

TWO

FROM NOW TO THEN: ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY AND ANALOGY

The primary use of ethnographic parallels . . . is simple. It is to widen the horizons of the interpreter.¹

The Tut'n'C'mon Motel was the setting for an archaeological fantasy, reflecting on the problems of interpreting ancient funerary rites.² An archaeologist of the distant future attempts to understand our present through the excavation of an American motel; a human skeleton lies on a bed and another lies in the *en suite* bath. The author suggests that future archaeologists would interpret this strange discovery as a wonderful tomb full of artefacts with sacred and ritual significance – the lavatory seat is confidently identified as an item of ceremonial headgear. The underlying message, however, is a serious one: how can archaeologists ever hope to gain even a partially accurate understanding of past societies from the material evidence alone? To find any sort of answer, we need to ask some rather more difficult questions – what do people think about death? What do people do about it, and why? An important approach to this sort of question is the use of ethnographic descriptions of funerary rites. By looking at the diversity of the human response to death, archaeologists trying to interpret the past can attempt to slough off ethnocentric presuppositions.

From the late 1960s there was a new interest in using ethnographic accounts of mortuary practices. Peter Ucko drew on a wide variety of studies of non-western societies to demonstrate that commonly held preconceptions among prehistorians could be challenged. The presence of grave goods does not necessarily imply belief in an afterlife; the orientation of a buried corpse might not reflect ideas about the direction of the other world; cremation need not imply any belief in the existence of a soul after death; and dynastic tombs need not indicate royalty.³ Such is the extent of cultural diversity in dealing with death that any generalization is certain to founder because at least one society would be known to social anthropology to break the rules. Ucko concluded that if we want to draw a parallel between a particular practice in the present and an archaeologically recovered one, we need as numerous and varied a set of analogies as possible to check against the content and context of the archaeological material.

THE SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEATH

Ucko's cautionary tales for archaeologists on the use of ethnographic parallels were published at a time when detailed case studies of funerary practices were dramatically on the increase in social anthropology.⁴ Many of these texts took as their starting points and

themes certain classic ideas, developed by Arnold van Gennep and Robert Hertz, of liminality and transition, transformation and the importance of funerary rites in organizing the society of the living.⁵

Rites of passage

Van Gennep's universalist theory of the *rites de passage*, later elaborated by Turner and by Leach, sets out a tripartite process of transition from one social state to another. These moments of transition include events such as pregnancy, childbirth, initiation, marriage and death. The transition is effected through *preliminal* rites (rites of separation from the existing world), *liminal* or threshold rites (rites during the transitional stage), and *postliminal* rites (ceremonies of incorporation into the new world).⁶ To van Gennep's surprise, in the societies he studied the rites of separation in funeral ceremonies were few and simple in contrast to the liminal rites and especially to the rites of incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead.⁷

Hertz's work was similarly cross-cultural, derived especially from Borneo (although he never carried out any fieldwork) and also focused on the parallel transitions undergone by mourners, corpse and soul. Attempting to explain the fear that death engenders, Hertz analysed the process of double burial: in Borneo, as in many other past and present societies, the dead body undergoes more than one rite in the liminal period. He noted that death destroys the social being and strikes at society 'in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself'.⁸ '[T]he notion of death is linked with that of resurrection; exclusion is always followed by a new integration.'⁹ The journey of the soul into the land of the dead is made visible to the living by the transformation of the putrescent corpse into clean bones and the readjustment and redefinition of the community of mourners.

It has been suggested that Hertz's theory of the passage of the corpse as a homology or model of the passage of the soul might be an invariate universal, but this theory requires modification when considering certain cases; rites of double burial in Madagascar, for example, lack the emphasis on beliefs about the afterworld and the journey of the soul which are prominent aspects of secondary burial in Borneo.¹⁰ Huntington's analysis of mortuary practices among the Bara pastoralists of southern Madagascar emphasizes the progress of the double funeral as a mediation between order (associated with maleness, sterility, bone and the tomb) and vitality (associated with femaleness, fecundity, flesh and the womb), with vitality generated through funerary celebration to counter the excessive order of death: the notion of a journeying soul is absent.¹¹ Equally, Metcalf and Huntington point out that van Gennep's scheme is merely a vague truism which provides a framework of form to which the content of cultural values of each particular society must be attached to grasp the conceptual vitality of each ritual.¹²

Functionalism and after

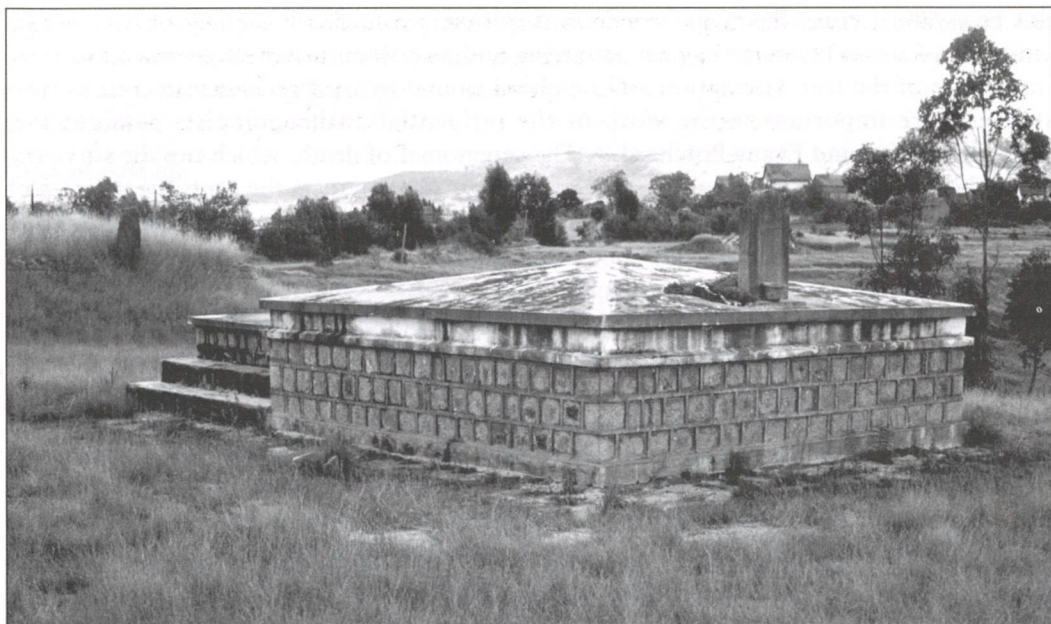
In the first half of the twentieth century, in spite of the pioneering ideas of van Gennep and Hertz, anthropologists and archaeologists often tended to use *functionalist* explanations of human societies and behaviour. Functionalism emphasizes the pre-eminence of the social whole over its individual parts, the human subjects. Using a biological metaphor, societies are viewed as bounded social organisms with needs and operating as systems. Societies adapt to their environments in ways (and with consequences) of which their members may

not be aware.¹³ Functionalist interpretations of funeral ritual saw it as affirmation of the existence of social bonds among the mourners and as a strengthener of political authority in the face of the fear, fascination and repulsion caused by the presence of a corpse. Such themes were important in the work of the influential anthropologists Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Pritchard.¹⁴ 'The ceremonial of death, which ties the survivors to the body and rivets them to the place of death . . . counteracts the centrifugal forces of fear, dismay, demoralization, and provides the most powerful means of reintegration of the group's shaken solidarity and of the re-establishment of its morale.'¹⁵

Anthropological studies of more recent times explicitly moved away from this functionalist stance and developed more sophisticated notions of the relationships between funerary ritual and social structure, in which the arena of mortuary rites formed a nexus of conflict and power struggle.¹⁶ As Goody noted for the transmission of property and the reallocation of rights and duties among the Lo Dagaa of West Africa: 'It is the funeral ceremonies that often reveal these tensions [between the haves and the have-nots] most clearly, for they cannot but enact the conflicts which exist within these intimate relationships.'¹⁷ At Lo Dagaa funerals the corpse, whether of a man or woman, was always dressed as a man of authority in the finest clothes of chiefly status, thereby testifying not to the individual's own social role and identity (often called the *social persona*) but to the well-being of the social group as a whole.¹⁸ The mode of burial of the corpse varied not only with status distinctions but also according to how the individual had conducted him/herself within a given role.¹⁹ In his analyses of the relationship between corpse and soul among the Berewan of Borneo, Metcalf notes the occasional disconnection between mortuary treatment and social rank. Berewan mausolea are impressive wooden structures standing over 10m high; they are expressive of high status and their construction provides an opportunity for a new leader to consolidate his position. Since a tomb cannot be built for anyone living, these mausolea may contain the remains not of headmen but of people who often turn out to be nobodies, unimportant relatives whose deaths provided the opportunity for a leader to ennoble himself by constructing a grand mausoleum.²⁰

Maurice Bloch's study of the relationship between kinship organization and the funerary rites of the Merina in highland Madagascar also highlighted certain contradictory tendencies between lived and idealized notions of social structure. People buried together in the communal stone tombs paradoxically probably never lived together since the reality of the kinship system of bilateral descent works against an idealized system of segmentary corporate groups which is expressed in the *famadihana* (ceremony of secondary burial), in the solidity and permanence of the collective tomb (Figure 2.1), and in the building of these tombs into the ancestral lands within Imerina.²¹

The value of such studies for archaeology is that they provide detailed contextual explorations of symbolism within funerary practices which archaeologists have learned to take into account. We have seen how funerals may be political events in which status is not simply reflected or represented but is actively constituted, and introduced the notion of funerary practices as idealized representations of social structure actualized in other everyday contexts. Other concepts can also be seen to have wide applicability, namely: pollution and purity, separation of living and dead, fertility and regeneration, rites of reversal, and conceptions of the dead as ancestors affecting the world of the living. These 'ways of thinking' are not universal in the sense that they lie outside time and space, existing everywhere, at all times; rather they need to be recognized as specific cultural logics and decoded from material remains and other evidence.



2.1 A Merina tomb in the highlands of central Madagascar. Bodies are arranged on stone benches inside the tomb and are taken out and rewrapped during secondary funerals (*famadihana*).

Pollution and purity

This binary concept was elaborated by Mary Douglas, and pollution or danger classically comes into play in those situations in which an entity is 'betwixt and between', falling between categories in our classification of the world.²² Death is, of course, the situation *par excellence* where the living are confronted by the danger of a torn social fabric and the physical contamination of a putrescent corpse. Symbolic pollution of mourners, corpse and material goods overwhelms the living and, during the liminal stage of the rites of passage of death, must be contained by rites of purification and by acts of transference which attach the pollution on to specific people and items.

In the early 1980s Judith Okely's analysis of British Gypsies' concepts of purity and boundedness was one of the anthropological studies which had significant value for the emerging *structuralist* and *post-processualist* schools of thought in archaeology. Ian Hodder and others were centring their attention on the possibilities of studying material culture through these *cognitive* approaches, moving on from earlier methods which had tried examining ethnographic records in order to draw up hypothetical rules of behaviour to which ancient societies were expected to conform.²³

Okely described Gypsy notions of symbolic boundaries which must be rigorously maintained to avoid pollution. She found a series of homologues linking inside/outside the body, inside/outside the home (the caravan or trailer), clean/unclean animals, and relations between Gypsies and Gorgios (non-Gypsies). Okely surmises that the corpse is considered polluting because boundaries have been broken; the inside has come outside and the turning inside-out of the corpse's clothes is an expression of this. The Gypsy traveller lives in opposition to many of the ways of the Gorgio, whereas the dying are brought to the Gorgio hospital and corpses must be sedentarized and pinned down by burial in a Gorgio

cemetery. When dead, the Gypsy becomes like a Gorgio in this breaching of boundaries between Gypsy and Gorgio. The act of tidying the grave is an inverted identification with Gorgio emphasis on outer appearance. Expensive wreaths and an elaborate funeral are appeasements to the dead soul, whose home and personal belongings are polluted and must be destroyed or, in recent times, disposed of to Gorgios.²⁴ As exemplified by this example from Gypsy society, the pollution surrounding death relates to broader spheres of social interaction and boundedness.

Separation of the dead from the living

The fear of the dead is a regular feature of liminal time prior to the rites of incorporation. Whether we weep for the dead because we fear them or we fear the dead because we weep for them, the dead are universally a source of fear, especially during the corpse's putrefaction.²⁵ With the passing of time, the deceased may come to be venerated, and fear and veneration may go hand in hand. Places of the dead such as tombs and graveyards may also provide a material locus for feelings of dread and fear. The separation of the corpse from the living is one means by which fear of the dead is controlled. Many ethnographic studies allude to strategies designed to sever connections with the deceased, whether by disorienting the coffin on the way to the place of burial so that the dead cannot find their way back, by burying the dead across the running water of a stream, by the provision of blades among the possessions of the dead so that they may cut their ties with the living, or by the cutting of a thread tying the mourners to the tomb. The deliberate orientation of a tomb so that it does not correspond with the orientations of dwellings (such as the location of tomb entrances so that they face away from those of houses) is widespread.²⁶ Battaglia's study of the Sabarl Islanders of the South Pacific highlights the ritualized ways of forgetting that are employed in the funerary rites, so that the deceased makes the transition to the other world while bringing least pain to the living.²⁷

Fertility and regeneration – rotting and fermenting

The themes of regeneration and growth, expressed by symbols of human and agricultural fertility, have been regularly noted since van Gennep's analysis of the symbolism of the rebirth of the god Osiris in ancient Egyptian funerals.²⁸ Victor Turner's elaboration of the concept of liminality similarly demonstrates the significance of regeneration within Ndembu funerary rituals, a point brought out in Hodder's interpretation of Sudanese Nuba burial, where graves cut in the shape of a grain storage pit have their floors covered with a scattering of grain.²⁹ Bloch and Parry have brought together a group of essays devoted to this theme of death and regeneration and it is worth quoting Bloch at some length. 'Merging birth and death in the funerary ceremonies is what creates a picture of fertility which transcends the biology of mere dirty mortality and birth. Funerary rituals act out, therefore, not only the victory over death but the victory over the physical, biological nature of man as a whole. Birth and death and often sexuality are declared to be a low illusion, located in the world of women, and true life, fertility, is therefore elsewhere. This is why funerary rituals are an occasion for fertility.'³⁰

Several authors have criticized Bloch's contention that female sexuality and reproductivity is generally associated with death and discontinuity in funerary symbolism.³¹ Dureau advises that while fertility symbolism does imply timeless social reproduction, it is based on a cyclical conception of time from womb to tomb rather than on an ideological manipulation of women by men. We should also view degenerative and

regenerative symbolism as two sides of the same coin.³² Metcalf and Huntington observe that corruption is a near universal symbol in funerary rites. They describe how the Berewan of Borneo store decomposing corpses in sealed jars in the kitchen, drawing off the liquids in a manner homologous to the preparation of wine from fermented rice.³³

Rites of reversal and 'killing'

The carrying out of actions backwards, and things being inverted or turned inside out, are common ritual elements in funerary practices. Ucko considers the case of Zulu ceremonies in which the coffin bearers walk backwards, a hole in the house wall is used instead of the door and 'yes' is used to mean 'no' and *vice versa*.³⁴ The eschatology is that of a world of the dead inverted to that of the living. Turning inside-out the clothing on the corpse is a common practice in many societies; among the Lo Dagaa the smock worn by the corpse was turned inside-out. Reversal reinforces the normality and naturalness of everyday practices by defining their opposite in ritual time. It also serves to separate the dead and their realm from the living. The 'killing' of artefacts associated with the deceased can be linked to concerns with pollution and to the means by which possessions become 'dead' so that they may travel along the same supernatural channels as the spirit.³⁵ There are many ethnographic as well as archaeological examples of this activity associated with funerary practices.³⁶

The power of the ancestors

In the 1960s grants for agricultural improvement were distributed throughout many areas of highland Madagascar. It is said that, to the surprise and concern of the agricultural advisors, many communities used the money to buy cement, either to repair old tombs or to build new ones. Thus cherished, the ancestors might then show their gratitude to the living. The beneficence of the ancestors would improve the fertility of the rice fields and rice production would increase. The role of the ancestors is very marked throughout the ethnic groups within Madagascar (Figure 2.2), and it is a phenomenon found in many other societies.³⁷ Formal worship of ancestors is a feature of many societies in East Asia.³⁸ Elsewhere, ancestors may not be worshipped as such but are treated with the respect due to elders.³⁹ Lehmann and Myers have claimed that a universal belief in the immortality of the dead exists in all cultures, while Steadman, Palmer and Tilley argue that ancestor worship is a universal aspect of religion. This contention is somewhat exaggerated since they include ghosts, spirits and ancestral totems as ancestors and define worship broadly as reverence or respect. Their work attempts to revise the conclusion of Swanson's early cross-cultural study which claimed that, in twenty-four out of the fifty societies analysed, dead ancestors do not influence the living.⁴⁰

Although we must question the merits of defining ancestor worship so loosely and also retain a scepticism of not only the sample size but also of the ethnographic basis of such knowledge, Steadman, Palmer and Tilley's study highlights the power of tradition in kinship-based societies in which 'the way of the ancestors' provides an unquestioned authority and truth. We should not, however, ignore those societies where the dead are deliberately erased from memory, so thoroughly that individuals cannot remember names beyond those of great-grandparents. One example is that of the Achuar of the Ecuadorian rainforest, where funerary rites are designed to prevent the dead spirit from stimulating the memories of the living; the rituals deliberately lead to a collective amnesia which wipes out earlier generations. The break between life and death is total, with no bridge between the beyond and the here and now, nor any destiny as an ancestor or lineage founder.⁴¹



2.2 A Betsimisaraka community in eastern Madagascar address their ancestors in front of a stone tomb. Most Malagasy are Christian but still maintain deeply held beliefs about the importance and power of the ancestors.

Observations that ancestors are active in the affairs of the living have major implications for archaeologists whose focus is on the disposal of the dead, since contemporary western notions – of death being a binary opposite to life, and of the dead as unwanted matter akin to rubbish – are likely to colour our perspectives on the past as well as on other cultures. As noted above, funerary rites often serve to turn the newly deceased, a dangerous and polluting entity, into a benign ancestral spirit. The holding of a ‘great feast’ among the Berewan entails the summoning of the sacred ancestral dead to partake in a festival at which their presence is potentially rewarding and invigorating but also dangerous; it is during this feast that the danger passes.⁴² Thus we might talk of the living dead or the powerful dead: a dead person is not simply inert and decomposing matter whence life or the soul has fled to a self-contained world of the dead such as an afterlife, but a spiritual entity which may be wrathful or benevolent, invoked to provide good things and placated with sacrificial offerings to ensure the termination of misfortune.⁴³

CROSS-CULTURAL GENERALIZATIONS AND THE NEW ARCHAEOLOGY’S SEARCH FOR MIDDLE RANGE THEORY

In the 1970s attempts were made by archaeologists to draw on ethnographic studies of mortuary practices not for making parallels with specific archaeological contexts but for exploring cross-cultural regularities and generalizations.⁴⁴ The study of funerary practices was one component of *middle range theory*, the search for invariate relationships between the static remains of the archaeological record and the dynamic behaviours of the people of the past in creating that record.⁴⁵ If particular relationships could be demonstrated to occur in all observed cases, then middle range laws could be employed to make inferences about past societies.

So, some researchers began framing law-like axioms to define and describe the relationship between mortuary behaviour and its archaeological residues; the philosophical aim of this school of thought was to construct a general theory of human social dynamics. In the 1970s this approach was seen as so innovative that it became known as the *New Archaeology* and, even twenty years later, it is often still called that; it is also sometimes referred to as *processual* archaeology. Most of the early proponents of the New Archaeology were working in the United States. Among them was Lewis Binford, whose cross-cultural study of the relationship between mortuary variability (the degree of variation in funerary rites within one society) and social complexity (the complexity of that society) was a demonstration of one such theory of the middle range.⁴⁶

Binford and mortuary variability

Binford proposed that one might expect:

- a direct correlation between the social rank of the deceased and the number of people with relationships to the deceased;
- the facets of the *social persona* ('a composite of the social identities maintained in life and recognized as appropriate for consideration at death'⁴⁷) of the deceased as recognized in funerary rituals should vary directly with the relative rank of the social position which the deceased occupied in life.⁴⁸

Binford's cross-cultural study involved some forty ethnographically documented societies recorded in an archive called the Human Relations Area Files. He knew that he could not obtain the level of detail that he really required about social status variation or socio-cultural complexity but reasoned that subsistence production broadly correlated with complexity: hunter-gatherers, shifting agriculturalists, settled agriculturalists and pastoralists were the four subsistence-based definitions of types of social group used by Binford, and he divided his sample into these broad categories.⁴⁹

Binford then listed the possible classes or dimensions of the social persona commonly recognized: age, sex, social position, conditions of death (how death occurred), location of death (where the person died), and social affiliation (membership of a clan, sodality, etc.). He found that the societies classified as settled agriculturalists more often took these dimensions into account in symbolizing the social persona of the deceased in funerary rituals. The fewest dimensional distinctions were found among pastoralists, with slightly more among hunter-gatherers and shifting agriculturalists. Binford thus concluded:

1. The recognition of each of the social persona's dimensions of age, sex, social position, etc., varied significantly between settled farmers and the rest.
2. The number of these dimensions employed also differed; hunter-gatherers tended to employ fewer dimensions than settled farmers.

Effectively, the more complex societies (sedentary farmers) seem to have more complex funerary practices – they try to represent more information about the dead person and they emphasize different bits of the dead person's identity.

Finally, Binford analysed the relationships of these social persona dimensions with particular forms of funerary treatment. He examined the types of body preparation,

treatment and disposition, grave forms, orientation and location, and grave good form and quantity which were reported for the societies in his sample.

3. The use of some of these particular funerary treatments varied with some of the social persona dimensions:
 - a) sex was distinguished by grave orientation and grave good type only;
 - b) age was distinguished by disposal of the body (grave, scaffold, river, etc.), type of grave and placing of the grave.

Summed up in more accessible language: 'who you are affects how you get buried and the separate bits that make up your identity get represented in different ways'.

Saxe and the social dimensions of mortuary practices

By the time Binford had published this work, Arthur Saxe had completed his PhD thesis on the social dimensions of mortuary practices.⁵⁰ Saxe used principles derived from role theory and from formal analysis (the study of the degree of 'redundancy' and 'entropy' in classificatory schemes). He proposed eight cross-cultural hypotheses which he tested on three societies: the Ashanti of West Africa, the Kapauku of New Guinea and the Bontoc Igorot of the Philippines. He didn't have to go to all these places – once again, the testing was done on data already collected and published by social anthropologists.

Saxe's hypotheses are an exercise in logic. I have summarized them into as simple a form as possible but, to do justice to Saxe's work, they take careful reading. The eight hypotheses are:

1. If we combine the various aspects of funerary treatment (for example, disposal above/under the ground vs. grave goods present/absent), we have a set of permutations in which the different combinations may represent different social personae. Saxe concludes that they might do but need not.
2. How social personae are decided and created is linked to the principles organizing social relations in that society. Saxe concludes that more complex societies have more dimensions (such as rank or social position) which cut across egalitarian principles of age, sex and personal achievement.
3. Lower status social personae would be marked by having fewer items than others, and conversely. Saxe finds that this is broadly the case in egalitarian societies, whereas in stratified societies it is true within each stratum or class.
4. The greater a person's status, the more likely that their most significant identities are represented at death, at the expense of their lesser identities, and conversely. Saxe finds only weak evidence for this.
5. The higher the degree of redundancy (degree of correlation) in burial attributes, the more complex and hierarchical the society, and conversely the more entropic (lack of correlation = paradigmatic) the less complex and more egalitarian the society. This hypothesis was untested.⁵¹
6. The simpler a society, the greater the likelihood of a relationship between the number of components in symbols, the number of contrast sets to define them, and the social significance of the symbols, and conversely. Saxe notes that this hypothesis needs to be refined.

7. The simpler a society, the less funerary variation there is in the treatment of deviants, and conversely. This was untested.
8. Formal disposal areas exclusively for burial of the dead (i.e., a cemetery) are maintained by corporate groups legitimizing through descent from the ancestors their rights over crucial but restricted resources, and conversely.

Given the data he was working with, there are no doubts about Saxe's scholarship. Yet there are difficulties in testing through cross-cultural surveys. Primarily, the researcher today can never be entirely certain how accurate the ethnographic records are. I can't imagine any researcher having the time or the ability to revisit every society ever described by an anthropologist. It is more than just a matter of whether the anthropologist got everything 'right' first time – there are always questions to be raised about objectivity, impartiality and understanding. Such cross-cultural surveys from written data have to be taken on trust to some extent, which leaves a rather large hole in attempts to apply the methods of experimental science to an observational science such as archaeology or anthropology.

Goldstein and Hypothesis 8

The most interesting of Saxe's hypotheses is Hypothesis 8, which was developed from Meggitt's observations in Papua New Guinea of affirmations of title to land by the living members of a group claiming links to a founding ancestor.⁵² Where land was scarce, the dead were buried in cemeteries, but elsewhere, where land was not a crucial resource, disposal practices were less formal. The hypothesis posits a functional relationship: that this particular social response is a function of the social system's interaction with ecological factors. It assumes that, while the individuals may be entirely unaware of the latent functional purpose of their actions, their social system deals with the problem of resource scarcity by developing these ties between people, ancestors and the dead.

We are fortunate that Hypothesis 8 has been re-tested, again through the use of ethnographic records. Lynne Goldstein followed it up with a study of thirty ethnographic examples.⁵³ She found that part of the hypothesis was sustainable: that the maintenance of a permanent, specialized and bounded disposal area was one means by which a corporate group, seeking to legitimize its rights over scarce resources, might ritualize this relationship. The existence of such a disposal area is likely to represent a corporate group which has rights over the use and/or control of crucial but restricted resources.⁵⁴ In other words, the absence of a formal disposal area does not necessarily inform us about social structure whereas its presence does say something about the existence of corporate groups and ancestor veneration.⁵⁵

Of all of Saxe's hypotheses, Hypothesis 8 is the one which has continued to be used and discussed. It was criticized by Ian Hodder on the basis of his ethnoarchaeological work on cemetery organization among the Nuba of the Sudan and has been recently reviewed by Ian Morris in a study of Classical Greek and Roman funerary rites, and by Christopher Carr.⁵⁶ Hypothesis 8 may take us some way towards understanding why cemeteries are constructed but it fails to help us understand when and why formal disposal areas, rather than other forms of legitimation, are employed by groups to assert title to scarce resources. Furthermore, relationships with ancestors go considerably further than simply establishing functional relationships to land, as surmised by Saxe and Goldstein.

Tainter and energy expenditure

Despite Ucko's caution about social inferences from mortuary practices, several of his examples show that wealth and/or status may be reflected in the contents, form, size or location of a tomb and he concludes that 'in the vast majority of cases known ethnographically, a culture or society is not characterized by one type of burial only, but . . . on the contrary, one society will undertake several different forms of burial and . . . these forms will often be correlated with the status of the deceased'.⁵⁷ A cross-cultural study on this theme was carried out by Joseph Tainter in an ethnographic analysis of 103 societies, to explore the relationship of social status and differential treatment of the dead.⁵⁸

Tainter found that certain funerary practices were consistently associated with social rank, namely complexity of body treatment, construction and placement of the interment facility (i.e. grave or tomb), the extent and duration of mortuary ritual, material contributions to the ritual, and human sacrifice. He devised an abstract notion of *energy expenditure* and found that the social rank of individuals correlated with the degree of energy expenditure in their mortuary rites in 90 per cent of cases. In contrast, social rank was marked by grave goods in less than 5 per cent of cases.⁵⁹

Christopher Carr's recent cross-cultural study of thirty-one non-state societies supports Tainter's findings on energy expenditure but also finds that in as many as thirteen of the thirty-one case studies (i.e. 42 per cent), differences in grave good provision are linked with differences in *vertical social position* (i.e. rank in a hierarchical social system). He also concludes that the quality of grave goods or offerings placed in the grave (but probably not their quantity) is also indicative of the status of the deceased.⁶⁰

Carr's approach is critical of Binford's sampling of societies and limited numbers of variables, as well as his assumption that subsistence mode would relate to degree of social complexity.⁶¹ Carr's most important, if obvious, conclusion is that mortuary practices are determined by a complex mix of primarily philosophical-religious and social factors and secondarily, physical and circumstantial ones. Further, social organization and social personae are often portrayed indirectly in funerary practices through the filter of beliefs and world view which themselves often affect funerary practices independently of social, physical and circumstantial courses. Beliefs determining mortuary practices and the treatment of remains are often primarily beliefs about the soul and its journey to the afterlife and beliefs about universal orders, including structural oppositions. The only factors which vary with social complexity are the expression of personal identity – which decreases with increasing complexity – and the indication of *horizontal social position* (i.e. age, sex or membership of a clan or sodality) which increases with complexity.⁶²

While Carr realizes that this and other middle range statistical generalizations do not constitute middle range theories expressing invariate relationships between social behaviour and mortuary ritual, he seems keen to develop such an approach, suggesting Hertz's theory that the fate of the body is used as a metaphor for the fate of the soul might be one such universal, a proposition that I have questioned earlier.⁶³

Criticisms of the New Archaeology

The processual approach of the New Archaeology, proposing positivist-derived universals for relationships between material remains and their social correlates, has failed to yield anything more than a few generalizations to which there are sometimes many exceptions. Tainter's energy expenditure model and the Saxe/Goldstein hypothesis are the two that

have survived though these, along with the evolutionist, cultural ecological, functionalist and materialist frameworks within which they were generated, have been criticized from various directions.⁶⁴ Within social or cultural anthropology, in the late 1970s and after, there was a move away from such functionalist and materialist outlooks. Terms such as 'simple' and 'complex' carry connotations of previous racist schemes of 'savage' and 'civilized' and have been judged to be no longer morally acceptable for distinguishing between contemporary societies.⁶⁵ A further ramification is that 'simple' societies are equated with 'egalitarian' and 'complex' with 'hierarchical', implying that hierarchical societies are at the apex of human achievement and evolution. Yet societies with 'simple' social organization and technology may have very complex cosmologies. Within archaeology, the processual concerns with universal generalization and social evolution have been challenged by new approaches which consider their views, especially of non-industrial societies, to be mechanistic, reductionist and de-humanizing.⁶⁶

The concerns of the New Archaeology, in looking for middle range rules of human behaviour, had led to a focus on what people did, to the extent of ignoring the ways of thinking which are reflexively linked to social practice. The proponents of New Archaeology's middle range theory have been looking for the wrong rules, focusing on *what* people did rather than *why* they did it.

FUNERARY PRACTICES: AGENCY, POWER AND IDEOLOGY

Many anthropological writers of recent years emphasize that funerals are political events at which the status of the deceased as well as that of the mourners is actively negotiated and re-evaluated. Geertz's analysis of the turmoil of a particular Javanese funeral provides a clear account of the way in which the ideological and political conflicts waged over the deceased were out of all proportion to the importance of the dead ten-year-old boy.⁶⁷ Metcalf and Huntington devote a substantial part of their book to the discussion of the transition of kingship during royal deaths, for example among the Shilluk kings and the Dinka politico-religious leaders of the Sudan, emphasizing how royal rituals and their funerary constructions serve in turn to build the institution of kingship.⁶⁸

The New Archaeology of the 1970s tended to see funerary practices, and the roles or social personae of the dead, as reflections of behaviour providing a record of rank and status. Archaeologists of today's *post-processual* school are more likely to doubt the clarity of that reflected image – funerals are lively, contested events where social roles are manipulated, acquired and discarded. The deceased as he/she was in life may be thoroughly misrepresented in death – the living have more to do than just express their grief and go home. Thus the material culture retrieved by archaeologists as the remains of funerary rites is not the passive 'statics' resulting from active behavioural 'dynamics' but is itself part of the active manipulation of people's perceptions, beliefs and allegiances.

As a specific realm of human activity, funerary rituals are incorporations and revelations of worlds and entities often very different from those invoked in other circumstances. In many cases they are concerned with idealized roles, spirits, communities and relationships which may refer more to the imagined past than the experienced present. As we have seen, Bloch's identification of a disjuncture between Merina social representations portrayed through funerals and tombs and the social and economic actualities of everyday life is one such case. 'The presence of the past in the present is . . . one of the components of that other system of cognition which is characteristic of ritual communication, another world which unlike that manifested in the cognitive system of everyday communication does not

directly link up with empirical experiences. It is therefore a world peopled by invisible entities. On the one hand roles and corporate groups . . . and on the other gods and ancestors, both types of manifestations fusing into each other.⁶⁹

One of the problems with Bloch's formulation is that it postulates an ideological realm of representation which is separated from the everyday experiencing of economic and political reality. Rather, we should think of human experience as developing within a myriad representations, whether they be the gender and status relationships played out in domestic activities, or the roles reconstituted in funerary ritual. Thus funerary rituals are not simply an ideological 'mask' of an everyday reality but simply one arena of representations among many.⁷⁰ In addition, human experience is not compartmentalized between the ritualized and the everyday but draws on knowledge of each to interpret and act in the world.⁷¹

Social practice and agency

Social theory that emphasizes role and social persona has been largely superseded by theories of *practice* in which roles are not pre-defined but are created through social practice.⁷² Roles should be considered as fluid and amorphous, open to manipulation in very subtle ways; institutionalized roles may constrain or enable behaviour but people's adherence to them may be variable.⁷³ Thus identities symbolized in death are the results of many different forces acting upon the mourners and on the deceased.

Whereas archaeologists have searched for generalizations and universals, anthropologists in recent years have explored variation and difference within the uniqueness of each culture. 'Much like the concept of culture, approaches to death in anthropology have undergone a process of parochialization. Parochialization has had the effect of eliminating a transcendental and universal conception of the problem.'⁷⁴ This development of what Fabian calls a 'folklore' approach to how others die has led him to infer that such studies place funerary-related behaviour at a safe distance from the core of our own society, turning it into a study of the 'other' which avoids rather than faces the 'supreme dilemma' of death.⁷⁵

While we will come back to this issue in Chapter 7, such approaches towards the particular and contingent have been important for establishing people, their beliefs and their *agency* (what people do as knowledgeable actors, the intentions behind their actions) as the subject of study, rather than the systems and structures of functionalist approaches. The usefulness of the anthropological conception of an *emic* view (the subjective perceptions and beliefs of people within a society) and an *etic* view (the objective analysis of the behaviour of those people from the outside), of which the distanced etic view is seen as the properly scientific approach, also comes to grief.

In funerary practices, as in all aspects of lived experience, thought and action form an inextricable duality which must be understood in terms of people's beliefs and agency rather than simply rationalized on our own terms from the outside. Such views are now firmly established within recent social theory.⁷⁶ Instead of sifting through the particulars of ethnographic observations to find latent functions and rationalities of which the subjects may be blissfully unaware, and which can be posited as cultural universals, we need to be aware of the quasi-universals and general themes which provide a framework for cultural variation but alone and taken from their cultural contexts tell only a small part of the story. Metcalf and Huntington summarize this relationship between the universal and particular:

Placed in the context of a particular ideological, social and economic system, rituals of death begin to make sense in a way that they cannot if we pursue elusive cultural universals . . . Caution is doubly necessary in connection with death rites because of an odd paradox. Contrary to what one might expect, conceptions of death are not only elusive, but also highly variable . . . Meanwhile, concepts of life . . . have a certain universal familiarity about them . . . the same symbols occurring in rites designed to promote fertility and the preservation of life . . . Death is more intangible.⁷⁷

ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY AND THE RECONSIDERATION OF ANALOGY

Ethnoarchaeology, a word which came into general use in the late 1960s, describes the use of field observations in the ethnographic present gathered by archaeologists addressing particular questions posed by archaeological data. Much ethnoarchaeology, nearly all of it on subjects not related to mortuary practices, developed in relation to the New Archaeology's call to develop middle range theory. The New Archaeology aimed to gather ethnographic data and frame questions within the hypothetico-deductive reasoning of a positivist philosophy of science.⁷⁸ Ethnoarchaeology was also the central method of Ian Hodder's *cognitive* school between 1979 and 1985, in the early stages of what was to become known as post-processual archaeology. Here, the aim was to understand the contextual workings of material culture symbolism within particular societies to understand how that material culture might fit into or be used to constitute ideological strategies of power and domination/resistance.

Forms of ethnographic analogy

Ethnoarchaeology relies on the use of *analogy*, the equivalence or correspondence of one thing to another. My examples throughout this chapter of funerary practices from diverse societies can be useful as analogies to the archaeologist studying an ancient culture. Such ethnographic analogies must be used with caution and archaeologists are very clear about their validity. Yellen defined four types of analogy: general, buckshot, spoiler and laboratory.⁷⁹ General analogies are limited to a few basic premises such as the observation that all human societies employ symbolism. Buckshot analogies are specific, tested hypotheses that might be developed from one specific ethnographic context and applied in a 'scatter-gun' fashion to any particular archaeological context which might fit those specific circumstances. Spoiler analogies are those specific instances when we might use an ethnographic case to dismiss an archaeological generalization or an inadequate archaeological interpretation. Finally, laboratory analogies are derived from experimental archaeology and do not require interpretation of an ethnographic 'other'.

Hodder reformulated analogies as formal, probability and relational.⁸⁰ *Formal*, or piecemeal, analogy is a basic building block of archaeological interpretation; through initial interpretation we come to recognize 'a hole with a human skeleton in it' as 'a grave' on the basis of resemblance of form or appearance. However, formal analogy is severely limited when moving beyond identification into more complex interpretations and understandings.

Probability analogies are made through the use of quasi-universal cross-cultural generalizations. Tainter's rule that social status is indicated by the degree of energy expenditure in 90 per cent of societies is an example of this. A problem with probability analogies (other than that we must hope that we will not encounter cases that fit into the other 10 per cent!) is that the reasons *why* the relationship holds are not necessarily

explicated. What matters is that the rule holds, not that its linkages can be necessarily explained or understood.

Invariant naturalistic inferences of this kind should not be considered as unassailable truth. As Alison Wylie has argued, there is no one set of standards or reference points, a 'transcendental grid', to which all hypotheses about the past can be referred.⁸¹ Instead she considers universalizing inferences as simply part of a continuum of different kinds of inference which must be applied locally according to knowledge of the context under investigation. She proposes drawing on linking principles which establish diverse and independent lines of evidence, a kind of triangulation of inferences from different directions.

The *relational* analogy is an indirect analogy between an ethnographic context and an archaeological case study, based on the structuring of social relations. We may consider a relational analogy as that which links different manifestations through a common structuring principle. Hodder's work on the notion of pollution and purity in structuring relationships between men and women shows how different material outcomes stem from the same underlying ideas in Nuba society, and in British Gypsy society.⁸² Hodder is never clear as to whether his structuring principles have cross-cultural universal validity; if so, then it is hard to see exactly how his notion of relational analogy differs from the laws of human behaviour presupposed by the probability analogy. It is better to assume that structuring principles are not universal and to work on the assumption that we require a certain level of inter-contextual analysis (Wylie's 'triangulation') in order to establish whether they are relevant for the purposes of analogy. A recent example of relational analogy interprets Stonehenge and other stone monuments of the British Neolithic as places built for the ancestors by comparison with the meanings of stone in Madagascar. The strength of the analogy lies not in the logic of the bridging argument, as with a probability analogy, but in the degree of corroboration and goodness of fit with the evidence of the archaeological case study, its ability to open up previously unforeseen avenues of study, and to reveal new insights into evidence which previously had not been understood.⁸³

Ethnoarchaeologies of death

By the 1980s it was clear that archaeologists themselves would have to gather the specific ethnographic data that they were interested in, rather than continuing to pillage anthropologists' case studies in the hope of finding a few morsels of relevant interpretation. This applied as much to the specifically death-focused contextual studies as to the Human Relations Area Files. Furthermore, the anthropologist's frozen moment was wholly inadequate for drawing comparisons with sequences of change in past societies. Towards the end of Hodder's African ethnoarchaeology he became increasingly concerned with the study of time and change, a marked departure from the notion of observing an ethnographic 'snapshot' of a static or synchronic moment in the present in order to make inferences about past societies in dynamic or diachronic perspective.⁸⁴ While many anthropologists were now becoming increasingly interested in developing historical perspectives to their studies of the present, only archaeologists were capable of using archaeology with history in their studies of contemporary societies. As Hodder's Baringo studies had shown, ethnoarchaeology also required a regional setting in which the spatial and temporal could be combined, in contrast to the standard anthropological approach of staying within one village community.⁸⁵ Good ethnoarchaeology also requires a society-wide awareness of social practices beyond those being specifically investigated.

Curiously, in contrast to Fabian's criticisms of anthropologists' evasion of tackling how we die in the west, funerary ethnoarchaeologists have concentrated their researches on British and American practices. A summary of this work is given below.

Some work by archaeologists has been done with the ethnographic 'other'.⁸⁶ The following case study of funerary practices among the Tandroy of southern Madagascar shows just how dynamic funerary ritual and architecture can be and how the correlation between social status and funerary expenditure has varied over the last two hundred years. By focusing on the development of monumentality in tomb building, the study demonstrates that the long-term time dimension is essential for ethnoarchaeological inquiry, in contrast to static ethnographic representations used in cross-cultural analyses or the brief historical sequences (fifty to a hundred years) which are occasionally addressed in social anthropological research.

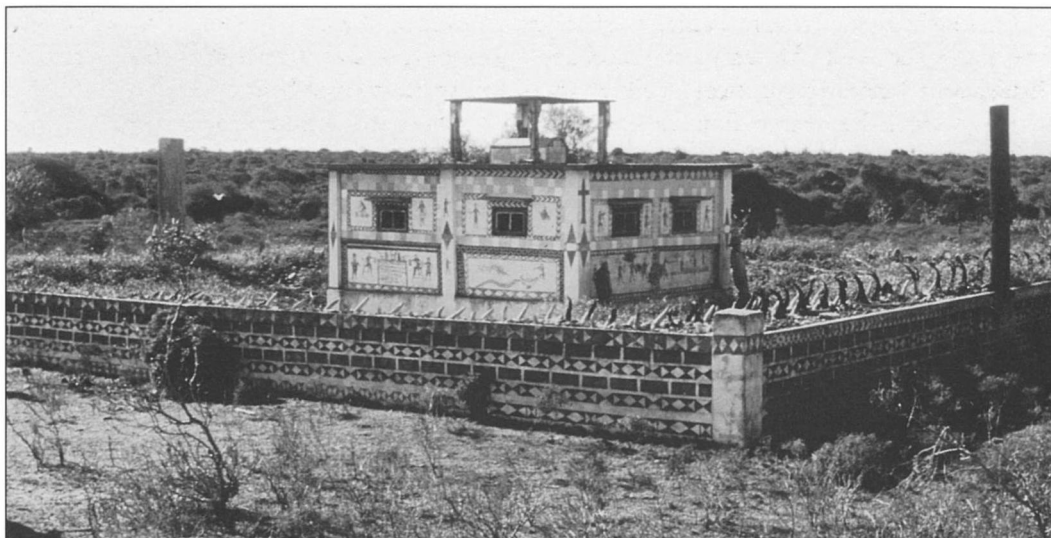
TANDROY FUNERARY PRACTICES AND THE RISE OF MONUMENTALITY

Androy, the 'land of thorns' inhabited by the Tandroy, is a region in the semi-arid south of Madagascar where pastoralism is the dominant form of subsistence in contrast to the rice cultivation of much of the rest of the island.⁸⁷ The dead are buried singly below ground, and tombs in the form of stone-walled enclosures filled in with boulders are erected over them so that the dead are not disturbed again. The bodies of dependent kin may later be inserted into the top of the tomb.⁸⁸ These sacred monuments are found throughout the region of the Tandroy and Mahafaly people. They are often huge, over 12 metres square and 1.2 metres high, with large standing stones – 'man stones' – at either end and a central monument in the centre (Figure 2.3). This monumentality is a tradition of relatively recent origin, and just one of a number of different types of burial forms used by the Tandroy in the last few centuries.⁸⁹

The Tandroy emerged as a political and ethnic entity in the sixteenth century, with clan groups ruled by leaders known as *roandria* engaged in endemic warfare and feuding. One lineage, the Zafimanara, was paramount and, despite a highly fragmentary political situation, maintained its power until the late nineteenth century. We do not know whether there were important distinctions between Zafimanara, commoner and slave burials in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries except that Zafimanara *roandria* have been traditionally laid to rest in caves, probably since the late seventeenth century. This variant style of interment is further distinguished by the placing of the body above ground. During the early eighteenth century the standard funerary rite involved burial within wooden enclosures hidden in forest.⁹⁰ This practice continues today and has connotations of poverty and low status in many areas, contrasting with stone tomb construction. During the early eighteenth century male circumcision rituals, rather than funerals, appear to have been the focus of consumption and for mediating social relationships, in contrast to today.

Tomb types and placing of graves

The use of stone in burials dates to the late eighteenth century, commencing with paired standing stones ('man stones') and with kerb stones around the grave. The earliest stone tombs were small rectangular cairns with standing stones at the east and west ends, probably beginning around 1820. By 1880 large tombs with low drystone walls were being built (Figure 2.4), while concrete and stone tombs with high walls, central tomb 'houses' and tall 'man stones' appeared in the 1930s. Finally, in recent years some tombs have been constructed with walls comprised of carefully chiselled stones with closely



2.3 A modern Tandroy tomb. As well as depicting aeroplanes and bush taxis, the structures raised in the centres of tombs often take the form of colonial administrative buildings, but the tomb is modelled not on the house but on the cattle pen.

fitting joints. The change in fashions is such that ancient or old forms may often not go out of use but continue to be constructed alongside innovative styles.

The building of stone tombs in prominent positions in the landscape is largely replacing the forest cemeteries where burials are enclosed within rectangular timber palisades. These palisade burials are similar in size to modern stone tombs but their earlier forms, in the nineteenth century, were much smaller with dimensions similar to the early stone tombs. Today the difference between palisade burial in forests and burial in a large and highly visible stone tomb is regarded as a distinction solely between rich and poor. In the sand areas of Androy, stone is today either carted in quantity from many kilometres away or the tomb is constructed with a mixture of stone and wood to simulate stone tombs. In this latter case, the minimal use of stone is in the provision of tall 'man stones' and a small cairn over the grave.

There are social conventions governing the placing of graves and tombs in relation to one other.²¹ Burials of senior individuals are always to the south of juniors while women's burials (which are not graced with 'man stones') are to the west of men's. Thus these warp and weft principles are employed in the complex spatial ordering of successive interments in relation to each other, whether the tombs are single or contain several graves. The classification of tombs is further elaborated by the division of stone tombs with multiple burials into three types: *mirampy* (where one tomb is built up against another, sharing a party wall); *miharo* (where a new grave is dug next to another tomb whose wall is subsequently demolished so that the two graves may be incorporated into a single tomb); and *mijo* (where a second burial is inserted through the fill of an existing tomb).

Tombs, cattle and houses

Tombs today are modelled on the cattle pen. Their size is comparable to the wooden-fenced rectangular cattle pens which are built traditionally in the north-east part of the village. These pens are constructed of uprights and cross-pieces and have their entrance in the south-west; in



2.4 An early Tandroy stone tomb, built for Mahasese, a king who died c. 1905–1910. This large style, first originating in about 1880, represents a metaphorical cattle pen in stone. Smaller earlier tombs, the same sizes as wooden houses, were first constructed in the earlier nineteenth century in remote areas.

houses the south-west doorway is traditionally reserved for slaves and women. This comparison between stone tombs and cattle pens is made explicit in the term ‘stone cattle pen’, one of the several words for stone tomb. The metaphor is further strengthened by the placing of cattle bucrania (the upper part of the skull with the horns attached) all over the tomb.

Cattle are the economic and symbolic driving force of Tandroy society. Their killing at an interment, the draining of their blood into the ground prior to the act of burial, and the marking-out of the grave’s edges with blood are all central aspects of funerary ritual (Figure 2.5).⁹² The exchange of cattle in relationships of obligation between wife-giver and wife-taker groups at funerals is a further indicator of their ideological significance.⁹³ Cattle are traditionally not killed at times other than funerals. The animals chosen for sacrifice must be castrates, since a bull’s potency might challenge the sacredness inherent in the tomb site. The consumption of meat from the animals sacrificed at the tomb is restricted to strangers and non-kin attending the funeral and to the funerary priest who assuages the pollution of death.

Cow’s milk also has sacred connotations. Boys and men are the milkers of cows; it is forbidden to women though it is said that they have the right to drink directly from the udder. The milk must be taken in a calabash, cow by cow, to the house and enters the house only through the south-west door. Only then may all the milk be poured together into a calabash or wooden bowl (no other material is used). Wooden vessels are similarly the only containers used in ceremonies conducted by ritual specialists. The cattle pen is the focus for specific ceremonies, protective and fertility-related. Shoes must be removed, as is required on tombs at burials, at clan gathering places, when entering the house and at ceremonies in other locations.



2.5 The stampeding and display of cattle in a village prior to and on the route of a funeral procession, and the driving of the host village's herd in front of the coffin to the place of burial, reveal the ideological importance of cattle in Tandroy culture.

The small stone tombs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are not considered to be 'stone cattle pens' nor have they been in living memory. It thus seems likely that the metaphorical link between cattle pens and tombs is a recent one. We do not know if these ancient tombs had cattle bucrania placed on them since these survive for no longer than thirty years. If there is a metaphorical model for the early stone tomb then it is most likely to have been the house, with its same proportions (always slightly longer than it is wide) and size (about 3m wide and 4m long). Also, the 'man stones' of the east and west ends of the tomb echo the roof posts at the north and south ends of the house (known as the 'skull post' and the 'head post' respectively). It may be that the early stone tombs are modelled more specifically on the collapsed house, with their low walls and end posts still standing. The house of the deceased is left to collapse and this is the condition reached by houses immediately prior to their ritual burning once the deceased is installed in the tomb. The 'man stones' of some nineteenth-century tombs are trimmed at the top in a similar way to the end posts' tenon to which the ridge pole is mortised. However, the size and shape of the standing stones, and the name 'man stone', are also very evocative of the human form. The latter seems most likely to have been a powerful symbolic association but this is not to deny the possible association with house end posts.

The origins of monumental tombs

The story of the origin and development of stone tombs involves a number of changes and transformations, notably their increase in size, the increased height of 'man stones', the

change from 'semi-detached' tombs (*mirampy*) to singular tombs, and even the probable reversal in the direction of seniority (initially descending from north to south and changing to south to north). This series of transformations must also be set in its context of kinship relationships, landscape setting, clan migration, and changes in other forms of burial, among both the Tandroy and neighbouring groups such as the Bara and Mahafaly.

Stone tombs originated when certain clans moved from the southern sand region to the rocky outcrops of central and northern Androy. From archaeological fieldwork and research on oral histories of migration, we are able to date this northward movement of the Afomarolahy clan to between about 1800 and 1880.⁹⁴ It was during this period that they settled adjacent to the rock massif of central Androy. In this rocky area we discovered a number of ancient Tandroy stone tombs. The names of some of the individuals buried in these tombs are still known, and can be found in the genealogical lists compiled for each lineage of the Afomarolahy and related clans.⁹⁵ By reckoning the date of death from these individuals' placing within the genealogies, the earliest rectangular cairn burials with 'man stones' are estimated to date to between 1860 and 1880. While there are small cairns of the early eighteenth century in northern Androy, these are different in shape and were probably constructed by Bara pastoralists who now live well to the north. Burials marked only by 'man stones' began earlier, in the eighteenth or even seventeenth century.

Those buried in the first monumental stone tombs were members of clans which were subordinate to the ruling Zafimanara, now known as the Andriamañare clan, but were ranked above other clans. The tombs were constructed in regions previously deserted and forested, and in grazing areas; these early monumental tombs were hidden deep in the forest, but away from the communal cemeteries of wooden fenced tombs. In simple terms the tombs were built because stone was now available. However, they appear at a time of considerable upheaval and many factors are probably involved. The Afomarolahy were moving into new territory, away from the constraints of traditional authority. They were encountering hostile Bara cattle herders in competition over grazing areas. They may also have been influenced by the Bara's styles of stone tomb but, as far as is known from oral histories, they did not intermarry.

The numbers of the Afomarolahy clan were expanding rapidly and, around this time, new group identities of lineage and sub-lineage may have been created partly through monument construction. The first men to be honoured with this style of burial were rich in cattle but had neither political office nor marriage connections with the royal clan. The centralized power of the royal clan waned around 1888, when Androy split into five small polities. The stone tomb tradition was not widely adopted by other clans until the twentieth century, but today these tombs are found throughout Androy. While forest burial within wooden enclosures continues, the construction of prominently placed stone tombs is an overt demonstration of wealth and status through which social and exchange relationships are mediated.

A number of quasi-universal themes emerge: that funerary monumentality is linked to moments of political uncertainty both personal and institutional, that the innovations are begun by a (relatively) high-status group, and that their example is later emulated. Yet there are many other dimensions such as the significance of the marginal grazing areas, the early tombs' associations with male burials within male domains, the relationship between the ruling clan and the Afomarolahy, and the political dynamics within the Afomarolahy clan.

THE ETHNOARCHAEOLOGY OF US: FUNERARY PRACTICES IN BRITAIN AND THE US

There is nothing more dismal than an English funeral. The unnatural quietness, the unspoken sorrow, the grotesque pomp of watching the coffin disappear behind an electric curtain in the

knowledge that it will only later be committed to the regulated gas jets of a crematorium furnace are all features which stand in stark contrast to the lively celebration of Tandroy death. In Britain the remains of the dead, whether cremated or inhumed, are marginalized and made to disappear, buried in suburban cemeteries or scattered in gardens of remembrance (Figure 2.6).⁹⁶ As Nigel Barley puts it, 'we do not just dispose of our dead, we throw them away and have no continuing relationship with them'.⁹⁷ He notes that the provision of cut flowers and the returning of ashes to nature are the only expression of decay linking to growth, whilst there is a tension in the need for ritual and, at the same time, a deep distrust of it.⁹⁸

Archaeologists turned their attention to contemporary British and American funerary rites from the early 1980s, adding to a growing literature by sociologists and historians.⁹⁹ In addition, there is a growing corpus of manuals and excavation reports on graveyards, crypts and cemeteries of the last few centuries.¹⁰⁰ The contribution of the ethnoarchaeologists among this mound of literature can be largely summed up as a focus on the material culture of death, exploring trends in the ways that it is used to separate the dead from the living, to define identities and status. As Finch puts it, 'funeral monuments can be seen to be active, operating in many simultaneous contexts and discourses'.¹⁰¹ We shall look at three themes: the rise of cremation in Britain, the mismatch between individual status and energy expenditure, and the relationship between religious creed and funerary practices.

The rise of cremation

In Britain today cremation is the normal rite; it is the destination of 72 per cent of the population, having reached what may be an upper limit after a century of rapid acceptance.¹⁰² Cremation was legalized in 1884 after a fifteen-year campaign. Opponents considered it



2.6 British crematoria are situated at the margins of society, in areas which are ambivalent in their landscape associations and meaning. Unlike churches which are often visited for aesthetic pleasure or spiritual contemplation, the interior of the architecturally undistinguished crematorium is seen only at funeral services.

irreligious, pagan and a major obstacle to the resurrection of the body on the Day of Judgement. Its vaunted benefits included greater hygiene and sanitary precautions against disease, lower costs of funerals, protection of human remains from vandalism, funerary services held indoors and prevention of premature burial.¹⁰³ The campaign for cremation took place at a time of changing attitudes to hygiene which influenced perceptions of dead bodies as spreading 'miasmas' and diseases. Additionally, tastes in funerary pomp and ostentation were already beginning to change towards moderation and simplicity by the 1870s.¹⁰⁴ For some, the beauty and simplicity of urn burial, with its classical associations, invoked an aesthetic ideal of the garden. It is also possible that the once-aborrent notion of cremation may have become more acceptable and familiar through the colonial encounter with the cremation religions of India. More recent justifications of cremation include the saving of land from becoming worthlessly cluttered by graves, its simplicity and lack of fuss and the creation of greater choice in depositing the remains. Such 'pragmatic' concerns belie complex changes in attitudes to the corpse, to the significance of the dead, and to religious beliefs.

As Sarah Tarlow points out, the rise in cremation signalled not only a shift from preserving the body (in lead coffins and using embalming techniques) to destroying it but also the individual identity of the deceased was rapidly broken down as well. The uniformity of urns, niches and plaques, the scattering of ashes into the anonymous gardens of remembrance, and commemoration by a collective monument and a line in the Book of Remembrance all contributed to the dislocation and anonymity of the dead. Cremation also accompanied and embodied a growing sense of privacy in bereavement, in which the immediate family and friends were not to be intruded upon in their grief.

Peter Jupp's study of choices between cremation and inhumation in 1980s Leicestershire identifies three main themes: religious beliefs, circumstances of death and social context. Firstly, funeral choices tend to be more elaborate, involving burial and memorialization, when the bereaved and/or the deceased were actively but traditionally religious, or perceived a religious or spiritual risk in death. Secondly, abnormal deaths (mass, sudden or premature) which are seen to be 'meaningless' and especially upsetting are similarly likely to mobilize the elaborate procedures of burial, perhaps since these deaths involve major social readjustments which are aided by 'funeral rituals deliberately designed to act as a vehicle for abnormal grief and to do justice to the lives cut short'.¹⁰⁵

Finally, as previously documented for 1970s Cambridge, Jupp demonstrates that the economic and class position of the next-of-kin is also a significant factor. The observation that cremation has spread to a large extent as a class-associated phenomenon is supported by a distinction between rural dwellers and urban/suburban populations and rural incomers.¹⁰⁶ Rural working class with long-term local roots and close family relationships are more likely to be buried than cremated. This links to other aspects of preference for burial, of which positioning in the British class system is simply one factor. The degree of rootedness within close communities may well be a significant element in choosing burial. For certain social and/or regional groups such as the travelling show families, Gypsies, immigrant Catholics and many rural communities, cremation is still largely unacceptable and will probably remain so in the foreseeable future.

Status and expenditure

In costing less, the rite of cremation is an important aspect of the degree to which families in Britain choose to express their status in the scale and elaboration of funerary practices. The Victorian way of death is well known for its lavish displays of wealth consumption

and its close grading of expenditure according to social position, prior to the advent of growing funerary simplicity as early as the mid-nineteenth century. As the 1977 Cambridge study indicated, there was almost an inversion in this relationship within a century. The Gypsies and show people were among the most ostentatious in all aspects of funerary display while the majority of those who lived in expensive residential property had simple and cheap funerals.¹⁰⁷

Aubrey Cannon's survey of nineteenth-century Cambridgeshire gravestones led him to propose that this move towards simplicity by the higher status social groups was part of a long-term cycle in display, in which the wealthy initiate a tradition of modest funerals, considered to be 'good taste', in contrast to the existing funerary elaboration. He invoked a 'law of expressive redundancy' to explain such long-term cycles in funerary display in the context of Victorian England (and north-east Iroquoia in the contact period).¹⁰⁸

The cycle is initiated by a first phase of high expenditure in funerary rites conducted by the rich – a moment of expressive elaboration. Later, as other groups or classes adopt similar lavish funerary displays, the élite adopt modest funerals to mark their difference from everyone else – expressive restraint. The reason for this, Cannon claims, is that after a while continued elaboration and expense just fail to impress. In the meantime, the lower social groups continue to emulate the now outmoded and vulgar ostentatious fashions once employed by the élite. Gradually this new practice of 'expressive restraint' spreads down the social ladder.

The concern for social status to be matched in funerary expenditure can be found in late fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sumptuary laws, in attempts to limit the emulatory expenditure of the *nouveaux riches* in competition with the traditional landed aristocratic classes, and a few decades later in the writings of the monarchist and churchman John Weever: 'sepulchres should be made according to the qualitie and degree of the person deceased, that by the Tombe every one might bee discerned of what rank hee was living.'¹⁰⁹ Finch describes how Weever proposed that the nobility should be marked by raised tombs with full-sized effigies and 'the meaner sort of gentry' by ledger slabs, thereby restoring a social order threatened by the provision of the most lavish memorials to the 'tradesman, or griping usurer'.¹¹⁰ Finch's study of seventeenth-century Norfolk church memorials, however, shows how these artefacts were actively used in the social strategies of élite families, particularly in creating the identity of a wider county élite.¹¹¹

Religious difference and community identity

One rural community in Britain where inhumation is still universal is that of the Gaelic speakers of the Outer Hebrides or Western Isles of Scotland. The southern islands of the group are predominantly Catholic while the northern are strongly Presbyterian, yet funerary practices in this century are broadly similar in both communities, in contrast to much of the rest of Scotland and Britain generally.¹¹² The graveyard is located far from the church and settlement, often close to the sea, and traditionally the coffin was carried jointly by all the male mourners from the church. On the predominantly Catholic island of Barra the funeral procession's long journey between the two, with the coffin in the middle, the men at the front and the women behind, served to emphasize the separation of the dead from the living, the segregation of the world of men from women, and the interdependence of the male community. 'With each step the dead person is farther removed from this world' so that the deceased comes to occupy a ritual status 'not as an "actor", to be sure, but as an "object".'¹¹³ The moment of physical separation comes

when the coffin is lowered into the ground and the tassels attached to the coffin – the front one previously held on the procession by the male chief mourner and the rear one by the female – are removed.¹¹⁴ While it has been traditional in other parts of Scotland for women not to make the journey to the grave, all attended the graveside and there was ‘a great profusion of meat and drink brought to the place of interment’.¹¹⁵ Vallee concludes that social status played a comparatively minor part in the ordering of social relations at funerals, and sees a structuring of solidarity and difference according to kinship, age and sex, religious affiliation and locality of residence.¹¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Some processual archaeologists have wondered whether this mismatch of social status and funerary expenditure will be found only in industrial societies and not in traditional societies where duties and obligations are defined by tradition and ritual. As Cannon’s work on the Iroquois and the above study of the Tandroy indicate, this mismatch is also an element of non-industrial societies and it is contextually and historically specific. The social and ideological factors influencing funerary practices, and those practices’ reflexive influence in return, can be shown to be important and complex. The extent to which we might expect a coherent relationship between ideology and funerary practice is far from plain. There been a tendency to treat traditional societies as if they do not have a history which includes fast-changing funerary practices, and there is also a problem of failing to appreciate the sometimes enormous impact of the colonial world on the societies in question. For example, we might envisage the establishment of a hierarchy of funerary elaboration consonant with status precisely as a result of external interference and domination.

As Cannadine has remarked, ‘the history of death is at least as complicated as the history of life’.¹¹⁷ The simple equation of practice with belief, and the existence of cross-cultural regularities or of stable and conservative rituals and traditions cannot be taken at face value. The archaeologist’s task is, as a result, made more difficult. Extrapolations and interpretations must be derived, as far as possible, from contextual study rather than assumed regularities between the observed and the imagined. Yet material culture is not simply a reflection or result of human behaviour as it was envisaged by middle range theory. Material culture may be seen as partly constituting beliefs, ideology and practices. The role of ethnoarchaeology is thus not to fill the ancient and prehistoric past with possibilities derived from other people’s present but to open up our imaginations to the extraordinary range of human approaches to death and life. As Bryony Coles says, ‘the greatest contribution of anthropology is not the identification of odd artefacts nor the provision of information about any single aspect of human activity, but the provision of a framework for human action that shows us when the past has not been satisfactorily explained’.¹¹⁸