Parallel journeys in Korafe women’s laments (Oro Province, Papua New Guinea)

Elisabetta Gnecchi-Ruscone
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par

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite des rites et pratiques funéraires des Korafe en insistant sur le rôle essentiel des relations féminines du défunt, afin de contribuer à la littérature (en accroissement constant) réévaluant les rôles rituels et le statut des femmes.

Par leurs lamentations, les femmes débutent, font progresser et mettent un terme aux procédures nécessaires à la transformation d’un cadavre en reliques, ainsi qu’un esprit triste et en colère en un ancêtre dans les pouvoirs desquels les vivants pourront puiser. Ces processus physiques et spirituels parallèles l’un à l’autre s’accompagnent d’une série de réajustements des relations au sein des vivants, qui doivent construire leur chagrin, replacer des personnages importants dans leur cercle social et recréer ceux des liens qui avaient été établis avec le défunt. Celles des femmes qui avaient un rôle central dans le réseau social du défunt sont cruciales pour ces procédures.

Le deuil et la réclusion des veuves sont nécessaires à la reconstitution des rôles et réseaux sociaux des endeuillés, ce qui permet la transformation spirituelle du disparu et confère aux parties molles du corps de pourrir. Cette dernière pratique est importante dans les coutumes magiques des Korafé car les ossements sont des restes qui étaient traditionnellement récupérés et utilisés pour accéder aux pouvoirs magiques des ancêtres. Les veuves avaient ainsi des rôles culturellement reconnus dans la reproduction de la société et dans le système cosmologique dans son ensemble ; un rôle auquel elles ne renoncent pas aisément, malgré leur engagement contemporain dans la chrétienté.

MOTS-CLÉS : rites mortuaires, rôles des femmes, lamentations, christianisme, pouvoirs ancestraux.

ABSTRACT

This paper concerns Korafe mortuary rituals and practices, it emphasises the role of key female relations of the deceased in the hope of contributing to the growing body of literature in which the ritual roles and relative status of Melanesian women is being re-evaluated. The complex and negotiated relationships between these practices with the ideologies concerning magic and Christianity are also considered.

With their laments women start, pace, and end the procedures that are necessary to turn a corpse into relics, and an angry and sorrowful spirit into an ancestor whose powers may be tapped by the living. These parallel physical and spiritual processes are accompanied by a series of re-adjustments among the living, who must elaborate grief, replace key figures in their social ambit and recreate those ties that were forged through the deceased. The women who had a pivotal role in the deceased’s social network are crucial for these procedures.

Mourning and widow seclusion are necessary for the reconstitution of the social roles and networks of the bereaved, ensuring the deceased’s spiritual transformation, and allowing time for the decay of the deceased’s soft body parts. This last process is significant for Korafe magic traditions as bony remains were traditionally recovered and used for tapping the magical powers of ancestors. Thus widows have culturally recognised roles in the reproduction of society and of the cosmological system as a whole, a role that is not easily renounced despite contemporary commitment to Christianity.

KEYWORDS: mortuary rituals, women’s role, laments, christianity, ancestral powers.

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This paper on Korafe mourning customs focuses on the women’s laments; those of the widows in seclusion, and those led by the deceased’s sisters who organise the release of the widow from her seclusion. More generally, this paper emphasises the ritual role of key female relations of the deceased, in the hope of contributing to the growing body of literature in which the ritual roles and relative status of Melanesian women is being re-evaluated.

Three of the ways in which traditional anthropological assumptions about women’s public invisibility, ritual irrelevance, and secondary social roles are brought into discussion in this paper as well as in much contemporary literature, are:

1 – Highlighting the prominent role of women in funerary ceremonies and exchanges. This was first evidenced by Annette Weiner (1983) in her work on the Trobiand. In the case of Korafe mortuary rituals, although widows are secluded for the duration of the mourning period, other women have key responsibilities in the procedures. Furthermore, I argue that in spite of the presumptions underlying the Christian condemnation of this practice, widow’s seclusion is not an exclusion of the woman from social life but a form of ritual “work”, which is recognised by the community, and for which the widow is rewarded with gifts at the final ceremonies, just like all other mourners are rewarded for the mourning work they have carried out.

More recently a volume edited by Pascale Bonnemère has similarly questioned the assumption that the exclusion of women from male initiation ritual entails their exclusion from the ritual process itself (Bonnemère, 2004: 1)

2 – Focussing on the social significance of brother-sister couples. In many Melanesian societies kin relations based on brothers and sisters offer alternative social links and sources of support for men, women and their children when problems arise in patrilineal and patrilocal societies. André Iteanu points to the fundamental role of brother-and-sister couples in all Orokaiva life-cycle rituals involving ceremonial exchange between affines, and attributes to such “dual couples” a magical function in the articulation between two levels of relations: that between men belonging to different groups, and that between men and spirits, a relation which encompasses all other Orokaiva social relations (Iteanu, 1983: 114, 116, 174, 178, 247, 265, passim). For Iteanu, death requires the following relations to be re-adjusted and re-defined: those between individuals, those between groups, and those between the living and their ancestors; and it is in this latter ambit that the brother-and-sister couples assume a fundamental role among the Orokaiva. The same applies to the Korafe, with the difference that the ancestors in question are not undifferentiated, but clan or lineage specific. Korafe ancestors are strongly linked to the ideology of clan and lineage membership. From them derive the diacritical symbols of group membership, and the rights and obligations linked to them, including those connected to magical practice requiring the same ancestors’ intervention, and mediated by the rightful and knowledgeable use of the relics.

3 – Following Marilyn Strathern’s lead (1988) concerning the relational nature of Melanesian personhood, while taking seriously the proposition that Melanesian social worlds include the spirits of ancestors, suggests to me that death may be considered the final life-cycle ritual. Thus the ritual work performed by a grieving and secluded widow is that of transforming the deceased’s relation to herself and to their children, to one between an ancestor and descendants. This also implies divesting herself of what remains of her relation to him as wife. Iteanu’s insightful definition of grief as that which is left of social relations after death (Iteanu, 1983: 122) is significant in this context. Indeed, it is only after working through her personal grief, and providing the focus for the community at large to do the same, that the widow is set free from her obligations. Affinal relations set in motion at the time of her marriage to the now deceased man must be concluded to the satisfaction of all groups involved before the respective partners of the two brother-sister couples involved release the widow and the community from mourning. After the deceased’s sisters have declared the end of the widow’s seclusion, and decorated her like an adolescent initiand, her own brothers provide a pig for the final ceremony. With this exchange the deceased’s tie with the widow is dissolved; she is free to re-marry. During the mourning period the spirit of the deceased is also thought to be grieving for those he has left behind, and to be tied by such grief and anger to the vicinity of his village. Only once these relations have been transformed is the spirit free to join the

1. If a widow marries before such a conclusive affinal exchange she is subjected to criticism. In cases where distance of migrant brothers causes an excessive delay in the brothers’ visit, the widow may be released from seclusion, but it is not considered right for her to marry before the previous marriage’s affinal exchanges have been satisfactorily concluded.
community of ancestors of his specific descent group.2

In this paper I bring ethnographic evidence to support my claim that Korafe women, in their roles as widows and as members of brother-sister couples, have culturally recognised roles in the reproduction not only of society, but of the cosmological system as a whole, through the transformations they effect in the course of mortuary rituals.

I propose that mourning and the period of seclusion is necessary for the completion of three processes: reconstituting the social roles and networks involving the bereaved community; ensuring the deceased’s transformation into an ancestor; allowing time for the decay of the deceased’s soft body parts. This last process is significant for Korafe magic traditions, as bony remains (jaws, skulls, teeth) were traditionally recovered and held by the deceased’s descendants to use as a means of calling on the magical powers of ancestors. Now that the unearthing of bodies is no longer practiced, these relics are substituted by the teeth which old men loose, and are kept safely by theirs sons, or other personal objects associated to the old man’s power.

Only when these three processes have been completed can the mourning come to an end; and the timing of the widow’s release from seclusion is determined by the satisfactory completion of these tasks, despite all declarations of intent to curtail mourning for motives tied to Christianity or modernity.

Placing the Korafe

Before entering into the detail of mourning practices I should acquaint the reader to the Korafe. The name refers to the language spoken by about 3500 people (Gordon, 2005), living in small hamlets scattered on the fjord-like slopes of Cape Nelson on the North-Eastern coast of Papua New Guinea, and who identify themselves as Korafe; around another 1000 Korafe speakers live and work outside of their home villages. Linguists have classified the Korafe language as a non-Austronesian language of the Binandean stock. Culturally the Korafe share many features, such as the origin myths, with the Orokaiva (Waiko, 1982); others, such as tattooing and tapa cloth patterns, with the neighbouring Maisin speakers of Collingwood bay (Barker, 1984); and others still such as the identification of patrilineal groups with the right to specific styles of doing things, with Goodenough islanders of the Massim (Young, 1971). Other groups living on Cape Nelson, such as the Arifama, Miniapia and Ubir speak Austronesian languages, and there seem to be quite a mixture of influences among all these groups, many of the villages include speakers of two languages.

The Korafe patrilineal groups are differentiated according to hereditary magical powers. Only the descendants of senior ancestors have the rights to and knowledge of the kind of peace making and feasting magic which allows their senior members to aspire to leadership status through the sponsorship of feasts and, in the past, the call to war. Descendants of junior ancestors specialise in other kinds of magic, which is precluded to members of high status clans, but necessary for ensuring wellbeing and fertility. This division of magical rights and duties was at the basis of a traditional political organization in which a number of lower status clans with powers over sorcery, gardening and weather magic cooperated in fighting and feasting under the guidance of a high status clan, in competition with similarly organised clusters of clans. Overall wellbeing and success depended on the ability of the elders from the higher ranking clans to promote such cooperation.

The administrative centre for this area is Tuji station, which was established as government station in 1900 and from which Resident magistrate C. A. W. Monckton and the Native Police pacified the area. The Anglican mission began its work in this area in the 1930’s, and the majority of Korafe are Anglican Christians. As a result of over a century’s involvement of Korafe people with colonial and post-colonial administration, cash economy, and Christianity, many so-called traditions and customary institutions have been challenged in an ongoing process of negotiation between the desire to acquire the knowledge and powers associated to the wider world brought to Korafe’s attention by contact with westerners, and the perceived need to preserve and transmit the powers associated to their own ancestors. One of the contexts in which the tensions between these two tendencies emerge in public

2. At first, while memories of the deceased and his peculiar abilities are still fresh in the minds of his survivors, he may be appealed to personally, for powers specifically attributed to him which are linked to the abilities he demonstrated in his lifetime, with the passing of years and generations, his identity becomes less defined and becomes a part of the more amorphous group of clan ancestors. Only ancestors who had really notable life histories or abilities are remembered personally, and their powers come to define the magical sphere of action of their descendants’ lineage or clan.
discourse is in the organization of rituals following the death of a man\(^3\).

**Death: the social consequences**

When a man dies, particularly if he was an elder of some standing in his community, all those related to him must readjust to a world without him, and those relations which were mediated through the deceased have to be reconstituted by his survivors. The position that the deceased had in the social network affects the scale of mourning ceremonies, the length of the mourning period, and the range of people who will attend. A man’s death concerns all his immediate family and lineage kinsmen in obvious ways, but it also has effects on his affines. From the point of view of his descent group, the relations with the deceased’s affines are among those to be resolved and reconstituted most urgently, now that the linchpin around whom they revolved is gone.

The brother – sister bond is important as the pivot around which affinal relations are constructed: at marriage the brother-sister couple is parted as allegiance is shifted to the spouse of a different descent group, however brothers and sisters continue to share the same ancestors. This shared heritage becomes evident on occasion of all the transitional moments of the life cycle: marriage and the initiation of the sister’s eldest child in particular, and is expressed by the idea that brothers have ‘natural’ powers over a woman’s reproductive capacities, as well as on her children’s health until the eldest among them has been initiated and ‘marked’ by the maternal uncles through the attribution of the right to wear their (MB’s) clan insignia (Gneechi-Ruscone, 1991: 59-87). This relation also plays a major role in the event of death and mortuary rituals: one brother-sister pair is dissolved by the brother’s death, and his sisters’ arrival in the village officially opens the public phase of mourning. The other brother-sister couple involved is that of the widow and her brothers, and her brothers’ intervention brings an end to the restrictions undertaken by the widow.

Similarly, affinal relations are also affected by the death of a married woman: her brothers come to the village where she had been living with her husband’s kinsmen, and sit on the mat on which she is laid out, requesting the *etu da minò* (price for the bones). They prevent the woman’s burial until their request is satisfied (usually a pig). In the cases in which a young married woman dies, particularly if the marriage exchanges have not been concluded, the deceased’s brothers may claim her body back for burial in their own land: if affinal relations had not been smooth, or when it is thought that the widower had not been a good husband, the deceased brothers may have a harsher attitude and make greater demands The *etu da minò* may be requested by the kinsmen of any person who will be buried outside of his or her clan’s territory.

**The practices of mourning**

As soon as death occurs, the women bend the body’s joints at the knees and elbows “so that he may walk”. Then they help the widow prepare a new mat and sheet for the deceased, and to pack his *javo* (personal string bag)\(^4\) with everything that he used to take with him when venturing outside his village. This suggests that the deceased is thought to leave as if for a journey, bringing the essence of his identity with him. In the meantime young men or boys from the hamlet are sent out to bring the news of the death to relatives in other villages, particularly to the deceased’s sisters.

When these preparations are completed, the widow and other women in the village begin to lament in a rather subdued, personal way. A widow is expected to weep for her husband, but however distressed, she cannot simply let herself go to inarticulate sobbing. For Korafe that would be a childish reaction: grief must be given meaning and sense, and the wailing laments, *sorara*, are codified and structured in conventional ways to help mourners do just that. A specific wailing tone is adopted, and mourners fit their own words to it. There are conventional phrases used to address the deceased by the different people crying for him; widows refer to their deceased husbands as *nanda kombo* (my sexual

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\(^3\) This account is biased towards the funerary rituals for men due to the fact that I experienced numerous such ceremonies during my fieldwork, and none for women. I suspect women’s funerals are given less importance and I would not have heard of a funeral for a woman outside the immediate vicinity of the village where I was living. The only other mortuary rituals I attended was that for a young child, which was highly charged emotionally but compressed temporally within a few days. According to my Korafe hosts the widower follows a somewhat muted version of the widow’s seclusion.

\(^4\) A *javo* is a small string bag in which Korafe men carry all their most valued and personal possessions (including betel, tobacco, magical substances, and ancestral relics, as well as a spoon and lime pot and lime stick), the same word, *javo*, is also used to refer to a person’s name, and it is often decorated with his clan’s exclusive insignia, both elements indicating the tight relation between a man’s stringbag and his personal identity.
partner). These repeated, conventional, utterances are mainly used by mourners at the beginning, when first joining in the sorara, as if they were a means for the bereaved to focus on the deceased, start summoning the remembrances connected to their shared lives and the emotions connected to those memories; they are soon replaced by improvised words and verses in which each mourner expresses her own grief in a personal way.

The arrival of the deceased’s sisters marks the true beginning of mourning. As soon as they see the widow, they begin scolding and berating her. They express anger at their brother’s death, and reproach his widow for not taking good enough care of their brother, for not being truly distressed, or even for not being a faithful wife. They may even strike at her, but usually at the sight of the body, their anger turns to grief, and their wrathful cries assume the tone of wailing. The women begin stroking their brother’s body and repeating the customary mourning appellative for their brother: “nanda bòka” (my loincloth), their cries overlapping the widow’s.

Burial

Burial usually occurs after the first night’s wake. Only the closer relatives living in nearby hamlets, or those warned by the first messengers, have had the time to come to the house for the first phase of mourning. At dawn the women prepare a hurried meal shared by all those present in the hamlet, then everyone goes into the house to farewell the body before it is buried. Mourners reach for the body and try to touch and stroke it for the last time as they cry their farewells. The widow chants a verse explaining to her deceased husband that she must let him go, since it has dawned.

The body is taken to a church where a Christian service is held, then to its grave, which nowadays is in a specially cleared cemetery outside village confines. In pre-Christian days the grave would have been dug underneath the house, in a manner similar to that described for the Orokaiva (Williams, 1930: 213-215).

Sorara is subdued throughout the service, and is substituted by the women’s singing of Christian hymns. The body is carried by young men, but otherwise it is escorted mainly by women. Most of the men remain either in the village or near the church, from which they shout cries of farewell: “Yasi ohi!” as if addressing someone departing for a journey. The deceased is told to go serenely, in peace, without anger; his friends and relations remind the deceased that they will meet again in Paradise. The body is laid in the grave on the pandanus mat provided by the widow and wrapped completely in a sheet which covers his face and head. When the first fistfuls of earth are thrown into the grave the women abandon the reserve that they had adopted for the church service, and begin wailing in earnest again. Also many of the women’s laments now include farewells.

The idea that the deceased is going on a journey is reiterated in many ways, it fits in with both pre-Christian and Christian Korafe conceptions of what happens to the spirit of dead people. If Christianity teaches that the soul will go to heaven or to hell, Korafe believe that shooting stars are the souls of recently deceased people flying back to the place of origin of their ancestors, to join ancestral spirits in the deep caves from which they once emerged. However, this does not occur immediately, for the duration of mourning the wrathful spirit of the deceased stays in the vicinity of his village, causing danger to the living. Only at the conclusion of the mortuary rituals does it join the other ancestral spirits.

Mourning and the Christian way

The Christian position regarding mourning is called into being in explicit terms once the mourners have escorted the widow back to her house. “Good Christians” are expected not to follow customary practices such as seclusion, closing down the deceased’s house and garden, giving away his property, or the more injurious practices such as the widow’s inflicting wounds on herself. All these practices, associated with pre-colonial ways are considered punitive and contrasted by Anglican teaching. What is interesting, however, is that not all these practices are simply dropped: there is a lot of discussion surrounding each death and each person’s way of participating in mourning. Immediately after the burial, while many mourners from different parts are gathered together in the hamlet, is a good opportunity for the deceased’s sons and brothers to make their intentions known to the rest of the community. They speak out in public

5. Other metaphorical terms are used by mourners according to their relation with the deceased: nanda munju (my egg) is the formula used by mothers crying over the death of her child; nanda bòka (my loincloth) by true or classificatory sisters mourning the death of a brother; nanda émbo (my skirt) is used by men crying for a true or classificatory sister.

6. The Seventh Day Adventist converts apply even more radical restrictions on mourning practices.
to declare their intention to follow the new Christian way and limit customary mortuary rituals, and are given public support for such decisions by other relatives who speak up on such occasions. Meanwhile the widow walks into her house and effectively enters seclusion.

The women I talked to said that they actually wanted to mourn inside their own house and that they would feel shame being seen outside. Despite the harshness of seclusion, I believe that first of all Korafe women felt the need to stay in their house while they grieved and, I contend, they also felt that it was necessary for them to do so. Among the Maisin the length of seclusion is equated to a measure of virtue for widows, who compete among themselves in these terms (John Barker, 1985). Refusing to enter seclusion would shame a widow, as it would indicate a lack of grief. But in addition, a widow who did not go into seclusion would leave her work undone.

Normally a compromise solution is worked out. Although their right to grieve in the house they used to share with the deceased is recognised, after a few weeks contemporary widows are expected to come out each Sunday to attend the church service, to show that they have not forgotten to be “Good Christians”. A group of women fetches the widow out of her house and escorts her to the church and back in name of their shared Christianity. Interestingly, these may well be the same women who in other moments join the widow in her sorara in name of shared kin or clan relations, but on this occasion their identification is as Christian women, not as relations or clan members. Even so, there is a sense in which widows ‘bring their seclusion with them’ to the church, they remain in a state of seclusion and mourning by avoiding interactions.

This practice corresponds to the general Korafe attitude to Christianity, which has not entirely substituted ancestral beliefs, but has largely encompassed them by adding a further, wider dimension of cosmological relations to be considered. To the previously recognised ones between individuals, groups, the living with the ancestral spirits, colonial and post-colonial experiences have added relationships with a world-wide humanity and with an all-powerful God (Gneccchi-Ruscone, 1991). Like in other aspects of their lives, Korafe widows have added a further dimension of relations to be maintained: those with the Christian powers. For all the verbal acknowledgment that such a commitment should result in the demise of some practices judged to be un-Christian, in practice giving up seclusion is virtually impossible as it would compromise other levels of relations which may be considered secondary to the new ones promoted by Christianity, but are nonetheless fundamental in everyday social life of contemporary rural Korafe.

**Seclusion and sorara**

The secluded widow is in fact the focus of much social attention. Sorara is the most pervasive sign of mourning in a village. The mournful sounds of sorara can be heard in the vicinity of the deceased’s hamlet: they vary in intensity and in kind throughout the period of mourning. At the very least the lamenting is kept up during her waking hours by the widow and any female relative paying a visit. Throughout the widow’s seclusion, many parties of mourners visit her house. Each group spends at least one day sharing in the village’s grief, and are given food prepared by the relations of the deceased. As each new group enters the house, the first thing they do is to scold the widow and whoever is chanting laments with her. A reproach which I often heard newly arrived parties make to those already present was that they should not be crying for the dead person, that mourning should not follow the harsh traditional way, that the widow and her children should stop crying. This reproach is more consonant with Korafe Christian ideology than that, which was nonetheless expressed by the deceased’s sisters, concerning the widow’s failings. Whatever the reproach, the salient feature is the act of expressing anger or any reasons for displeasure at the deceased’s kin, before being moved to tears by the sight of the body or of the other distraught mourners, and joining in their grief by participating in sorara.

Men and women have different ways of sharing their grief. Men may also participate in sorara, and usually as each new party of mourners comes to the hamlet, the men enter the house, and take part in the lamenting for a while, but soon they return outside and join the other men sitting on the house veranda. They discuss what form they think the funerary rituals should take, in view of their wish to adhere to a more modern or Christian way of doing things. Many of the men related to the deceased make public speeches and announcements about such decisions. But most of all, the men gathered on the veranda share talk, tobacco, and betel nut with the bereaved sons and brothers of the deceased, thus reassuring each other about their mutual good relations. The express preoccupation and
with mutual reassurances concerning the status of relations with the deceased and his family are to be understood in the context of beliefs that death is always the result of sorcery: a death always gives rise to speculations regarding the culprit, and anyone with unresolved conflicts may be suspected.

Meanwhile inside, and well within the men’s hearing, women give vent to the whole range of their emotions: anger, grief, frustration, fear, and suspicion. On the template provided by sorara, women extemporise verses on the specific person they are mourning; they recriminate, remember past tensions or conflicts involving the deceased, make suppositions as to who could have been jealous of the deceased or offended by his actions, they might even make outright sorcery accusations.

At times, if the women’s laments make specific accusations, the men sitting outside try to silence them: they bang on the floor, and shout at the women to be quiet, not to get carried away. This reaction has two explanations: on one hand, following the death of a person of high status who probably had maintained his groups’ connection with others, the men are interested in emphasising friendship and good will with all other groups, in order to reconstitute or reinforce those ties: they do not want old tensions to be brought to the surface. On the other hand, if the sorcery accusations are deemed to be true, it would be the men’s duty to the deceased to exact revenge: they may not be willing to take such steps (also considering Christian opposition to sorcery) and in any case they are not willing to declare such intentions publicly.

One thing that the secluded widow and the other lamenting women do, therefore, is to bring out into the open all the possible sources of tension between the deceased’s kin and other lineages and clans in their social sphere, thus stimulating the deceased’s clansmen to deal with and solve them: either by taking actions to smooth out underlying tensions or by exacting revenge against those considered guilty of the man’s death, thus resolving the deceased’s family relations with their ancestors, as well as with other social groups.

These visits are important in that they give all people who were connected to the deceased the opportunity not only to share in his family’s grief, but to vent their own suspicions and allay suspicions which may have arisen concerning their own involvement in the death. By visiting the bereaved hamlet, mourners demonstrate their good will towards the dead man’s kin and their intentions to reinforce the social ties between their respective groups, despite the death of the person who was previously responsible for forging and sustaining them.

In pre-colonial times the body used to be buried under the house, and during the first period following burial the widow and close relatives used to sleep on the ground directly above the grave. Now that the body is buried outside the village, mourners feel sorry for the fact that the departed “sleeps alone” in the cold, outside, so they too “sleep in the cold” (Yāura avāri) in sympathy with the deceased’s plight.

Once the first period is over, when the majority of visitors has left the village, the hamlet inhabitants share a meal of garden food, and decide to stop yāura avāri. After sleeping indoors for the first night, at dawn they perform a simple ritual, usually involving a sharp breaking sound, to despatch the spirit on its way. Although these rituals are partially replaced by the church service that precedes the burial to pray that the deceased’s soul is admitted to heaven, they are still performed, explicitly to ensure the spirit’s future goodwill to his descendants.

This attitude is strongly linked to magical traditions, and is expressly condemned by the Christian ideology that pervades public discourse in the villages. Thus if the timing of this simple rite can be said to coincide with the satisfactory resolution of one set of social relations, that is when the main body of mourners from other villages leave the hamlet after mutual reassurances as to positive social relations with the deceased’s family, it is also significant that it is performed on the first occasion since the death that the close relatives of the deceased can benefit from some degree of privacy.

The aspect of secrecy is even more important for another set of practices which may take place at the same time, and which are even more strongly condemned by the dominant Christian ideology, as they involve attempts at communicating directly with the spirit of the deceased and, furthermore, they are directly linked to ideas of revenge and sorcery. The scope of such divining rites is to ask the spirit to indicate the person who is guilty of causing his death.

Mourning restrictions

The widow’s seclusion is not the only restriction associated with mourning. All the members of the deceased’s family, his village folk and other close kin, friends or associates wear distinctive signs of grief on their body, called rovārova. Dark western clothing is generally
adopted by mourners in place of the traditional job tears’ hood for the widow and armlets and leg bands for the other mourners. The widow is not supposed to change or wash for the whole period of her seclusion, while other mourners neither shave nor cut their hair.

Accompanying these restrictions are individual self-sacrifices made by mourners in memory of the deceased, kamángara. While visiting the bereaved kin of the deceased, each person may declare his or her intention to give up a type of food or activity associated in some way with the dead person. A widow, for example, may give up her husband’s favourite food; a friend may give up a particular type of fish which they once caught together; a dependant may give up sugar which he used to ask the deceased for; or a dancing partner may give up dancing, and so on. Each individual mourner will be given a gift at the end of the mourning process, in exchange for the work performed through such restrictions. These restrictions too are considered to be opposed to the ideas of Christian charity towards mourners. They are interpreted as punishment for the bereaved on the one hand, and then payment for the performance of a Christian duty on the other. Although this view is generally accepted, there is some resistance to foregoing rovárova and kamángara. In certain cases the bereaved families attempt to restrict the observance of such customs to a limited group of people, perhaps because they feel it to be a hypocritical gesture by people whom they consider could be responsible for the death, or because they want to avoid future obligations to those who make such public statements of their grief. The Christian position on these customs is a useful rhetorical explanation for preventing others from entering in the particular relationship entailed by such mourning exchanges, without having to justify their denial in other, more offensive, terms.

The final lament: singing the journey

It was the deceased’s sisters who were responsible for organising the release of his widow from seclusion. 7 One night the deceased’s sisters summoned all the mourning kinwomen to gather in front of the widow’s house. They sat in pairs forming a wide circle, each older woman sitting next to a younger one. Following the lead of the senior women, all the women joined in a mourning song called ghaséga. 8 This involved no dancing or drumming, the women beat out the rhythm on their lime pots. This was remarked upon as an occasion of great sadness because it marked the end of a phase of the mourning. This thought saddened the women, who gathered to cry just one more time for the deceased. As in sorará, sadness had to be given form and meaning, and the verses of the song provided a framework for the women’s expression of sorrow.

The verses recited an imaginary journey of the body of the deceased through the landscape. The device for narrating this journey is very simple. As in the following example, each verse began with the words of the widow’s lament: nanda kombo (my partner); she then proceeded to describe the leaves in which the body has been wrapped, and the memories they bring back to her, then concluded with a request to unwrap the body for her to see it once more.

| nanda kombo, doriri komaru | My partner, mountain okare komaru |
| Itido doghedo, Besuge gaone | Smoked and bundled. Unwrap for me to see |
| Nanda kombo. Besuge gaone | My partner. Unwrap for me to see |
| Besuge gaone, besuge gaone | Unwrap and I’ll see, unwrap for me to see |

Senior women told me the song was composed as if each verse were sung by the widow as she accompanied her husband’s body along an imaginary journey, from the top of the mountain where he died to the beach where he was buried. 9 At each stage of the journey the body is wrapped in the leaves found in that place. Every time they stop the widow wishes to unwrap the body to look at her husband once more, then he is wrapped with the leaves found in the new place. In this verse, the okare leaves remind the widow of occasions when she went into the bush with her husband to collect the nuts, which they smoked and wrapped in small bundles of leaves. At the same time, the shape of the okare tree is thought to resemble a house, evoking of the house she used to share with her spouse. In a subsequent verse the words sung by the women take the widow’s memories to the gravelly shores

7. The following account is a reconstruction from the recollection of two old women. Since widow seclusion is very low key nowadays, the rituals attached to its end have not been performed for some time, or are done in a more muted version.
8. The word ghaséga also refers to dance practice and to lullaby. It is distinct from other laments used during mourning (sorará), and from other songs (yáru) or dance tunes (divári).
9. The significance of the imaginary journey sung by the female relatives of the deceased during the last night of his widow’s seclusion becomes clearer when it is put in the context of other references to the journeys made by the dead as described above.
of a stream where she went with her husband to collect pandanus leaves, and reminding her of the place they shared and on which she now sleeps alone. Within this framework, each woman was free to improvise new verses, commemorating events in the couple’s shared life through the evocation of places associated to specific plants. This creative freedom recalls the process by which Binandere incorporate new songs into the standard repertoire, gradually replacing verses about the more remote past with verses regarding the deeds of more recent ancestors (John Waiko, 1982).

Ghaségà continued all night: the women grieved for the definitive separation of the deceased from the world of the living. After this ceremony even his widow shed her grief and what remained of her relation with the deceased, as she was re-introduced to social life outside her house. The women mark the arrival of dawn, and the end of ghaségà, with a verse about standing on the beach, looking towards the sunrise over Kofure point. Then the women accompanied the widow as she sang a verse in which she explained to her husband that she will stand up and walk out of her house and down the steps, while actually they escorted her to sit onto a mat spread on the ground in front of the house. One of the deceased’s sisters rolled a tapa cloth and ritually hit the widow over the head. The sisters wail as they remind the widow of her happiness with their brother who had taken good care of her and of her children; they scolded her for “leaving him” already, and coming out of seclusion, and, maybe, contemplating marriage to another man. This ritual marked the end of a widow’s seclusion, her movements became freer, and she was allowed to resume life and activity in the village and garden.

The recitation of all the places which the deceased has visited throughout his productive life as a married man, which pointedly extend all the way through his descent group’s territory from the highest reaches of the mountains to the beach, and connected to the products which he has harvested with his wife in all these places is, like in many other Melanesian cultures, a political act of claiming rights to specific tracts of land for his descendants.

The claims made by the singing women, however, are not only for the rights to exploit the natural resources associated to particular tracts of land. Marta Rohatynskyj (2004: 80-82) illustrates how for Omie speakers of the Kokoda district, elderly men have accumulated in their bodies the powers drawn from the various totemic sites and developed a complete identity with the range of land based totems that reflect the history of their movement over the land. Speaking of such names is equal to making a claim to the land associated, and to the magico-religious knowledge associated. Similarly Korafe magic powers are associated to the specific abilities demonstrated by ancestors during their lifetime, and travelling in memory over the territory claimed by the deceased, while recapitulating his memorable hunting, fishing, agricultural, or other feats, establishes the possibility for his descendants to include among their ancestors someone to appeal to for magical help in those same activities.

A number of myths point to further meanings in ghaségà. The first one suggests that at each successive stage in the corpse’s journey, and at each unwrapping of the body, corresponds a further stage in its decomposition. In this myth a very beautiful young boy who was killed by jealous men in a village near Keppel Point, where he had gone with his sisters to look for obsidian. His two sisters wrapped him in a mat, put him on the platform of their canoe, and set out for home. At various stages of their journey, people living along the coast were attracted by their wailing and asked the girls to show them the body. Each time the body was unwrapped it was seen to be in a more advanced state of decomposition, and people tried to persuade the sisters to bury it there. But each time they refused and pressed on. Only when they had reached their own village and unwrapped the body for their parents and found that just the bones remained, were the sisters persuaded to bury him. In the second myth, a sorcerer tricks two bereaved sisters into burying their father in the sand, so that he could secretly dig the corpse up every day and eat some of it. This may explain why the sisters in the first myth refused to bury their brother in foreign territory. It might also be a reason for the tradition of sleeping on the grave, to guard the body from sorcerers.

The third myth underlines the stark separation of the dead from those they loved which must be effected through the process of mourning: Beriaberia Ghimása’s widow hides behind a rock to wait for his spirit and then follows him despite his entreaties to stay behind. They come to a river of blood and pus, which he flies over. The widow is determined to follow him and begins to swim across the river. Convinced by her determination he bends back a young tree as a bridge, but warns her that she will not be able to go back that way. Then he tells her that ants will eat his flesh and they will not be able to sleep together, but she answers that she didn’t follow
him to sleep with him. Finally he relents and allows her to accompany him to the world of the spirits from which she never makes return.

Unlike the mythical wife in Beriaberia Ghimäsa myth, the widow participating in the journey described by ghasëga sheds her grief and gives up that which remains of her relation to her husband. This is also suggested by the double references in each verse of ghasëga: the okare leaves recall the act of gathering the nuts, but also the house where the widow now lives alone; the pandanus leaves which the couple cut together, remind her that she now sleeps alone on their mat. It is as if the widow, progressively unwrapping her husband’s corpse from each type of leaf tied to a memory of their shared life, is divesting herself of a part of her that still links her to him. The marriage relation is transformed at the same time as his flesh is stripped from his bones.

In this respect it is significant that the deceased’s sisters accompany the widow in ghasëga. By freeing the widow from her seclusion his sisters accomplish the final dissolution of her marriage to their brother, while as members of the same brother sister unit as the deceased who share the same ancestors as him, they also elicit from the widow evidence about the places and powers to which his descendants may claim rights upon in future.

### Removing mourning restrictions

After the end of seclusion, or sometimes on the same occasion, arrangements are made between the deceased’s immediate family and other mourners, to remove all self-imposed mourning restrictions. Both Kaninggara and Rosarora restrictions are taken on voluntarily by individual mourners; and their removal involves a series of reciprocal exchanges between each mourner and the deceased’s family, beards are shaved, hair cut, new clothing or string bags are given, and foregone foods exchanged, signalling the end of the period of grieving. Before each kind of food which had been given up in kaninggara is eaten, the deceased’s son offers a portion to the spirit. He explains to him who had given up eating this food in grief for his death, and now, wishing to eat it again, has brought some to exchange with his descendants. This is the first occasion in which the sons address the deceased as an ancestral spirit. After ghasëga the grief still tying the spirit to his relations has been resolved, and the emotional attachment of the living transformed into the respect due to ancestral spirits.

At the same time as the spirit’s new status is acknowledged, the mutual relations between those left behind are re-established by the exchanges of food, the mutual cutting of hair and shaving of beards, the gifts of clothing and string bags. Social relations between the deceased’s family and other mourners are now independent of him.

### Dressing up the widow

The last person to be freed of all self-imposed mourning restrictions is the widow. In a ceremony called Vujari (decoration), the deceased’s sisters trim the widow’s hair and give her new clothes and a new string bag to wear: they remove the restrictions on washing and on wearing everyday clothes. There are many parallels between this ceremony and the initiation of adolescents, which is also called Vujari: both ceremonies conclude a period of seclusion by decorating the subject with new clothes and ornaments, signalling his or her entry in the world of inter-clan sociality and exchanges. The widow is now free to re-marry, forging a new set of affinal relations and initiating new exchanges between her brother’s lineage and that of her new husband. Just as in the adolescent’s Vujari (Elisabetta Gnecci-Ruscone, 1991: 77-87), the exchanges that take place at the end of the widow’s period of seclusion mark the conclusion of affinal obligations linked to the subject of the exchange.

It is the widow’s brothers, protagonists of the other brother-sister pair involved, who make the final gift for the deceased’s kin. With this pig the widow’s brothers conclude the series of affinal exchanges that began when their sister married. This conclusive exchange can only occur if the relations between the lineages involved are amicable, if there are no unresolved issues. Since these are among the most important relations to be affected by the death, it is important to conclude the mourning with such a gift, which signals that the way is open for further future exchanges between the two groups, despite the end of that particular affinal linkage.

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10 In Vujari ceremonies for adolescents, it is the mother’s brother’s right to decorate with their own clan emblems the eldest child of their sister, but they will only do so once all the preceding affinal exchanges between them and the child’s father’s descent group have been satisfactorily concluded. It is only after this ceremony on the eldest child that their sister’s children are formally allowed to decorate for dancing, and therefore enter the sphere of inter-clan sociality, and can marry.
As in all the exchanges between affines, taking place at the different stages of a married couple’s life cycle, the brother-sister couple have a central role. In the closing mourning ceremonies there are two such pairs involved: it is the deceased’s sisters who release a widow from mourning obligations and give her new clothing to decorate herself for social interaction, and it is the widow’s own brothers who provide a pig for the deceased’s kin. Without the cooperation of these two brother-sister couples the mourning phase cannot come to its conclusion. Indeed there are cases in which mourning is effectively but not officially over, because one of the parties (perhaps living and working in another part of the country) has not yet made return to the deceased’s village with the concluding gift.

Conclusion

The work of mourning is over. During seclusion the widow provided the focus for the process of transforming the social relations involving the deceased’s descent group. Meanwhile, as the widow gradually sheds layers of grief, in a process that parallels the decaying of the deceased’s flesh, his spirit has been transformed and can join the ancestors. The fact that widows are secluded is not an indication of their exclusion from public life. By focussing our attention on what the widows and sisters of the deceased do and what they say in their laments, instead of accepting at face value the Christian view that seclusion is a form of punishment, it becomes apparent that they are responsible for important transformations in the social and ritual spheres of life. At the end of this period the deceased’s sisters accompany the widow, putting an end to the obligations that she incurred through marriage, but they also accompany her in singing about the places the deceased visited throughout his life, thus enabling his descendants to stake claims on those particular sites. Similarly, what remains of the body at the end of these processes can now be used by his descendants, those with rights and knowledge to magic, to summon his magical help.

These very important tasks are the work of the key women in the deceased’s social life: it is through his wife and his sisters that during his lifetime he has entered into a series of affinal relations with members of descent groups other than his own, relations which his brothers and descendants must now forge without his mediation: the lamenting women throughout the widow’s seclusion motivate this re-elaboration. These same key women accompany him in the journey which will transform him into an ancestor: while they retrace his personal history, unwrapping him of layers of grief and residual relations, he travels to join the ancestors as one of them, carrying in the string bag prepared for him by his widow, all those items most closely linked to his own personal identity. It is through the transformation of his relations to the living, effected by his widow and his sisters, that a man becomes an ancestor and his heritage becomes available to his descendants.

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