built overlooking the celebration and spread with food for the spirits as they were said to view the dancing. It was believed that if all the proceedings pleased the spirits, then for some time the village gardens and women would be blessed with fertility. It was a renewal of their community, the unseen ancestral spirits accorded equal status in the festival.¹⁷

A few burial practices were horrific. One was the ritual strangulation of the widows of a deceased man in the Lemakot area of northern New Ireland. Their bodies were then tossed onto the cremation pyre of their husband, believing that their spirits would be happier if they maintained their immediate family unit. The only exception to this rule was if a widow was suckling an infant.¹⁸ The practice was in the context of an extreme patriarchal society.

In the regions of the swampy Sepik River where there is minimal solid ground, the dead were usually buried on higher ground far from the riverside home village. The mourners in the latmul clans of the middle Sepik would wade into the river to symbolically wash away their grief. As part of the ceremony they would carve an effigy of the deceased person, prop it up with a complex of poles and burn it together with the possessions of the individual. The ashes were then swept into the river, and a mystical crocodile or canoe was said to carry the spirit of the deceased far out to sea.¹⁹

In the Chimbu (or Simbu) province of the Central Highlands a perplexing problem often surrounded a death. Instead of asking the question "What caused the death?" the clan may ask, "Who caused the death?" The belief existed that malevolent spirits would take the form of a rat or flying fox and surreptitiously enter a human host, usually an old woman, and mount a hunt for the internal organs of another human, who would, in turn, become ill and die. The clan sorcerer would identify the old woman and condemn her to death, believing that her demise would also cause the death of the malevolent spirit. This practice was called sanguma. Europeans condemned the custom, and it has become a criminal offense under Papua New Guinea law.²⁰ If sanguma was not activated in the event of a death, then the Chimbu community would initiate a generous exchange of food and other goods among families, not only out of sympathy and friendship for the bereaved but also to indicate there were no reasons to suspect that the death was caused by a malevolent spirit.²¹

Summary

Generally speaking, the people of Papua New Guinea demonstrated in their own peculiar ways a great respect for their dead. Death was celebrated in the midst of sadness. The sense of perpetual community with the dead was common. In many clans there was a strong belief that departed spirits, for at least a couple of generations, would revisit the living relatives. In order not to confuse the visiting ancestors, the living were not expected to sell their land but rather to maintain the familiar surroundings. For this reason land ownership was diligently guarded. No spirits were ever worshipped, not even a major entity such as Dadagaliwabe of the Huli clan. Sorcerers would try to communicate or placate the spirits, but that was different from any worship of them. Effigies were not worshipped, but instead sometimes used to convey spirits or frighten their enemies during fighting or to identify with friendly spirits in their tribal dances. When food was left for ancestral spirits, it was done with the belief that the living were simply fulfilling their communal obligations to make sure their departed loved ones were adequately fed. Some practices, however, were identified by European government authorities as cruel or unhygienic. These have gradually disappeared, especially under the influence of Christian missions.

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