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MBEERE ANCESTORS AND THE DOMESTICATION OF DEATH

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This article examines both traditional belief and practice regarding death and the ancestors and the transformation in the ‘ancestor complex’ resulting from sweeping changes in land tenure among the Mbeere of Kenya. Corpses were customarily exposed in the bush with little attendant ritual. The unceremonious disposal of corpses by highly mobile, weakly corporate descent groups made for a weak relationship between lineages and territories, and thus mitigated against the development of ancestral shrines as centres for sacrifice and collective observance. Since all land, including bush, is now claimed by lineages or individuals, burial effectively dissociates death from the previously unclaimed wilderness, which was the traditional abode of the shades. Since it occurs in land claimed by agnates of the deceased, burial also provides evidence supporting arguments about the ownership of disputed territory. First mandated by the colonial Government, burial has domesticated death and created more tangible connexions between a social group and a land parcel. Traditionally, shades beyond three generations corporately and capriciously afflicted individuals and communities. The shades identified as fathers and grandfathers, by contrast, acted for specific, discernible reasons in harming individual kin. The distinction between the amoral corporate action of the genealogically distant shades and the more comprehensible punishments emanating from the recently deceased has been reinforced by the recent quest for land titles under the new land tenure rules.

Many discussions of African ancestor cults, including the recent revival in the pages of Man (Callhoun 1980; Kopytoff 1981; Fortes 1981) of a debate initiated by Kopytoff (1971), address issues set in an ethnographic present without regard to the effect of fundamental social changes on customary ancestral beliefs and the structural arrangements in which they are embedded. Among the Mbeere, a Bantu people of east central Kenya, the emergence of freehold tenure and registered land titles initiated a lengthy period of adjudication of corporate claims under customary law in which ‘proof’ by lineages of their long-term occupation of land was essential for successful litigation. Yet the new system of land tenure has itself stimulated both unprecedented corporate action by previously weak corporate groups and new uses, so to speak, to which the ancestors can be put. The specific graves of lineal forebears can now be used to support the claims of their descendants to founder’s rights to particular territory. By contrast, the customary procedure of corpse exposure in the bush helped to prevent both the identification of specific ancestors with land and the creation of a symbolic link between lineage and locale. That link has now become vitally important in legitimating land claims, following political and economic transformations in the wider social order. I shall argue that Mbeere customary beliefs and practices about the disposition of the dead are epiphen-
omena of a traditionally flexible social structure with only rudimentary corporate qualities, and that structural changes stimulated by modifications in land tenure have prompted important shifts in ideas surrounding death and the ancestors.

In 1930, the Local Native Council of Embu District, at the behest of the District Commissioner, declared that District residents could no longer legally expose corpses in the wilderness. Instead, burial of the dead was required, although the customary positioning of the body could remain the same. Thus the body of a male would be placed on its right side with the head towards Mt Kenya, the presumed habitation of God, while a female corpse would be set out on its left side, also with the head towards the mountain. Although the disposal of the dead continued with little attendant ritual, graves could be marked with rocks or mounds of earth.

In the wake of alterations in mortuary practices and shifts in land tenure, a new set of symbols now expresses redefined relationships between social groups and territory. Although a relatively recent phenomenon in Mbeere, the symbolic value of the dead for communicating economic and political relationships has been closely studied in Africa and in other areas (Douglass 1969; Bloch 1971; Bloch & Parry 1982; Middleton 1982), where a common interest in property, authority, or succession are regularly at issue. In traditional Mbeere society, by contrast, attitudes and responses towards death closely approximate the highly austere practices of the hunting and gathering societies discussed by Woodburn (1982), who describes a basic indifference among these people towards using the dead to symbolise or regenerate a community. In these societies and in traditional Mbeere, where the passage of authority and property were not much at stake, mortuary ritual was relatively attenuated owing to the relative ease of social readjustment among people not tightly bound by corporate interests.

**Political organisation**

The Mbeere share much in common with their Embu and Kikuyu neighbours as political relations were essentially diffuse and non-hierarchical, except for the respect and influence normally accorded elders. Particularly important in these acausal political orders were many *ad hoc* councils of male elders which could be called upon for the resolution of civil strife or delicts between persons. Open to any man with at least one circumcised son or daughter, such councils were not standing bodies but were formed for each dispute or issue. Considerable overlap in the personnel of each assembled council was normal within a particular neighbourhood, as men noted for their influence and personal abilities at arbitration or oratory were repeatedly asked by their peers or by litigants to sit in council. Two grades of elderhood marked the male passage through the life cycle, but service on an elders’ council was not limited to men of the senior grade, unless the case required that particularly grave oaths be sworn by disputants. But whatever the level of elderhood represented by men in a particular council, that assembly existed only for the life of the issue which activated it. The elders exercised influence without definitive authority and
relied especially on artful persuasion and clever compromise to make legal settlements. Although elders could make use of potent curses and powerful oaths as leverage in re-establishing social equilibrium, their capacity for effective dispute settlement ultimately rested on the willingness of people to accept their intervention.

Since the establishment, in 1906, of colonial rule in Embu District, political relations have been transformed. The appointment of chiefs and headmen in charge of wholly artificial administrative units introduced a hierarchy of office and formal coercive sanctions which in turn brought a corresponding attenuation of the elder role in the new political system. Except for a brief period early in this century, councils have not enjoyed official recognition. Elders’ councils lost ground before the formally sanctioned authority of chiefs and headmen, despite the colonial government’s regular quest for customary precedents or values to justify official policy.

Social organisation, land tenure, and individual title

Patriliny defines membership of clans as well as of agnatic groups at lower levels. It underlies the core of each domestic group and organises descendants of the founder of a landed estate. Before the movement for land tenure change, the three or four generation lineage was the major land-holding corporation. Such shallow lineages at times formed a residential unit, thus making land-holding corporations coterminous with the agnatic core of the domestic group. Before tenurial alterations, sanctioned by national statutes in the 1960’s, land was extensively available for the mixed economy of horticulture and herding (mostly small stock) which characterised most areas of Mbeere. Men inherited land and stock according to the house-property complex, although the land was usually part of a larger lineage-controlled estate. But, owing to the availability of unexploited wilderness and to the relative ease with which hiving off could occur, corporate control of land put few constraints on lineage members. Only when a member wished to relinquish control of his portion of the estate to someone outside the lineage (in exchange for stock, for example) did the corporate group assert its right to grant permission for the transaction. This agnatically-based corporation was also the vengeance group. Similarly, the persistent sorcerer was punished summarily by his closest agnates to whom the neighbourhood gave the responsibility for ridding the community of their unregenerate kinsman and who thereby dissociated themselves completely from his evil deeds. The domestic group or shallow lineage thus represented the socially significant group in these several contexts and indeed has traditionally been the narrow field to which corporate agnatic relations have generally been confined. In addition to the shallow lineage, the Mbeere also recognise a descent group of greater depth (nyúmba), which I call a maximal lineage. In this larger group, there is an attenuated sense of obligation in the wider circle of agnates because, traditionally, there are no centripetal forces of corporate land holding and other collective rights.

Before the move towards changes in the customary system of tenure, land scarcity was never an issue and occasional litigation in councils centred only on
the boundaries of particular gardens and not on entire parcels controlled by
the shallow lineage. These parcels, called ithaka (sing. kithaka) by the Mbeere, are
composed of both the cultivated gardens of lineage members and claimed
wilderness and fallow lands. Shifting cultivation and small stock herding led to a
mobile population which did not press heavily on a constricted territory.
Instead, small groups moved freely into previously unsettled land or reclaimed
fallow areas. New cultivations could be claimed by small family groups without
constraint from more widely ramifying agnatic bonds. In this easy access to new
territory, and in the absence of competition for existing cultivations, genea-
logical reckoning was unimportant as a means of limiting access to land, which
remained a free and uncontested resource.

The momentous land tenure changes implemented in Kikuyuland in the
1950's extended into Mbeere, with some modifications, by the late 1960's. This
complex process has been described in previous articles (e.g. Brokensha &
Glazier 1972; Glazier 1976), and many of its aspects are not relevant here. Several
points, however, are relevant. The land tenure changes are part of an overall
scheme of rural development. Government is seeking to confer individual land
titles on farmers, thereby divesting extended kin groups of corporate rights in
land. In Mbeere, the shallow lineage has customarily exercised corporate
control over the transfer of land through sale and the allocation of tenancy
rights. These collective rights in land have come to be regarded as inimical to
rural development which will best proceed, in the official view, by encouraging
independent freeholders. The latter will then be able to use their title deeds as
collateral to secure agricultural loans and to undertake capital improvements
without the social encumbrance of kinsmen. The award of individual titles can
proceed only after the settlement of all outstanding land disputes, and these
disputes are to be settled according to customary law. That is, Government
requires the adjudication of contested lineage claims, after which the lineage
judged 'owner' of the land can award particular acreages of the formerly
contested land to its members. One rationale for altering the land tenure system
has, ironically, been that title deeds would greatly reduce the cost, in both time
and money, of litigation, since a registered title provides definitive proof of
ownership. Although this may be the case in the long run, the tenurial change
has itself precipitated an avalanche of land disputes. The many claims and
counterclaims reveal an almost baroque complexity, various lineages having
given virtually all their collective attention over the last decade to the assertion of
their putative rights over particular land, while staving off attempts by other
lineages to press similar suits in this zero-sum game.

Land cases were initially heard in the Mbeere court overseen by a magistrate
who followed customary law. By the early 1970's, land litigation under custom
was referred by Government to local adjudication committees made up of men
from each resident clan in the administrative area and supervised by a land
adjudication officer. In both arenas, genealogical recall figured prominently in
the arguments, since it expresses the basic rule of customary law that a man
should gain rights to land held by his patrilineal forebears. With easy mobility
and abundant arable land, localised lineages never proliferated beyond four
generations before agnatic clusters moved off to clear new land, and hence
genealogical recall had little practical importance. But the high stakes at risk in land litigation have led to very deliberate, even audacious, genealogical manipulation. Length of occupation of land is exaggerated and associations are asserted between a given territory and particular lineage forbears alleged to have lived eight, ten or, most hyperbolically, twenty-two generations ago.

Although freehold titles will eventually spell doom for the Mbeere lineage by rendering its major raison d'être superfluous, lineages over the past two decades have flourished as they anticipated land tenure change and organised their legal strategies accordingly. The manipulation of genealogies has led to an organisational expansion of land-holding groups. That is, shallow lineages belonging to the same clan have sometimes coalesced into a single group, which I term a descent coalition. The Mbeere do not distinguish between the descent coalition and the maximal lineage. Both are larger and more dispersed than the shallow lineage and represent alliances among agnatic kinsmen who have decided that their interests in gaining land under the new rules is best served by forming a large group of co-operating kinsmen which can number over one hundred. In this way, more sizeable acreages can be claimed than would be possible for a small, shallow lineage. It is essential in litigation to point out how one's group is making wide use of the disputed land, and this is best done by an extensive membership cultivating many gardens in all the lands it is claiming. Furthermore, litigation has proved expensive because of court costs and other fees, and larger groups can assess members for these essential funds. The intensive labour of numbers of people is also necessary for the demarcation of land boundaries by sisal plantings. When a particular land dispute concerns hundreds of acres, lineage leaders have decided that the territorial gains can only be achieved by enlisting agnates outside the shallow lineage. They, in turn, accept the promise that their contributions in time and money will be repaid with a registered title in the event of legal victory.

Beliefs about the ancestors

Mbeere spirits of the dead are known as ngoma and are said to resemble shadows or other visible, but insubstantial phenomena. They are also linked to whirlwinds, although most of these occasional gusts are metaphorically called the 'spirits of women' (ngoma cia aka), rather than simply 'spirits.' As forms without substance, spirits cannot be touched and, as with one's own shadow, often remain just beyond reach if one approaches them. Yet the spirits, or shades to follow Wilson's usage (1957) (which captures the Mbeere sense of ngoma), can reach out to seize people, throttling those who displease them and sometimes killing their livestock. This inconsistency conforms to general notions that in all relationships between the living and the shades the latter maintain the initiative. The shades exercise exclusive physical power which the living can only hope to stave off by right action or by supplication. The living thus react to the intrusion of the shades but never appear to activate the human/shade relationship. People do not approach the shades unless the latter have made their presence felt by causing illness or loss directly attributed to them through divination. Alterna-
tively, auguries of impending ancestral affliction may also have been detected before any actual loss, in which case the living attempt to communicate with the dead through supplication—gifts of beer or sacrificial animals—amidst appeals to the shades to withdraw their threatened havoc. Mbeere abhorrence of the shades is very much in keeping with both their distaste for any protracted discussion of death and their traditionally spare funerary ritual. Little concerned with eschatology and the nature of the shade community, the Mbeere instead think considerably more about the effects of the shades on living people.

Ancestral shades dwell in natural places beyond homesteads, cultivations, or other areas associated with human habitation or activity. These spirit abodes include any bush areas or forests, hilltops, rock depressions where water collects, or other natural pools. In addition to the generalised association of the wilderness with the shades, they sometimes reveal their specific presence to an apprehensive world of the living through their singing. In this highly marked form of speech, the shades further set themselves apart from normal human discourse. Singing, moreover, is a highly metaphorical, often riddle-like communication which heightens the sense that the shades and their intentions are not fully knowable. Although the shades avoid human settlements by day, preferring instead to remain denizens of the wild, they may emerge at night entering cultivated places, paths and crossroads, or stopping on the margins of homesteads. In all these artefacts of human presence, the singing of shades is sometimes heard, just as it can be in their wilderness haunts by anyone foolish enough to venture there at the dead of night. The sharp cleavage in Mbeere thought between domestic order and wild nature thus coincides with the traditional opposition between the proper domains of the living and the dead.

Collective singing, aside from its occurrence in neighbourhood work parties which take place by day, normally signifies celebration of the sort characteristic either of rites such as circumcision or of harvest dances during the millet or sorghum seasons. But living people experience none of the familiar joy of celebration when they hear the stillness of night disturbed by the chanting dead; people know that what brings satisfaction and delight to the shades can convey misery to the living. Shade singing, for example, may herald the arrival of a new presence in the nether world of the dead—a kind of celebration marking the birth of a new shade. But since the shade represents a spiritual incarnation of a once vital human being, the welcoming of a new shade into the shadowy wilderness domain has, as its human counterpoint, grief among the living, who have just lost one of their own. Just as the rite of circumcision celebrates the demise of youth and rebirth into adulthood with the attendant symbols of death and regeneration much in evidence, so too does actual death assume a symbolic reversibility as it marks a new rebirth into the spirit world. The latter exists in a relationship of metaphysical but inverted complementarity to the world of the living.

The living also consider the shades utterly nefarious, for although they live in communities with a seemingly conventional order—including clans, families, rites of initiation, herding—the similarity to living society is illusory. Conventional meanings are rearranged so that shade levity may be the prelude to human catastrophe. Shades, moreover, can act collectively, their various clan identities,
derived from their former presence among the living, being submerged as they attack their living kin, thus overturning accepted values about agnatic solidarity and support. The interests of the living and dead are regarded as fundamentally at odds. The human community consequently hopes but vainly to maintain an unbridged distance between itself and the destructive community of shades to whom the living do not look for succour.

As celebration often includes meat feasting, the singing of the shades may also augur an impending loss of livestock. Shades depend on the living not only to augment their own numbers but also to supply them with animals, which they herd and slaughter. The sudden death of domestic stock may be taken as evidence that the shades have passed through the home. The shades thus take what they wish of human or animal life, but the living claim no similar benefits from the spirit world except negatively, hoping that they and their herds may escape the attention of the ancestors. No claims are made, for example, that loss in the spirit world brings gain to the living. Although the Kimbeere terms for naming an infant after a deceased kinsman imply a kind of spiritual reincarnation of the dead person in the newly born, I recorded no explicit statement to the effect that the shades can actually die, amidst mourning in the community of shades, and be reborn as human infants. This perception of asymmetry is in keeping with the Mbeere emphasis on human vulnerability to the ancestors.

Since the arrival of Europeans, particularly the missionaries in the 1920’s, converts as well as those who spurn Christianity agree that shade singing is much less frequently heard. People say the shades in many Mbeere locations have migrated from their accustomed natural habitations. The missionaries, who translated ngoma as ‘devil,’ discouraged people from placating the shades and concertedly undermined belief in their efficacy. Theirs in effect was a task of exorcism. The disappearance of the shades is also associated both with the expansion of the human population into previously uncultivated areas and with formal claims to the latter which impinge on the wilderness haunts the shades have depended on. It is said, moreover, in a widely-held version of the self-fulfilling prophecy, that ritual action, whether in sacrifice for rain or in the swearing of an oath, depends on universal belief in the instrumentality of the ritual and in the mystical force which supports it; if people grow doubtful the ritual will not bring about its intended purpose, nor, in the case of shades, will their auguries be so frequent or dangerous. Yet I heard no laments about the withdrawal of the shades. As the sociological counterpart to the Mbeere view, it can be argued that affliction by specific ancestors is agnatically-based and therefore highly particular and narrow in its range. Christianity, which flourishes through the conversion of anyone regardless of social affiliation, encompasses an unbounded, universal community of suffering. Religious bonds, ranging across the particularism of lineage membership (hence the Mbeere doubts about the efficacy of custom), render the ancestors ineffective, and they are said to migrate to places where the impact of missionaries has been least significant. In these latter areas the particularism of kinship, and the vulnerability to specific shades which it spawns, has not yet diffused into wider, uncircumscribed religious allegiances.

I recorded very few instances of affliction by the shades, but it would be facile
to suggest that this represents merely the erosion of custom and the growth of Christianity. I strongly suspect, without being able to demonstrate it, that Christian proselytising and scepticism are less important than the prevalence of other local explanations for human misfortune, which is most often attributed to sorcery. Like the action of the ancestors, sorcery usually operates through mystical channels, but these nefarious actions are set in motion by living people—kin and neighbours—who are regarded as potentially much more dangerous than the dead. The Mbeere traditionally enjoyed wide scope for individual action and achievement whether through distinctions earned by service on an elders’ council or in magico-medical curing or other learned, cultivated specialities. Residential mobility, moreover, was relatively untramelled as neighbourhoods were consistently changing their multilinear composition and people established extra-agnatic local bonds through migration, council activity, and other individual transactions. Yet people were also members of groups of kin which incorporated them from birth and created constraints and countervailing pressures on individuals operating outside a purely lineage context. Fear of sorcery, then, occurs amidst diverging values about diffuse agnic solidarities and non-ascriptive purposeful relations beyond the lineage. Values about restraint and co-operation insure, moreover, that social relations are always underpinned by a constant and continuing ambivalence among the living. One should be friendly to non-kin, but not too friendly, helpful to agnates but not intrusive. No such ambivalence surrounds the relationship between the living and the dead as people feel no dependence on the shades, which are universally assailed for the suffering they induce. People are content to suspend the relationship between the living and the dead, at least as that relationship has been traditionally constituted.

In the asymmetrical relationship between people and shades, the living regard the dead as frequently arbitrary but always powerful adversaries, who coerce obedience under threat. Animal sacrifices or libations of beer are conveyed to the shades under duress; these tokens are thought of differently from the gifts exchanged for goods, services, advice or instruction—exchanges pervading human relationships but conceptually set apart from the relationship between the living and the dead. For English speakers, the term most often used to describe an offering to the shades is ‘bribe.’ Although such offerings, as mediating terms in a relationship, structurally reiterate exchanges between living people, the Mbeere rationale for placating the shades distinguishes the human/shade relationship from that between living people; it is hoped that with each material response to shade threats, the bond between the afflicted and the dead may be severed. Exchanges between the living, by contrast, reinforce established relationships or create new ones. Yet sacrifice gives symbolic recognition to the continuing connexion between living and dead in spite of its overt purpose of severing the relationship. Because shades are said to kill people and animals if their demands are not met, one would not attempt to terminate one’s relationship to the shades by deliberately neglecting them.

The suffering which the shades visit upon the living inflicts retribution on kin who have violated the wishes of the shades. The shades may also bring misfortune capriciously. When shades punish their kinsmen, they often do so to
uphold the injunctions of a curse (kiri mu) which has been violated. Frequently, a shade punishes one or more of his survivors if the deceased’s estate has not been divided according to his wishes. Other illness within the homestead may simply be interpreted as the wrath of a shade who is disturbed at what he regards as abuse and dissension within the home, especially in contravention of the wishes of the forebear before his death. In these instances, the shade acts to uphold conventionally held ideas about right conduct including peaceful familial relationships and submission to the wishes of an elder near death. The curse of an ancestor is linguistically identical to the curse which was frequently resorted to by the elders’ assembly to coerce truthful testimony and to insure acceptable comportment among disputants following a case. In council, elders cursed litigants who gave false statements and those who resorted to revenge or other forms of anti-social self-help following the ostensible settlement of a suit.

When shade affliction occurs, the most frequent response requires the pouring of beer in libations around the home to placate the angry spirit in the hope of hastening recovery. Beer can be poured over the ground from the hut where the sick person lives to the edge of the homestead where the cleared ground gives way to bush or to a path. The shade is thereby shown the way out of the homestead, away from the world of living people, to an uninhabited place in order to establish once again a clear boundary between the living and the dead. Another response to shade affliction points to a second conception of shade habitation. In this instance, beer is placed in hollow tubes around the home in order for the shade to move underground where some are also presumed to reside. There seems to be no restriction on who can approach a shade, although a father will do so on behalf of a sick child. The head of a homestead exercises no exclusive right to appease the shades.

But if punishment by a particular shade occurs for a discernible reason, shades acting in concert cause mayhem capriciously. They can accost kin or non-kin indiscriminately. Although the shades are said to live in families and clans, they are not inhibited by conventional human mores valuing agnatic loyalty. Instead, shades can simply band together causing havoc without regard to kinship relations. One’s own ancestors simply join with other shades in bringing torment. Their greatest threat lies in concerted action, and merely hearing the shades in song foreshadows some unknown misfortune which people try to avert by libation and sacrifice.

Shade affliction is thus attributable either to specific spirits or to the shades acting corporately. The few cases of specific shade affliction which I recorded pointed to fathers or grandfathers as the likely agents. I cannot argue with certainty that shade affliction has in fact declined in recent years as people unanimously contend. But the considerably greater interest in genealogically closer patrilineal kin as the source of specific suffering suggests that beyond this level agnatic kin are simply submerged in the generic category of ‘shade.’ In cases of specific misfortune befalling an individual, corporate action to placate the shade does not occur as the afflicted person, unless a child, assumes responsibility for imploring the shade to desist from causing harm. In those instances when people hear shades singing, there is little concern about the identity of specific shades. Rather, people wish to avert the collective wrath of
the shades, and they may sacrifice a goat to this end. Otherwise, drought, human or animal disease, or other catastrophes may befall the inhabitants of a neighbourhood. Unlike the sacrifice to a particular shade, this form of sacrifice is directed to the shades as a potent, corporate force, but one which is an internally undifferentiated threat to the community at large without regard to kinship relations between the living and the dead.

The consequences of burial
In the light of the increasing use of long genealogies to press land claims, one might expect that people would begin to invoke the names of more remote ancestors as the agents of specific afflictions. But such attribution of responsibility has not occurred, and the distinction between remote and recent ancestors continues without any apparent tendency towards melding. The relative weighting of evidence in land disputes explains in part the continuing conceptual separation between the two categories of forebears. ‘Modern’ evidence, such as improvements to land or securing agricultural loans prior to the reorganisation of land tenure, contributes substantially to successful case outcomes. Such recent phenomena have become matters of public record only in the last two generations and particular men are always associated with them. Critical evidence based on recent criteria for proving land ownership has thus reinforced the importance of identifying the closest forebears, who, in many cases, were among the first people buried after corpse exposure was proscribed by Government. Although burials of women and children are sometimes noted in pressing claims, lineages emphasise the specific identities of male kinsmen buried in the disputed territory.

Rituals to placate the shades never reflect corporate lineage unity at any level of segmentation. An individual sacrifices in his own interest or on behalf of his children or as a member of a larger multi-lineage community. In contrast to the Tallensi ancestor cult predicated on the relationship between particular lineages and local areas (Fortes 1945: 197), social organisation in Mbeere cannot be comprehended as a coincidence of lineage and community. Instead, lineage and locality represent independent principles of organisation. Thus the traditional abandonment of corpses in the wilderness was consistent with the effacement of lineage-locale relationships. Mbeere lineages cannot then be considered religious congregations defined either by common veneration of specific ancestors at particular structural nodes in the genealogy, or by common territorial bonds genealogically mappable along segmentary lines.

Commemorations of the dead, like genealogies and the attribution of mal-evilence to closer rather than to more remote forebears, are, of course, fundamentally social constructions. The actual material remains of a corpse may represent only an incidental feature of commemorative rites, or such rites may be enacted without the presence of any bodily remains. Among the Lugbara, for example, much attention is devoted to the various non-material aspects of the deceased—breath, spirit, and especially the soul. These manifestations of the person must be ritually dispersed and, ultimately, the soul will be transformed
into a ghost. The latter assumes membership in the lineage which can be substantially affected by ghostly action (Middleton 1982: 137–41). A similar de-emphasis on the material remains of the corpse marks funerary observance in the Spanish Basque village of Murelaga. Douglass finds that the actual grave assumes little significance in comparison to the sepulture—a rectangular space on the church floor which is associated with a particular household and is the focus of regular mourning rites (1969: 31–2).

In traditional Mbeere society, neither the material remains of the dead nor elaborate ritual concerned the bereaved. Space does not permit an examination of the flexible quality of Mbeere social organisation, but similar social patterns connected to funerary austerity have been identified by Woodburn as features of ‘immediate return’ systems. In such systems there are minimal ‘obligations or other binding commitments to specific kinsmen, affines, contractual partners or to members of bounded corporate groups, however these are recruited’ (1982: 205). Without arguing that traditional Mbeere social organisation represents a fully developed immediate return system, I find its traditional emphasis on easily formed, transactional relations and on temporary formations in the political realm highly pragmatic. With little moveable property and an abundance of land, the corporateness of shallow lineages was slight. Political succession, moreover, was never an issue owing to the absence of chiefs and the proliferation of ad hoc local elders’ councils open to any man of demonstrated arbitrating skill. In a society in which the fabric of social roles was not tightly interwoven, the death of any individual created a tear which was relatively easy to repair through prompt removal of the body and expeditious, socially circumscribed purification rites. Woodburn sums up the response to death in immediate return systems by arguing that little elaboration and ritualisation at death occurs where social adjustments ‘involve no reallocation of authority or of assets but are largely a matter of personal feelings’ (1982: 206).

The diffuse connexion between the shades and the wilderness accords with customary mortuary practices which obliterate material relationships between a disposal site and a particular individual. In the main, the deceased was taken into the bush, well away from human habitation, for scavengers such as hyenas and jackals to carry off and consume. The common goal in the disposal of the dead was prompt removal of the body from the homestead. If someone died within a hut, it had to be destroyed by fire in order to remove the pollution of death. The newly dead would then join other shades in some unknown wilderness abode as the living reaffirmed, through sacrifices and libation, the separation between living and dead whenever it was breached by death or by intrusion of the shades into the affairs of the living.

With the exception of magical techniques to ensure the safety of those disposing of bodies, very little ritual surrounded death. Subsequent commemorative acts or other periodic ritual observances were also absent, and in no sense can one speak of an ancestor cult among the Mbeere. Indeed Lambert notes that among the peoples of Central Kenya, where vagueness generally characterises conceptions about the ancestors, the ancestor complex ‘appears to reach its lowest ebb’ among the Mbeere and Embu (1950: 115, 119). Attenuated ritual is not, however, a characteristic feature of Mbeere life crisis events. Such tran-
sitions as male and female initiation and the assumption of elder status by retiring warriors were highly marked, symbolically laden ritual transformations (Glazier 1972). These, however, were constitutive rituals in the sense of creating or renewing enduring groups such as age-sets.

A special preference is expressed by men for burial on land claimed by their lineages, and such burials are now part of a fundamental reordering of the relationship between lineages and land. When discussing land claims, the Mbeere use the omnibus term *kithaka*, which includes bush land as well as gardens. Burial, whether in the bush or on the periphery of gardens, can be invoked as evidence of ownership. That is, a grave site now establishes a visible connexion between a particular territory and forebears buried within it, thereby forging new and socially valued links between the land and its claimants. Pointing to grave sites and identifying kinsmen buried therein, lineage members in litigation assert continuity in a particular line of descent and the territorial embodiment of that line. Not surprisingly, people say that deceased kin buried in the disputed land will suffer great displeasure if the land is relinquished by their descendants. No longer dissipated by carrion-eaters, the corpse is buried in territory representing what its claimants hope will be the site of their permanent residences and titled farmsteads. The earlier period witnessed shifting cultivation and the easy mobility of family groups at a time when corpse abandonment symbolised clear oppositions between home and wilderness, life and death. Burial and the emerging social usages concerning the deceased have, in effect, domesticated death, which now lends itself to the pursuit of altogether new economic interests. All uncultivated areas are now claimed, about to be titled, and conceptually articulated to homesteads, gardens, and other places increasingly subject to human design.

**Conclusion**

The Mbeere traditionally think about forebears two generations removed from the present and the more remotely deceased in rather different ways. Specific affliction, due to some immoral act or violation, emanates from a deceased father or grandfather, in much the same manner as an efficacious curse is received from living fathers, grandfathers, or other elders. As for more remote ancestors, people think about their effects on the living in very negative terms, attributing a certain caprice and arbitrariness to the undifferentiated collectivity of shades.

Kopytoff (1971) has suggested that anthropologists should regard ancestors in Africa in much the same way as elders. He asserts that the authority relationship running from elders to juniors continues after the elders die, which effectively maintains the jural relationship between generations. Kopytoff wants to talk about elders, whether they are alive or dead, and to resist differentiating elders from ancestors. Arguing that this formulation is close to African conceptions, he suggests further that the ethnocentrism of the English word ‘ancestor,’ which emphasises a break between living and dead, can be avoided. Indeed, his data from the Suku point to a marked uniformity in linguistic and conceptual
formulations about living elders and those who have died, but the Suku are probably exceptional in this respect. Although the Mbeere think about the consequences of certain activities of living elders as closely related to the effects of a specific shade on the living (here I have in mind the use of curses), the Kimbeere term *ngoma* is linguistically unrelated to common words (*mükùnì*, *mùthùrì*) for elder. In Mbeere, the key point is not simply the real conceptual distinction between ancestors and elders; rather, in terms of their punitive motivations and the capacity of living people to understand the moral pose the shades assume, the critical distinction is between the recently deceased—still alive, as it were, in memory—and the dead of four or more generations removed. The former act against particular individuals out of moral intent and conventionally agreed-on values about right conduct. Specific afflication by the recently deceased occurs through socially sanctioned curses. The temporally more distant shades act collectively and wilfully against people for reasons that are arbitrary and thus not fully comprehensible to the living.

Misfortune follows from anti-social or immoral actions prohibited by elders, who can ultimately act as punishing shades against those who have ignored their proscriptions. Living elders, as embodiments of the moral community, can also punish kin and non-kin alike through their collective curse, which visits a just doom on miscreants. The mystical power of a legitimate curse functions in much the same way as the ‘breath of men’ among the Nyakyusa, whom Wilson has explicitly compared to the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru (1959: 168). But capricious affliction by genealogically distant shades represents another matter quite distinct from the action of elders and the moral weight supporting their collective actions. Indeed, the Mbeere seem unconcerned about the identity of the shades beyond father and grandfather. The enmity of father’s or grandfather’s shade is usually comprehensible in the sense that afflication derives from particular acts which displease these spirits. But beyond one’s specific connexion to these lineal kin, relations to the dead are more categorical than structural and represent a projection of a generic amoral power of elderhood onto the spirit world. The arbitrary action of these more distant shades distinguishes them from genealogically closer spirits and certainly sets them apart from living elders whose actions are always discernible when legitimated in councils. Thus an elder who dies may potentially afflict his sons and grandsons should they flaunt his moral authority just as he might have cursed them in life, and the sufferer can understand through divination the nexus of causation between his acts and the misfortune they bring forth. But a shade’s identity would eventually be submerged in subsequent generations as he joins other shades of the shadow world for unprovoked assaults on the human community.

Under conditions of economic change, Mbeere death has come to represent a key diacritic marking a new fixity in relationships between social groups and territories and bears some similarity to the social mapping through mortuary rite and symbol which has been analysed in a number of well-documented ethnographic cases. Although much more extensive than in Mbeere, public celebrations of death emblematic of social structure occur, for example, in Murelaga. Douglass finds that mortuary ritual brings into play a more extensive range of social relationships than any other event. Every stage on which the
recently deceased played a role is once again reset for a final re-enactment of the social relationships defining his life (1969: 212). Among the Merina, an even more conclusive symbolic nexus clearly links death to critical social groups. Such connexions are manifested in the placement of the dead in family tombs, despite the fact of descent group dispersion. The descent group mausoleum represents the perpetual, solidary kin group and effects that symbolic value by merging individual identities into the enduring collective representation of the tomb (Bloch 1971: 170–1; Bloch & Parry 1982: 34). By comparison, Mbeere representations of death refract social experience in reduced form. By ‘reduced form,’ I mean that death and burial still remain relatively private, circumscribed matters. Given the very dispersed settlement pattern and the prevailing view that death ought to be handled quickly and without much discussion, an individual’s death becomes widely known only many days after burial. I never, in fact, attended a funeral, but few people ever do. Yet once the burial has been accomplished, it serves the important social and legal purposes I have outlined.

The domestication of death has reiterated the distinction between individual forebears of the last two generations and the larger spirit world, which now has little to celebrate owing to the combination of Christian influence, land tenure change, and colonial edicts about burial. As buried forebears are conceptually associated with particular pieces of land and particular lineages, these latter groups now symbolically reclaim the dead from both the wilderness (all of which is claimed) and from their ultimate place among the shades. That is, the recently dead are alive both in structural memory and, even more significantly, in historic record as men who first put specific, named lands to new uses with the help of agricultural loans and land improvements. Their burial on the land—whether bush, fallow, or garden—claimed by their lineages and the critically important evidence of their ‘modern’ uses of the land together reinforce the customary identification of specific shades among the recently deceased.

NOTES

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