

# MORTUARY PRACTICES, IDEOLOGY AND SOCIETY IN THE CENTRAL MANDARA HIGHLANDS, NORTH CAMEROON

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## ABSTRACT

After introducing recent theory concerning the archaeology of death, this paper analyses the cultural transformation of living into dead expressed in material aspects of mortuary practices in seven Mandara societies (Mafa, Sirak, Cuvok, Hide, Wula, Mabas and Gemjek). The ideological, sociological and other factors (e.g. gender, cause of death) which account for the variability observed within each group, are defined and compared. Ideology is shown to operate in all three of the ways identified by Anthony Giddens: identification of sectional interests as universal, denial of contradictions and naturalization of the present. In spite of variability in their expression, the ideological premises underlying mortuary practice are common to all seven societies, testifying to the existence of a *symbolic reservoir* into which these societies and their antecedents have been dipping for almost two millennia. Implications for archaeological inference are discussed.

*Keywords* : mortuary practices, burial, material culture, archaeology, ethnoarchaeology, ideology, Mandara, Mafa, North Cameroon.

## RÉSUMÉ

### PRATIQUES MORTUAIRES, IDÉOLOGIE ET SOCIÉTÉ SUR LES PLATEAUX DU MANDARA CENTRAL (NORD-CAMEROUN)

Après avoir passé en revue les théories archéologiques récentes concernant la mort, nous analysons la transformation culturelle des vivants en morts, telle qu'elle est exprimée dans les aspects matériels des pratiques mortuaires dans sept sociétés des monts Mandara (Mafa, Sirak, Cuvok, Hide, Wula, Mabas et Gemjek). Les facteurs idéologiques, sociologiques et autres (par exemple, le sexe, la cause de la mort) responsables de la variabilité rencontrée sont déterminés et comparés. Il est démontré que l'idéologie fonctionne de chacune des trois manières signalées par Anthony Giddens : identification d'intérêts propres à une section de société comme des intérêts universels, négation de contradictions et naturalisation du présent. Malgré la variabilité de leur expression, les prémisses idéologiques des pratiques mortuaires sont communes aux sept groupes considérés, ce qui témoigne de l'existence d'un *réservoir de symboles* dans lequel ces sociétés et leurs prédécesseurs ont puisé depuis presque deux millénaires. Nous terminons en signalant quelques implications pour l'interprétation de données archéologiques.

*Mots-clés* : pratiques mortuaires, enterrement, culture matérielle, archéologie, ethno-archéologie, Mandara, Mafa, Nord-Cameroun.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The archaeology of death

African mortuary practices have been remarkably little studied from an ethnological as opposed to a sociological viewpoint, and it is particularly surprising that ethnoarchaeologists have not paid attention to a topic that concerns archaeology so directly.

Before the late 1960s, as Chapman and Randsborg (1981:5) point out in their survey of approaches to the archaeology of death, "The methodological basis for a social analysis of mortuary practices had not been formulated". This situation changed with the appearance of a thesis by Arthur Saxe (1970) and an influential paper by Lewis Binford (1971) that argued for the existence of correlations between the structure of mortuary practices and of society at large. During the rest of the decade this theory was tested against ethnographic data, applied to archaeology, elaborated and developed in numerous papers and monographs (e.g. Brown (ed.) 1971; O'Shea 1984 and see Tainter 1978). Such studies contributed substantially to regional archaeologies and to archaeology in general. Although none of these authors worked with African materials, Holl (1990a and b) has applied the approach to the analysis of Iron Age materials from south of Lake Chad. His papers demonstrate an awareness of inherent weaknesses of the New Archaeology, a concern for *structure* to the virtual exclusion of *culture*, a disdain for the symbols through which the structure was expressed and indeed for ideology in general, and limited regard for natural (e.g. decay) and cultural (e.g. secondary burial) formation processes. Thus the "mortuary sociologists" regarded "differential aspects of the social system" as passing through a series of *filters* in the process of becoming "isolatable archaeological patterning" (O'Shea 1981:40, fig.2). This is very different to the post-processualist view that disposal of the dead also involves a conceptual *transformation* of living society (Parker Pearson 1982), with the corollary that the different cognitive patterns and ideologies found in societies worldwide must imply the existence of a variety of transformational rules.

In their book *Celebrations of death*, Huntington and Metcalf (1979) offer a valuable commentary on Hertz (1907) that includes a diagrammatic representation (1979: 66, fig. 2) of Hertz's explanation of the fear of death as the product of three sets of relationships. A modified version of this diagram is presented here (fig. 1) and generalized to account for different aspects of mortuary practices. It is the relationship between the "Living and Mourners" and the "Corpse and its Disposal" that determines the *scale* of the rites and the *differentiation of social personae*. It is this aspect with which archaeologists were almost exclusively concerned through the 1970s. Until the 1980s little or no attention was paid to the relationship between the "Soul and the Dead" and the "Corpse and its Disposal". This is apprehended through *metaphor* that is developed into the *symbolism* of the rites (e.g. sleep with awakening to resurrection or a process of fermentation). The third dyad, relating "Living and Mourners" to the "Soul and the Dead", accounts

for the *sequence of rites* as the social persona is transformed or extinguished. In any one society the three pairs of relationships in the Hertzian triangle are all interdependent expressions of the same ideology, and thus no one of the relationships can be understood in isolation.

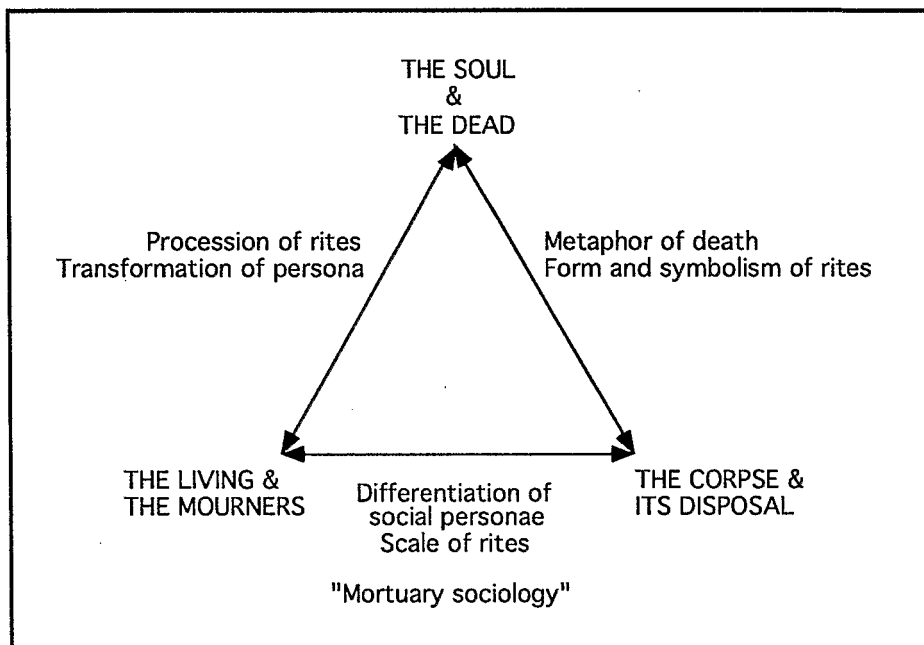


Figure 1 : A Hertzian view of mortuary practices.

Hodder (1986:67) has drawn to our attention to Giddens' (1979:193-97) identification of three ways in which ideologies operate, that is to say by:

- 1) the representation of the interests of dominant sections of society as universal,
- 2) the denial or transmutation of contradictions, that is to say the concealment or misrepresentation of social relations, and
- 3) the naturalization of the present, by which he means that social constructs are represented as part of the natural order of things.

Hodder comments,

*"if burial remains are seen as ideological naturalizations of the social order, then burial variability within cemeteries....will correlate directly with the structure of society, but if burial remains in a particular society deny contradictions, then the archaeological burial data cannot be used to "read off" the social organization".*

The ethnographic data presented below confirm that mortuary practices can be, and I suspect generally are, characterized by both.

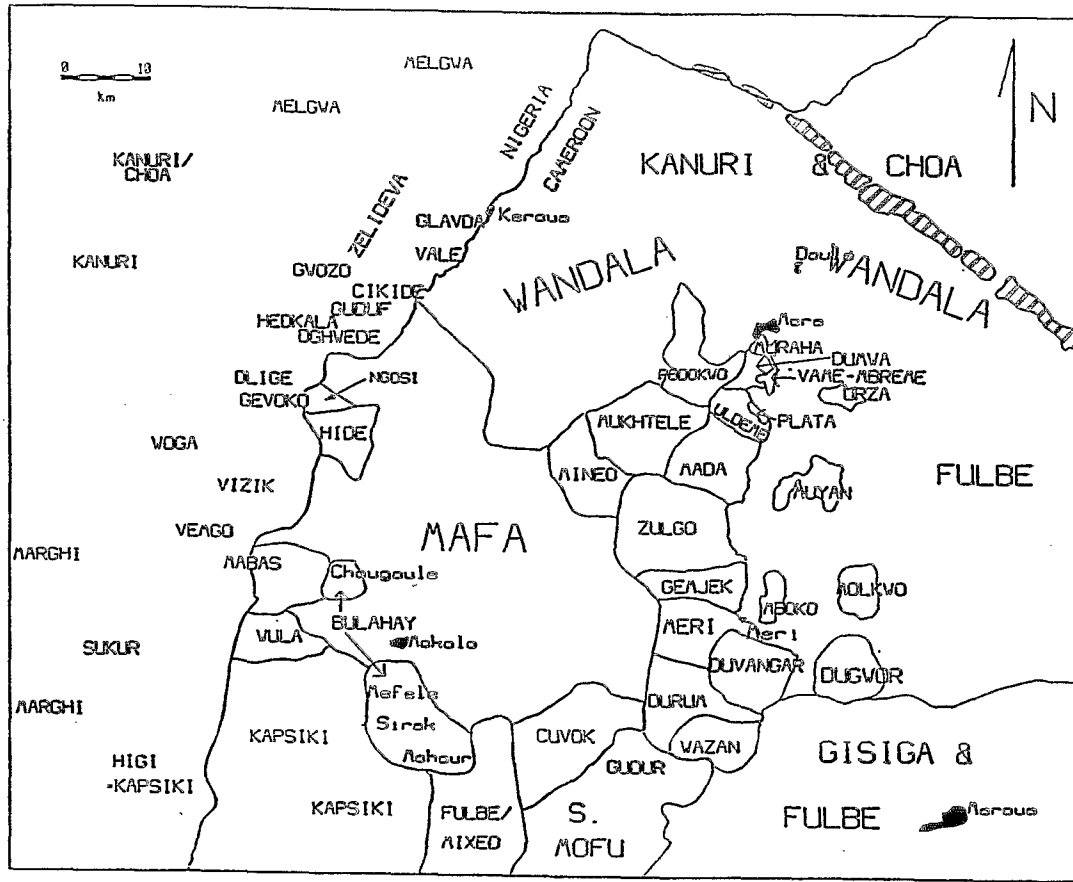


Figure 2 : Map of parts of N.E. Nigeria and N. Cameroon, showing ethnic distributions.

To sum up, disposal of the dead is a form of ritual communication that, to paraphrase Shanks and Tilley (1982:130), is integral to the social construction of reality and to the reproduction of the social formation. The archaeology of death ought then not be limited to mortuary sociology but should also embrace its symbolic component, the process of "ancestralization" and the ideological transformations involved in the realization of any particular Hertzian triangle. This can not be achieved by analysis of mortuary practices in isolation. Patterning in mortuary practices must be linked to patterning in architectural, settlement and other material domains (Parker Pearson 1982 Hodder 1986:140). To date there have been few such studies (e.g. Hodder 1984). Hence the need for ethno-archaeological studies of a range of domains of material culture that can contribute to fuller understanding of mortuary and other practices in context, and in particular to the building of better bridges between the dynamics of human life and the statics of the archaeological record.

### The Cameroonian data base

It is from this perspective that I intend in this paper to examine traditional<sup>1</sup> disposal of the dead in the central Mandara highlands among the southern Mafa, Sirak (*Bulahay* of Sirak), Cuvok, Hide, Mabas, Wula and Gemjek (fig. 2). The data are drawn primarily from my fieldnotes made during a total of 10 months in the field in 1986, 1989 and 1990, from those of Judy Sterner on the Sirak over the same periods, and from Kodzo Gavua (1990) on the Mafa of Soulede and neighbouring communities. Information on the Mafa and Sirak is by far the richest, other groups having been visited irregularly and, in the cases of the Cuvok, Wula of Karantchi, Mabas and Gemjek (where the data come entirely from the single small community of Mosro), only on a few occasions. Our materials on funerals are supplemented by published sources, particularly Boisseau and Soula (1974 (3):607-646) and Hinderling (1984 (3):90-107) on the Mafa.

All these are egalitarian agricultural societies little above the subsistence level. They vary greatly in size, the southern Mafa considered here numbering about 45,000 in eleven communities<sup>2</sup>, the remaining groups, excepting the Gemjek<sup>3</sup>, one settlement each (Mabass - pop. 586; Sirak - 1859; Cuvok - 3968; Hide - 9102; Wula - population unknown but not exceeding 3000, Gemjek perhaps five or six thousand with Mosro only a few hundred). Society is organized by exogamous patrilineal clans and into two exogamous castes (except among the Gemjek, where there are nonetheless many similarities), the *cultivators* and the "*transformers*" or "*specialists*" (ironworkers, potters, undertakers, etc.), the latter constituting

<sup>1</sup> i.e. unaffected by modernizing -for the most part Muslim and Christian- practices.

<sup>2</sup> The Mafa settlements to the west, north and northeast of Mokolo town. Population data are preliminary results from the 1987 census.

<sup>3</sup> Mosro is one of twelve Gemjek mountain communities (including Gadua in which Barreteau has discovered that a different language is spoken). The combined Zulgo-Gemjek population numbered 13,125 according to the 1976 census (von Graffenried 1984:27).

roughly 2.5% - 5% of the population. Rights to land are held primarily by virtue of inheritance. It is therefore not surprising that the principles of male superiority over females and of seniority by age and genealogical position are cornerstones of the value system. All these societies practise ancestor cults in which pots play an important part as devices for communication with the spirit world (Sterner, this volume).

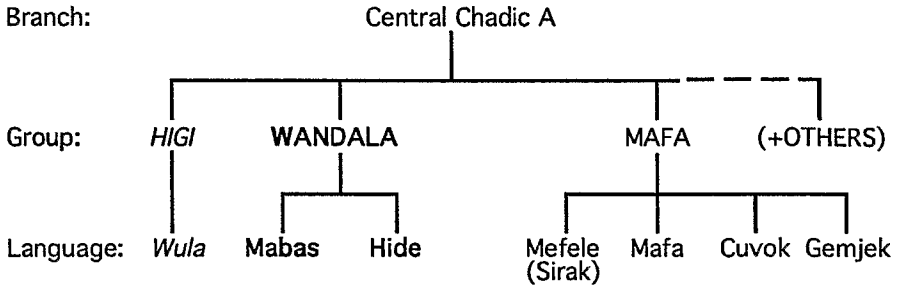
The community settlement, non-nucleated but focussed on a mountain, was traditionally the largest political entity, and while chiefs existed, their power, spiritual rather than temporal, was and remains extremely limited and often divided between a chief, in Mafa *bi dza*, responsible on behalf of the community for the cult of the mountain, and another, the *bi yam*, for rain-making and other cults associated with the crops. There is also a chief of the transformers, *bi ngwazla*, with other ritual responsibilities.

According to historical linguistic studies (Barreteau 1987), the languages of these peoples all fall within the Central (Biu-Mandara) branch, sub-branch A of the Chadic family. The Mafa, Sirak (mefe) and Cuvok languages are the most closely related to each other within the Mafa group of languages (unfortunately named, as the Mafa, although very numerous, are geographically and culturally marginal to the main cluster of groups and languages located on the eastern periphery of the highlands). Gemjek (a dialect of zelgwa) is a more distant member of the same group. Mabas and Hide are closely related members of the Wandala group. Wula is a Kapsiki (psikye) dialect in the Margi group (Fig. 3a, 3b). On the other hand, my overall evaluation of the material culture suites of these peoples gives a different grouping (Fig. 3b), with Mabas assorting with Wula, Hide with Mafa, Sirak intermediate between Mafa and Kapsiki, Cuvok between Mafa and Mofu of Gudur, and Gemjek with the Mofu-Diamaré block (Vincent 1991).

I shall concentrate on material aspects of mortuary practices closely associated with the actual disposal of the dead. The dimensions of variation considered include: physical and managerial direction of the funeral, the location and nature of burial grounds, preparation and clothing of the body, tombs and graves, positioning of the body, and gravegoods. I shall make frequent use of the term "elder". Elder status is not precisely defined in these societies; attaining it is an accretionary process involving several of the following attributes:

- a physiological age of at least thirty,
- having descendants to carry on the cult,
- having already lost one's father, and/or mother in the case of women,
- having taken part in ceremonies that establish senior status.

a)



b)



Figure 3 : Relationships of the studied groups by a) language and b) material culture.

This last might imply taking part in the Sirak *gola* festival, which is a formal farewell to youth, or participating as a bull owner in the bull festival common to all these groups (von Graffenried 1984), or having responsibility for making offerings to the spirit of one's deceased mother or father. In the case of a woman, the bearing of several children is important, but her status will depend in part upon that of her husband. Eldership thus generally implies that the individual has realized his or her basic potential as a member of society. Women are discriminated against also in the sense that is rarer for a woman than for a man to attain senior status, and rarer that that status be recognized in the material aspects of burial. Lastly, it should be emphasized that not only is there considerable variation within even the southern Mafa, but that there is frequent disagreement about and renegotiation of norms and actual practice from burial to burial even of persons in the same category within a community. I have observed only one Hide burial, Gavua only two traditional Mafa burials (one of a six-month old child), and Sterner no actual Sirak burials. James Vaughan (pers. comm. 1990) tells me that among the Marghi there is minor variation by clan in mortuary practices, one for example practising partial removal of the epidermis (Otterbein 1967). We do not have the same fine degree of cultural resolution; our data, especially on the rarely visited groups, emphasize the ideal at the expense of the actual and imply a standardization that is certainly illusory.

### Funeral direction

Funeral direction normally involves orchestration of an at times protracted series of ceremonies that may include preparation and dressing of the corpse, divination and the carrying out of sacrifices, besides digging of the tomb or grave and the actual burial. Among the Mafa, Sirak, Cuvok and Wula, funerals are directed by male transformers, though women transformers may sometimes be called in to bury small children, and infants, as probably elsewhere, are often buried by their parents. Amongst the Hide, transformers are called in to bury elders. For other persons, the funeral is directed by members of the family, affines playing an important role. Mabas transformers do not specialize as undertakers, while affines again conduct Gemjek funerals.

### Cemeteries

The location and importance of burial grounds among several of these peoples has been affected by changes in settlement and community patterning since the start of the colonial period. Decreased need for defense and desire for improved access to water, good land, schools and other non-traditional resources have, in most of these societies, resulted in moves down from inaccessible and relatively inhospitable massifs onto the plateau. This results in the breakdown of former links between clans and cemeteries and the latter's at least partial abandonment. Where populations have remained *in situ* or moved only short distances this is not the case. Thus among the Mabas a large cemetery of the chiefly clan is still in use, located near and below the chief's compound. At Sirak, where much of the population has shifted to the foot of the massif, but only over short distances, the clan cemeteries on the mountain are still used. Chiefly and other land-holding clans would always have emphasized the importance of cemeteries as proofs of ancestral rights. Indeed "strangers", landless immigrants, are customarily denied room in cemeteries and buried on the road leading towards their settlements of origin. This constitutes an explicit denial to their descendants of an opportunity to lay claim to some part of the host territory.

Nowadays one often sees small burial grounds with a dozen or so visible graves that serve just a few families of the same lineage or sub-clan located in a particular quarter of the settlement. This may well always have been the practice among the Cuvok, where the quarters are distant from each other, and among the Hide whose population, centered around the market and administrative center of Tourou, is larger than that of any single Mafa community. The quarter in these cases acts relatively independently.

It is possible to elicit an ideal cemetery organization, though probably not, due largely to taphonomic processes -for earth mounds melt into the ground within a generation and even stone-faced superstructures eventually

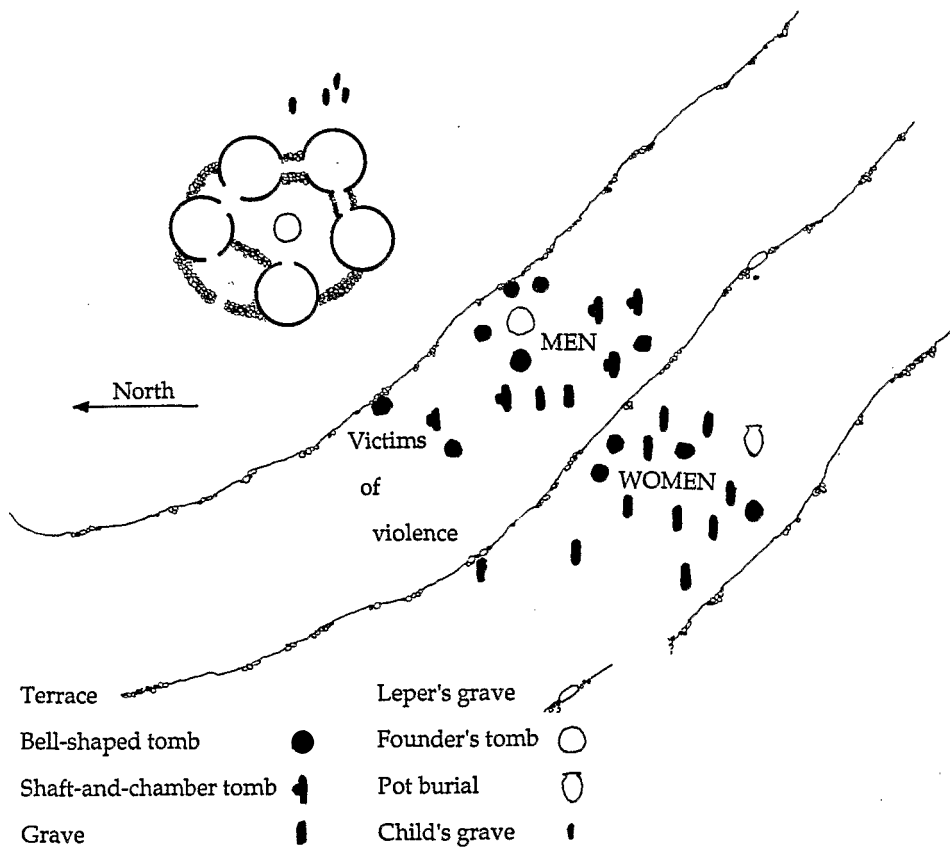


Figure 4 : An ideal Mafa cemetery plan elicited from informants.

break down- to recognize one on the ground<sup>1</sup>. This difficulty in recognizing the spatial structure of a cemetery must also apply to their native users. The example shown in Figure 4 is imaginary and was elicited from Mafa informants, but cemeteries would probably not differ greatly between any of the groups considered here. The focal tomb is that of the founder of the local segment of the clan. Around him are other male elders and junior males. Persons who have died by violence are grouped together and a little apart. Wives and unmarried daughters are located downslope of their husbands and fathers, wives married only once receiving more favourable placement. A few men choose to construct their own tombs more or less in secret on the land they farm. Excluded from the cemetery or at least relegated to marginal positions are lepers and smallpox victims, while infants and small children are generally buried behind their mothers'huts. Chiefs are commonly given special treatment. Mafa chiefs may choose to be buried beneath their own granary and cult hut. The Hide chief (mRam ma Hdi) is always buried in the chiefly compound beneath his bedroom, which is then abandoned and allowed to collapse. The last Sirak chief has two tombs, one in the cemetery of his clan and another by his homestead.

Cemetery organisation can be seen to express several of the prevailing social values and attitudes: the importance of kinship and the higher value placed on men and on the genealogically senior, the firm integration of wives into their husband's kin group, the fear of spirits untimely released through violence and of the disease spirits responsible for particularly fatal or unpleasant infections.

### Preparation and clothing of the body

As is common in this part of Africa, all or parts of cadavers are customarily anointed with an ochreous oil (though not among the Gemjek) and sometimes also with other ritually important substances (Wula). Amongst all groups goatskins, either dried and soaked to regain pliability or preferably fresh killed for the purpose, are sewn around the loins of adults, this being said by the Mafa to prevent sexual activity in an overpopulated nether world. There is also a concern with covering the face of the deceased either with a skin (Mafa, Sirak), with cloth strips (Wula), bark fibre (Gemjek women) or a shroud (Hide, Gemjek). Mouchet (1949:47) states however that among the "Zelgwa" (Zulgo), closely related to the Gemjek, men did indeed have their faces covered with goatskin. Special treatment is accorded transformers, twins<sup>2</sup>, and sometimes parents of twins among the Mafa, in that sheepskin is substituted for goatskin in wrapping the head.

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps for this reason Podlewski (1966:16 fn.) mistakenly denied their existence among the Mafa.

<sup>2</sup> Twins are in fact only the most common of the multiple and other abnormal, e.g. breech presentation, births that are classified together under the same term, *tsakalay* in Mafa.

Gowns and other articles of clothing, it would seem in numbers appropriate to the individual's wealth and position, are put on over the skins. Rich, successful men (Mafa, Sirak, Cuvok, Hide, Gemjek) might also be wrapped in the hide of a bull slaughtered for this purpose, with its horns attached to the deceased's head. A porcupine quill headdress worn by deceased Sirak elders during their transport to the cemetery (but owned by the officiating transformer) refers to the assimilation of these animals, which live below ground and emerge only at night, to the spirits of the dead. The Mafa make the same symbolic connection, but the headdress is of Kapsiki origin (Otterbein 1967:11; van Beek this volume; and a similar headdress in Gardi 1953: photos 74 and 75).

As in other aspects of funerals, poverty may lead to variation from ideal patterns. Among the Mafa, dried skins, sacks made of bean fibre or even leaves can, if necessary, substitute for the skins of animals killed for the occasion. I shall not insist upon this type of variation (although some might be visible archaeologically). The bodies of victims of smallpox and leprosy were on the other hand usually accorded no or minimal preparation before a hasty burial either nude, perhaps with skins laid over them, or in a mat or similar expedient covering. In such cases fear of contagion (by the spirit responsible) short-circuited normal practice. Amongst the Wula a belt with medicines was tied around the waist of victims of violence. When the body swelled in the tomb and burst the belt, the medicines would attack the killer.

Again the preparation and clothing of the body reveal the working of certain themes important in local thought. The colour red has protective powers and serves to insulate the corpse (David et al. 1988:371-72). The spirits of the newly deceased are potentially dangerous even to family members and leave the body only reluctantly and over a period. Thus the head must be sewn into goatskin, one stated (Mafa) function being to prevent the deceased seeing and revenging themselves on those who would remove them from this world<sup>1</sup>. In the case of successful Mafa men who sit for a while in state in their entry courtyards, the head and neck are also wrapped round and round with rope to keep the head upright. Formerly in Sirak once the body had been placed in the tomb, the skin over the face was removed. Somewhat similarly among the Mofu, whose burials (Vincent 1980-81) appear in most respects closely comparable to those described here, the skin over the mouth was cut open so that the deceased could eat and talk with the ancestors. Goats and sheep are symbolic analogues of the cultivator and transformer castes, sheep also being associated with twins who, like the transformers, are ambiguously perceived as being both powerful and dangerous.

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<sup>1</sup> However I was informed that among the Gemjek slits are cut in the the shroud over the eyes.

There is an element of display in the clothing of the corpse with gowns or strips of cloth, the latter once an important medium of exchange. Such display takes second place to the sewing of the corpse into a bull's hide, and assimilation of the deceased to the animal that is a central symbol of religious life (von Graffenried 1984, David 1990). Although I was informed that Cuvok women might be wrapped in cowhide, in these male-dominated societies where women had little opportunity to accumulate wealth, it is unsurprising that their burials are much less marked by such elements.

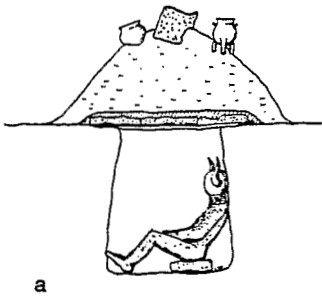
## Tombs and graves

### Burial structures (Table 1)

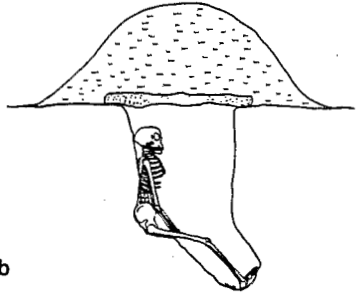
We distinguish tombs having a sub-circular opening and a subterranean chamber from graves with the form of a sub-rectangular trench (fig. 5). There is some degree of overlap between the categories, for example a grave with an offset niche for receipt of the body. Tombs with a cylindrical shaft and an elongated, often offset, chamber at the base are the most widely distributed. The variety of excavated structures within several of these societies is noteworthy and speaks to age, role and status distinctions.

Types of tomb/grave	Mafa	Sirak	Cuvok	Hide	Mabas	Wula	Gemjek
Cylinder w/ elongated chamber	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
Bell-shaped tomb	+	+	-	-	-	+	-
Boot-shaped tomb	-	-	+	-	-	-	-
+stone-faced superstructure	-	+	-	-	+	+	-
Urn burial	+	-	-	-	-	-	-
Grave (+/-niche)	+	+	+	+	-	+	+
Small grave/tomb for the very young	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

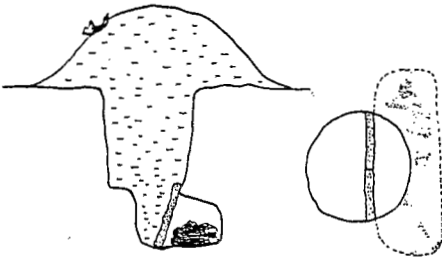
Table 1. *Types of tombs and graves by group. Note that a "-" may not always indicate absence of a type, sometimes only a lack of information.*



a



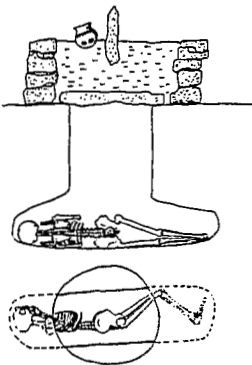
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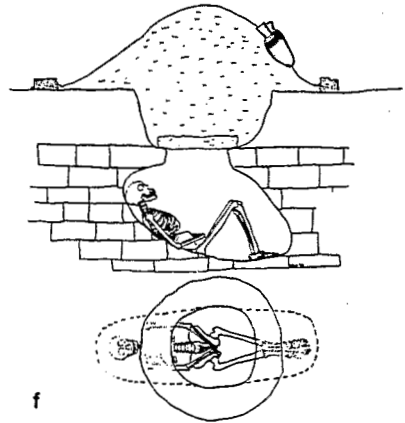
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d



e



f

Figure 5 : Tombs and graves: a) Mafa male elder; b) Cuvok chief or victim of violence; c) Hide male; d) Mafa female; e) Wula woman with at least one child; f) Gemjek male twin (as pots over tomb in duplicate).

Bell- or flagon-shaped tombs are found among the Wula, the Sirak and Mafa. The boot-shaped tomb, in which the body is placed seated in a main shaft with the lower legs extending into a niche, here occurs only among the Cuvok where it is reserved for chiefs and victims of violence. Men and women are buried in a seated position among the Mofu-Diamaré, though facing in different directions. The tomb is of the bell-/flagon-shaped form (Vincent 1980-81; 1982). While backdirt will be heaped up to form a mound over almost all types of burial and a rock or rocks are likely to be incorporated, formal stone-faced superstructures occur amongst the psikye-speaking Wula and other Kapsiki/Wula-influenced groups (Sirak, Mabas). Urn burial is a rarity among the Mafa, where it is, it would seem, most often but not exclusively practised by potters who make their own large storage vessels for this purpose. Presumably a relict of past practices in this general region (Connah 1981, Forkl 1985:351-76), it occurs in one Marghi clan (James Vaughan pers. comm. 1990) and perhaps among other groups. Graves, widely distributed, are everywhere reserved for those with low status or who are otherwise disadvantaged. These include some women (Mafa), the young (Hide), the poor (Mafa) and those with smallpox or leprosy (Mafa, Cuvok, Wula). Infants and small children (up to what age varies) are customarily buried in a small grave or tomb of generally expedient form, not necessarily duplicating those of adults.

Among the Sirak, potter's clay, though not builder's daub, is believed to have a dangerous though weak spirit inimical to cultivators. Perhaps for a similar reason care is taken that the earth should not come into direct contact with dead persons, especially with those of some significant status. Empty shafts are closed by slabs of rock, while chambers are separated from earth-filled shafts by rock plaques (perhaps also other materials) and gaps between them daubed over. Even the mats used to wrap Wula lepers will keep the dirt off for a while.

When tombs and graves have been filled in it is customary to leave upon them the hafts (but not the iron bits) of the digging stick and hoe used in their construction, together with any bowl or calabash used to evacuate the backdirt, and vessels or large sherds used by the gravediggers to wash. We consider these items as abandoned on account of contamination rather than as grave goods. Other items may make reference to the social persona of the deceased. Pots are commonly used for this purpose (see below under grave goods and Sterner this volume), while among the Wula *three* upright stones identify the grave of a man with children, *one* those of childless adult males and all women, and an absence of uprights the young. The Mabas practise a similar (but not identical) custom.

A concern with status, and particularly with achievement of elder status, is very evident in this dimension of mortuary practice. Mafa for example reserve the bell-shaped tomb for a man or woman elder who has children of their own and whose own parent of the same sex is already dead. Other preoccupations, for example with the spirits of those slain in war, are also recognisable. The form of the tomb or grave may have an important symbolic component. van Beek (this volume) has shown that among the

Kapsiki the flagon-shaped tomb and its stone superstructure are an inversion of the granary on its stone base. The small opening of the Mofu-Gudur tomb through which the corpse passes only with difficulty is an explicit reference to the narrow passage through which we enter the world (Jouaux this volume). The bell- or flagon-shaped tomb thus signifies hut, granary, pot and uterus, all appropriate abodes for the process of ancestralization through processes that include germination, gestation and possibly fermentation. We can offer no such interpretation of the tomb with shaft and offset chamber -and yet a simple explanation, in terms of the need to shelter the body from both scavenging animals and direct pressure of earth, is unsatisfying and incomplete. Both here and in the case of simple graves there is an obvious concern that the body lie in a sleeping position, a dimension to which we now turn.

#### Position in tomb (Table 2)

The position of the body within the burial is constrained by the form of the excavated structure. Seating of the corpse is only possible in the bell-shaped and boot-shaped tomb types. According to Boisseau and Soula (1974 (3):629), at Jingliya adult Mafa males whose fathers are still alive are buried in bell-shaped tombs, but lying on the side and, almost necessarily, in a flexed position. In almost all other tombs and graves, though not among the Gemjek where they recline on their backs, bodies are laid down in a sleeping position, generally on the side and somewhat flexed. Degrees of flexure do not appear be of significance. The burial of infants and very small children being carried out in private, positioning is probably less standardized.

Position	Mafa	Sirak	Cuvok	Hide	Mabas	Wula	Gemjek
Seated	MW	MW	Chief, victims of violence			M	
Seated on stool						Chief*	
Lying on R	m	m,?f	m	m	m		
Lying on L	f		f	f	f	f	
Lying on back							mf
Lying on bed					Chief*		

\* associated with charcoal

Table 2. *Position of body in burial.*

M=man elder; W=woman elder; m=males; f=females

To be seated in the face of others is to be superior or at least equal to them and is here associated with chiefs and elders. It is noteworthy that men and women elders are in some cases buried in identical positions, negating at the end of life the gender distinction that is so fundamental during it. Wula and Mabas chiefs are also buried with quantities of charcoal, the former being buried in it up to the chest, the latter with charcoal placed under the bed on which he lies. Charcoal burials will be further discussed below.

A clear distinction between males and females is evident in burials in graves where the body is laid out in a sleeping position. For many societies in this part of the world the *left* hand is the hand of God and of man (Vincent 1978) and it is said to be with the left hand that the husband, lying on his right side, clasps his wife in bed. So he lies in the grave. Wives, and by extension all females, lie on their left sides. Only among the outlying Gemjek and perhaps in Sirak is this distinction not made.

Orientation is a more complex issue, perhaps because there are so many ways of expressing the same thing. Orientation to the rising sun might for example imply either that persons are buried with their heads to the east (or actual sunrise depending upon the season), or looking to the east, which, if males and females were laid on different sides, would imply different orientations of the heads, or both alternatives in the same society, and so on. In fact an association of sunset, death and the west is commonly made in this region, but is expressed in various ways and not always in burial. Thus the Mafa will bless a task with an offering first to the rising and then the setting sun, and it is considered inauspicious for the evening sun to shine directly into a compound entrance. Some Mafa informants claim there is no generally preferred orientation in burials, rather the deceased is positioned to look away from her or his former residence. Others describe both males and females buried lying down as having their heads to the east, though facing in opposite directions. Seated males are said to face to the east, which is confirmed by Lavergne (1944) and Lembezat (1961:49), who describes "Matakam" males generally as looking to the east, adding "et du même coup face à la maison que le mort vient de quitter"! Such inconsistencies and oppositions are not uncommon within highly variable Mafa culture, and may indeed be an expression of stylistic differentiation between competing communities. In Sirak persons of both sexes buried in the seated position look westwards, as do the chief and victims of violence among the Cuvok. Hide men are lain down with the top of the head to the west, looking south; women with heads to the east, also looking south. Wula women lie in the same position and orientation; men on the other hand are seated and, I was told, face east. Gemjek men, lying on their backs, have their head to the west, the women any orientation *except* east, but chiefs to the east. The concern with east and west is thus general, but here as elsewhere its material expression is very varied, very likely too varied to be used by an archaeologist as a basis for inference to the principle (*cf.* Ucko 1969).

### Body unavailable

There are occasions when people die away from home and where distance or other factors prevent their corpse being returned. We have seen that the bodies of landless immigrants are buried on the road leading to their community of origin. Nonetheless their presence, actual or symbolic, in their home cemetery may have implications for inheritance. In such cases the relatives in the deceased's home settlement make strenuous attempts to obtain part of the body, a finger for example, or failing this may make a doll, commonly out of the wood of the grey-barked and swollen elephant's foot tree (*Adenium obesum*), and will bury the corpse substitute in a small tomb or grave.

### Reuse of tombs

Whether, as amongst the Mafa, to make an explicit statement about the continuity of the clan and the structural assimilation to its founder of successor senior males, or because of lack of space, or by mistake -since surface indications are unlikely to survive more than a generation except where tombs have stone-faced superstructures- tombs and graves are sometimes or even often, reused. Only among the Gemjek, who once again differ, does this not occur, the concern that two persons should not occupy the same tomb there being carried to the extent that a foetus near term will be surgically removed and buried separately. While it is likely that, as in the first case cited, there will be a significant relationship between successive burials in the same tomb, this is not necessarily patrilineal. In one Sirak case recorded, a daughter-in-law replaced her husband's mother in the tomb. Perhaps there are patrilineal sequences of reuse for men and affinal ones for women. Tombs are never reused until sufficient time has passed for the previous body to have been reduced to a skeleton. Treatment of the remains of former occupants differs, but the skull is generally and perhaps always given special treatment, whether being replaced in the tomb between the legs of the new corpse (Mafa), removed and hidden in a cleft in the rocks (Sirak), or sometimes even reburied separately in a pot (Cuvok). We are not far from the skull cults of the Adamawa-speaking peoples (Champion-Dumas 1989), and it is clear that skulls, pots and sometimes stones may play similar roles in ancestor cults.

### Grave goods

#### Pots on graves (Table 3)

It is very common for bowls and large sherds used to remove backdirt from the excavation to be left on the burial together with any vessel or large sherd used by the gravediggers to wash in. These have not been included in Table 3, which is perhaps most remarkable for the variety of pots that are used by different groups to signal a limited range of statuses. By no means all burials are marked by a pot. There is a strong correlation with adult status; indeed it would seem a prerequisite that the deceased has succeeded in life at least to the extent of having contributed to production of the next

generation. Beyond this the pots associated with each clearly distinguish between men and women. It should be noted that, among the Mafa, tripod pots are only used by males for cooking meat and other high protein foods and that the grease jar's primordial function is to hold the grease and crushed bone mix resulting from processing of bulls killed in the bull festival. It is thus firmly associated with the "father of the compound".

Types of pot	Mafa	Sirak	Cuvok	Hide	Mabas	Wula	Gemjek
Cook pot				W		W,f	
Flour jar		W					
Water-carrying pot							W,?f
Filter bow					W		
Eating bowl	mf	W					
Beer jug				M	M	M	M
Triped pot	M						
Grease jar	M						
Gola pot		M					
Enemy spirit		M					

Table 3. *Pots placed over burials.* Keys as for Table 2.

### Other

Wrapping of the body in cloth strips is comparable to dressing it in banknotes; to sew the corpse into the hide of a bull butchered for the occasion bespeaks substantial wealth. Otherwise there is little differentiation of the dead by the objects buried with them. Admittedly our data are incomplete and traditionally wealth was expressed rather in full granaries and stock pens than in consumer durables, but it appears that the overall concern, more elaborated among the Gemjek than others, is to provide the departed with items either of sentimental value to them or that will serve them in good stead in the land of the dead, where they will live a life that is, it would seem, perceived as being on the whole pretty similar to the one they are leaving.

The charcoal burials of the Wula and Mabas chiefs lead us, however, in a different direction. Meek (1931, vol. I) reported on burials of chiefs in charcoal-filled or part-filled shafts among the Bura (I:252) and Pabir "as a protection against termites" (I:171), the Kilba (I:187), southern Marghi with Pabir connections (I:218), some Higi/Kapsiki (I:252, 254), the Fali of Wuba (I:302) and the Sukur (I:315). The weight of the distribution lies to the west of our region (Otterbein 1967), though it may have wider historical

connections (Forkl 1985:347-51; Seignobos 1986, 1991). Seignobos suggests that there is a smelting metaphor involved here and a sub-text involving the association of the chieftainship with the blacksmiths. This may well be the case; however, according to Koji, chief of the Wula transformers and who officiated at the funeral of a Wula chief in 1986, Seignobos' (1991:261-62) description of the burial is not entirely accurate. No iron ore was alternately layered with the charcoal, for example, and this weakens the evidence for a smelting metaphor. Koji prefers a simpler explanation. The intent of the undertakers is to prevent the body of the chief from falling down in his grave and making contact with the earth. For this reason he is seated on a stool (which may perhaps be of iron as among some of the other groups listed above), propped by iron bars and held in position by charcoal. For these are the materials that are -saving stone and earth itself which cannot be used- the least subject to decay in their world. In death and even after decomposition the chief continues to preside and watch over his community and its lands<sup>1</sup>.

### CONCLUSIONS

The previous sections have demonstrated that the material aspects of disposal of the dead are intimately linked with ideas, values, attitudes and themes that repeat in many different aspects of the lives of these societies. Furthermore it is clear that fundamental features of the belief system are shared by all the societies studied. Also apparent is the great variability in the data and the fact that the seven groups choose to emphasize different aspects of this common ideological heritage in differing ways and in different dimensions of mortuary practice. Thus for example a concern regarding the release of potentially dangerous spiritual power by the spilling of human (and animal) blood, is evident among the Mafa in the special location within the cemetery of victims of violence, among the Cuvok in tombs of a special form, and among the Wula in the wearing of a medicine belt. Furthermore if, instead of looking at specific practices, we look more generally at the sorts of ways whereby different categories of person are differentiated in death, we find more in common between the groups (Table 4). Thus, although details differ, women are very commonly differentiated from men by their burial position, and strangers from those properly of the community by burial location. On a yet more general level we may cite the metaphor of battle which we believe is present at the start of funerary rites in all these groups, as neighbours and kin arrive in full battle gear. A traditional reaction to misfortune was to go off and start a small war (*cf.* Boisseau and Soula 1974 (3):616 fn.). This has been ritualized among the Hide, who, when a man dies, go and shoot arrows at a tree on the edge of their territory. A metaphor for the process whereby the deceased becomes ancestor that may be widely shared is that of gestation/germination in the uterus/granary/tomb.

<sup>1</sup> Boisseau and Soula (1974, vol. 3:629) show that the Mafa verb *ndzi* groups several concepts: to exist, to feel well, to endure, to reside and to be seated. Compare English "sitting pretty, seat of power, court is sitting..."

Category	Mafa	Sirak	(Cuvok)	Hide	Mabas	Wula	Gemjek
Welders <sup>1</sup>	-	c	p	p	p	tpf	cpf
Other m	(1)tp	tp	?	t	-	-	f
Other f	(1)tp	tp	p	tp	p	tp	cpf
Inf/small	lct	lctp	lt	ltp	ltp	ltp	-
Chief	(1)f	l	tp	l	(1)pf	pf	p
Twins (or parents)	c	c	-	-	c	-	cf
Transformers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wealthy men	c	c	c	c	?	?	?
Victims of violence	-	-	tp	-	-	c	-
smallpox	ctf	?	?	-	?	?	-
leprosy	(1)	lctf	t	(1)	-	lc	lt
"Strangers"	l	l	l	?	?	l	?

Key: W=women; m=males; f=females; l=location of burial outside cemetery; c=preparation and ritual clothing of the body; t=type of tomb/grave; p=position/orientation in tomb/grave; f= burial furnishings and goods (excluding pots on graves); - = no distinction made; ?=no data on this category. For information on pots on graves see Table 3.

Table 4. *Differentiation of categories of persons in various dimensions of mortuary practices.* Note that differences are expressed as variation from treatment of male elders. As we often do not have complete information on each category, absence of information does not necessarily mean absence of differentiation.

Such series of observations at different levels convincingly confirm the close relationships between the studied groups' ideologies and systems of belief. In the terminology introduced to African archaeology by McIntosh (1989), we find ourselves in the presence of a "symbolic reservoir" that, from admittedly weak archaeological indications (David and MacEachern 1988, Wahome 1989), began to fill in the beginning of the regional Iron Age, perhaps two thousand years ago.

Sterner (1990) has suggested that the continuing pattern of small scale population movement within the region noted by several authors may be largely responsible for the maintenance of the reservoir. Competition between groups, particularly in the last few hundred years characterized by population increase, is, on the one hand, likely to have stimulated intra-

<sup>1</sup> Women elders and females generally are commonly distinguished also by clothing worn over the skins appropriate to their gender. Thus men are often buried wearing hats. What is striking is the general lack of differentiation in the items worn specifically for burial.

Mandara stylistic differentiation (Hodder 1977, 1982:84-86). On the other hand, the generally hostile relations between Mandara montagnard societies and surrounding Islamic states exercised a countervailing pressure favouring stylistic and symbolic homogenization among Mandara peoples. Mafa expansion and Islamic warring and trading had varying effects upon the smaller groups, as is seen very clearly in the contrasting cases of the Hide and Mabas, speakers of closely related Wandala-group languages. The former, relatively secure from cavalry attack in their rocky hills, threw in their lot with the Mafa. The Mabas, in a less defensible position at least from the east, allied themselves with the Wula, retaining a qualified independence only by acting as catspaws of the Fulbe. In the process both groups took on many aspects of the material culture of their stronger neighbours, most obviously in their pottery and exterior aspects of their architecture.

More generally, it is likely to be inappropriate, when faced with data bases indicative of relatively high population densities but lacking evidence of marked social stratification, to make use of concepts of ethnicity that presuppose significant boundedness. The ethnic unit of prime interest to the archaeologist is not necessarily *the*, frequently instable and short-lived, ethnic group, but may be a larger cluster of those that relate to the same symbolic reservoir. This is the unit that, because its members will tend to process information through similar ideological lenses, appears most likely to respond to major challenges -economic, social or political- in ways that are sufficiently similar over a region for significant trends to be recognized by the archaeologist. The delimitation of the reservoir, I might add, remains a problem even in the present instance.

How does ideology structure the data in larger ways? First it seems clear that male elders use mortuary practices to support their dominant position and to represent their sectional interests as fundamental to the functioning of society. The principles of respect for age and genealogical seniority giving access to the ancestors, on which they depend to support the multifaceted system of mystification that holds the young in check, are explicit in many aspects of mortuary practice. Cemetery organization centres upon them; their tombs are often differentiated from others in ways that demonstrate the proximity of this group to the ancestral source of power, and their consequent ability to control resources. This second aspect, involving prestige display, is much more obvious if we take note of the ceremonies surrounding the burial. It is the size and duration of these wakes -which speak to the deceased's and his or her family's ability to mobilize beer, food and guests (but which leave no significant archaeological residue)- that constitute the main forum for the display and reinforcement of status, rather than the burial and gravegoods, the latter expectably skimpy in a world where a) there is little social surplus and b) there exists no "big man" institution to compete with the principle that access to land, the prime resource, depends on clan affiliation and seniority. It is noteworthy also that chiefs are in death as in life very little differentiated from other elders, except in the western part of the region where the Wula and Mabas have, in

spite of their small size, yet come under the influence of and been allied to more complex societies, including para-Islamic states such as Sukur. Rites for women elders tend, perhaps especially among the Mafa, to approximate those of the men. A prime message is that the welfare of society as a whole depends upon the periodic restatement and acceptance by society at large of the traditional values that the male elders -and to a lesser extent their wives- hold in trust for the group from the ancestors whom they, for the moment, embody. Their claim is presently of course being strongly and successfully challenged by younger, modernizing Mafa, the product of the school and of world religions, who are coming more and more to control the springs of power, wealth and influence.

The denial or transmutation of contradictions is the second way identified by Giddens in which ideology operates. Here the remarkable *lack* of differentiation of the transformer caste in mortuary rites must forcibly strike any observer aware of how ubiquitous and pervasive a feature of daily life is the transformer/cultivator distinction. In death, transformers and cultivators return to the mythical brotherhood which was disturbed by the "necessity" to select one of the siblings to work iron and bury the dead (Sterner and David 1991). The socio-economic division, of which the myth is the charter, facilitates the transmission of complex technologies and helps to ensure availability of specialist services in a kin-based society. The myth, by emphasising that the original differentiation of the statuses took place in a familial situation, also implies its reversability, thus allowing what seems actually to have occurred, fine tuning of the size of the transformer caste to a level sufficient to meet the technical and other service requirements of society at large (David and Robertson in press). The reassertion of brotherhood in mortuary practice reinforces the message of the myth.

I should however point out that in Giddens' (1979:194) view, "It is normally in the interests of dominant groups if the existence of contradictions is denied or their real locus is obscured". It is by no means clear in this instance whether the cultivators or the transformers are the dominant group. The cultivators can by force compell transformers to undertake certain unpleasant tasks, but the transformers have many opportunities to manipulate their clients and a monopoly of two basic industries, iron working and pottery manufacture. It is my impression that in fact both parties believe they have the best of the deal, and that the denial of contradiction is not the imposition of one dominant group but rather an unacknowledged conspiracy between the two.

Lastly let us consider the third aspect, the naturalization of the present. As Martin's (1970) monograph on the "Matakam" (Mafa, Bulahay, Cuvok and Hide) and Müller-Kosack's (1987) thesis on the Mafa of Gousda make abundantly clear, these are societies characterized by what Douglas (1973) describes as strong grid and group, in which persons during their lifetimes proceed through a series of statuses that depend primarily upon their gender, physiological age and genealogical seniority, and in which freedom of the individual to depart from role expectations is severely constrained. Although men may become relatively rich, great warriors, diviners or priest-

chiefs, and women mothers of many living children or respected midwives, the extent of their differentiation from the public at large is not great, dependent as it is upon the individual's health and physique to a much greater extent than in Western society, where the ability to manipulate people and systems is preeminent. Thus, although achieved status is recognized in mortuary practices by the wearing of a bull's hide and horns, the location of a chief's burial or the placing of a flour pot on the tomb of a successful *genetrix*, it is the God-given categorization of basic statuses: infant versus fully human, man versus woman, elder versus other, that most clearly and regularly structures the data. The orientation of burials to cardinal points is also a form of naturalization of social distinctions. At a funeral the celebrants are reminded of the status of the deceased in the course of a powerful affect-laden ceremony, while their regular attendance -and funerals are after all among the most dramatic performances available to them- must imprint upon them the nature of that structure and a feeling for its inevitability. The pots left on the graves, or their absence, remain to be read and to remind the living of that structure.

I have shown that, in the domain of mortuary practices, ideology operates in all three of the ways identified by Giddens, and that ideological naturalization and denial of contradiction occur simultaneously. Moreover I can see no reason why this should not be a general characteristic of mortuary practices worldwide -it is certainly true, for example, of the Cambridge funerals and cemeteries analysed by Parker Pearson (1982). The main problem facing the archaeologist is, as I see it, how to determine which elements of mortuary practices are operating in which way. This is not a challenge to which I feel presently able to respond on a general plane, particularly as, since the denial of contradiction seems likely in most instances to imply a *lack* of material differentiation, its identification will require especially full contextual knowledge of other aspects of the culture. In this instance, for example, the repeated association of forges with evidence of pottery manufacture might cue the archaeologist to a correlation of the two industries. She would then seek some transformation of this association, and, not finding it, infer the likelihood of a contradiction.

For the archaeologist wishing to interpret a body of mortuary data, there are several further implications of the preceding discussion, only three of which will be touched on here. First, the theory and practice of mortuary sociology are supported by our results in that the scale and complexity of funeral rites and associated material culture are correlated with dimensions of the deceased's social persona, but it is also clear that the correlation is far from perfect and in any case only part of a larger and richer story told in ideological translation. Second, whereas it is inconceivable that mortuary practices not be imbued with ideology, it is clear that human groups relating to the same symbolic reservoir may express these so variably that only a broad contextual approach to the decipherment of symbols is likely to be productive. Third, the data adduced above demonstrate how essential it is that ethnographic and preferably ethnoarchaeological studies continue to inform hypothesis building in archaeology.

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