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MEANING AND MATERIALISM:
THE RITUAL ECONOMY OF DEATH

Peter Metcalf

University of Virginia

Among the Berawan of central northern Borneo, expensive rites of secondary treatment of the dead have been declining in frequency in recent decades. The obvious explanation is ‘acculturation’—weakening of traditional belief and re-allocation of resources to new material needs—in effect, the explanation for exceptions to the ‘rule’ of secondary burial adopted by Robert Hertz (1907). But this catch-all explanation leads us false. The ritual significance of initial funerals remains the same, and expenditure on them continues high. The real source of the change involves newly available credit arrangements made possible by the activities of traders. Despite the impact of such economic factors in conditioning the form of death rites, however, it remains necessary to look to symbolic interpretations in order to understand the meaning of the rituals.

Many rituals, probably the great majority, are not expensive in terms of the energy or finances required to perform them. Some, such as gestures of greeting or respect, may come so close to being conditioned reflexes that it would cost more effort to hold them back than unthinkingly to execute them. At the other end of the spectrum there are grand rites and ceremonies that occupy the attentions of many people over an extended period. Such complex affairs may demand the commitment of significant material resources. When this occurs, we can be sure that the participants take into account interests that go beyond the expressive. Ritual must then come to terms with economics.

This duality of interest is neatly illustrated by the widespread phenomenon of what we may call ritual economy, the ability of a rite to telescope in scale, to expand or contract in the grandness with which it is celebrated, without any essential change in format or rationale. Perhaps the most celebrated example concerns Nuer sacrifice. The proper sacrificial animal is the ox, but oxen are too valuable to be spared in any but the gravest situations. At other times a less costly substitute will be found, a sheep or a goat or, most parsimonious of all, a cucumber of a certain species. The cucumber is treated as though it were an animal victim; it is presented and consecrated, an invocation is said over it, and it is ‘slain’ with a spear (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 202–3).

The economy of ritual often serves to explain how it is that a variety of religious observances are described by the participants as being ‘the same thing’, while appearing very different to the outside observer. Some slight sophistication in Nuer ways is necessary to perceive that the cutting of a cucumber is ritually homologous with the much more emotionally charged sacrifice of an ox. Yet what is varying in the two cases is contingent: the

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seriousness that the participants attach to the circumstances prompting the rite, their available resources at that moment and their personal whims. What remains constant is the meaning of sacrifice. 1

These thoughts are prompted by the puzzling variability of mortuary rituals in Borneo, especially where we find secondary treatment of the dead, or secondary burial as it is more commonly known. Two minimal features define secondary burial. First, the death rites fall into two parts: an initial and by the nature of things unscheduled funeral; and later, sometimes years later, a prearranged and frequently sumptuous secondary rite. Second, during the latter rites the bones of the deceased are moved from a place of temporary storage to a final resting place, with or without other processing, such as cleaning or putting in a new container. Within this general framework there is considerable variation in ritual detail from place to place, as one might expect in so ethnically diverse a place as Borneo (Stöhr 1959). But in addition, we frequently find variations in the death rites as they are observed within a single community. It may be that even the majority of people are not accorded the full rites of secondary treatment. For them an abridged ritual suffices. These alternative sequences complicate our attempts to explain what the secondary treatment rituals are all about: why are some individuals selected for special treatment? are the remainder incompletely processed, in some sense? what is the relationship between the different ritual sequences?

I have already explored some of these issues elsewhere, particularly in connexion with the ideological content of the death rites of the Berawan of central Northern Borneo (Huntington & Metcalf 1979). But I did not there address the important economic aspects of the rites. Meanwhile, there is a longstanding materialist explanation for the practice of secondary burial deriving from Wilkin (1884). Consequently, this article has two objectives: first, to relate the variety of death rites found among the Berawan to economic factors, showing how the availability of resources influences the choice of ritual sequence; second, to measure the classic, and largely symbolic, analysis of secondary treatment made by Robert Hertz (1907) against the materialist explanations suggested by the examination of economic variables.

Hertz’s handling of the problem of exceptions

Hertz dealt with the problem of non-standard rites largely by pushing it aside.

His essay has several interwoven themes, the most striking and original to do with the metaphorical relationship of body and soul. 2 It was a landmark in the study of ritual. Yet it has its flaws, reflecting perhaps the limitations of library research. His handling of exceptions to the ‘norm’ of secondary treatment is a case in point. Hertz was no doubt aware that even in communities practising secondary treatment it is frequently the case that not all corpses are so processed. But he has little to say about these exceptions. In this he no doubt reflects the sources he employed in making his study, accounts by travellers, missionaries and the like, which stress the most elaborate obsequies and barely mention humbler rites. In so far as he addresses the issue of exceptions at all, he treats it as evidence of social change: some
unstable mixture of practices resulting from devolution or acculturation. The full rites of secondary treatment are painful and inconvenient, he tells us, and therefore:

many tribes, as a result of either spontaneous evolution or foreign influence, have come to spare themselves the bother and the risks of this ceremony. Some, for this reason, have advanced the celebration feast they owe to the deceased so as to make it coincide with the immediate funeral, which thus becomes the final one. Elsewhere the feast has kept its date but only traces of the original custom of change of sepulture have survived. Thus the Alfuru of central Celebes . . . limit themselves to pulling out all the weeds from the grave. (Hertz 1960: 58).

As a general postulate, this appeal to vestiges weakens the main argument of the essay. The power of Hertz’s statement lies in his relating particular rites and beliefs to one another. But if secondary rites can be fused with initial ones, then we can find secondary burial wherever we choose to look, and all power is lost. Is a church sexton weeding a graveyard evidence of previous extended death rites? There is no need to labour the point further.

Debilitating as the passage is in implication, the example that Hertz chose is not in fact evidence for survivals. The process of acculturation among the Alfuru can be documented (Kruyt 1895). Having adopted Islam, they abandoned secondary burial. Presumably, they also abandoned the eschatology that went along with it, at least in formal professions of faith, so that their post-conversion rites and beliefs are in conformity with Hertz’s main statement. They simply provide another negative case; the loss of an interesting custom is no doubt unfortunate, but the argument is not impaired. Moreover, what has been happening in recent decades among the Berawan appears at first sight similar to what occurred among the Alfuru a century ago.

Like the Alfuru, the Berawan have been affected by conversion to a world religion. The Berawan comprise some sixteen hundred people, distributed among four longhouse communities in the lower Baram river watershed in north west Borneo (Metcalf 1976). Two of the communities are now Christian; another is divided between Christians and a local revivalist cult. Only one village has continued steadily in the old religion, preserving the institution of secondary disposal of the dead. But even in that longhouse, the full rites of secondary treatment are only rarely carried out these days. Meanwhile, material change is clearly in evidence. Many of the family apartments of the longhouse boast furnishings brought from the coastal towns, and trade store shorts are preferred to the traditional breechclout. It is easy to assume that the recent decline in frequency of the elaborate and costly rites of secondary treatment are a simple consequence of acculturation—that the acquisition of an outboard motor is now a more attractive way to expend resources than the performance of an arcane ritual.

Two features render this interpretation suspect. First, the full rites have always been reserved for a minority of individuals. Second, expenditure on funerals as such continues high.

*Frequency of secondary treatment*

Berawan rites of secondary treatment, or secondary disposal, of the dead are the noisy climax of a ritual sequence that lasts for a year or more.³ The Berawan
name for them is *nulang*, and I use it to avoid the cumbersome English phrases. The etymology of the term is significant. It is a cognate of the word for bone (*tulang*), the initial /n/ indicating a verbal form, so that *nulang* means 'to bone'. *Nulang* are the grandest and most ritually complex of Berawan festivals.

However in recent years *nulang* have become exceptional events, even in the longhouse that retains the old ways. One occurred in 1973 and another in 1975. Prior to these two occasions, no *nulang* had been carried out for over eight years. There had been splendid funerals during that time, but none had been extended to complete the full ritual sequence. The usual reasons cited by outsiders for this decreasing frequency concern a weakened belief in the traditional religion and prohibitive cost. But the 'withering away' of 'superstition' that the missionary looks for is not at the root of these changes, and traditional concepts of death and the soul have remained basically unmodified. Meanwhile, economic factors have indeed had an impact, but not in the expected fashion.

Certainly *nulang* were more common in the past. In addition to the accounts of the Berawan themselves, a census of graveyards provides material evidence. There is a considerable variety of styles of mortuary edifices (Metcalf 1977a). Some contain only one set of remains, others several. Some are clearly associated with secondary treatment, because they provide sufficient space to accommodate only the collected bones and not a corpse. Moreover, every major edifice of traditional type implies at least one *nulang*, because an extended period is required to construct and decorate it. Berawan custom does not allow work to begin on a tomb before death occurs, and therefore the corpse for which it was built must have been temporarily stored elsewhere. There are a sufficient number of these mausoleums to indicate that *nulang* were not infrequent in the half century before 1950, when religious innovation began. It is difficult to make any meaningful estimate of their frequency, but if we aggregate all four Berawan communities together the rate must have exceeded one a year.

However, it is equally certain that during the same period the majority of funerals have not included *nulang*. They have instead utilised an abridged ritual sequence, in which the funeral rites that occur immediately after death (*patai*) are made the final ones. Berawan say that both options have always been available, and again the contents of the cemeteries bear them out. Each cemetery contains only a small number of finely carved tombs, and even the oldest, which date back a century or more, contain traces of simple tombs of a type not associated with secondary treatment. It remains possible that in the remote past all deceased persons received *nulang*. Ritual schemata indicating this are found in other parts of Borneo. For example, the Ma'anyan of southern Borneo perform rites of secondary disposal on a regular basis, processing at one time all the dead accumulated in the interim (Hudson 1966: 361–98). But Berawan usage contains no precedent for such a mass *nulang*: all the evidence points to the conclusion that extended and abridged rites have coexisted indefinitely.

The problem of exceptions to the full rites therefore remains. It is not possible to dismiss them as a mere symptom of change. Instead, the two
sequences must be brought into a coherent relationship with one another, as I have done at length elsewhere. Berawan themselves insist that the two sequences are alternatives, that they are ritually 'the same thing'. We are evidently presented with an instance of that kind of ritual economy that we saw in Nuer sacrifice. In the context of our present concern with economics, this conclusion draws our attention away from the format of the rites, towards a consideration of their varying scale, regardless of format.

*Expenditure on mortuary rites*

The striking fact is that expenditure on funerals (*patai*) continues high, despite the infrequency of *nulang.* It follows that costs to not increase in direct proportion to the time taken to complete the rites. Although *nulang* are usually celebrated on a relatively grand scale, it is often the case that funeral ceremonies conducted immediately after death can grow costly enough to compete with them in splendour.

One might imagine that there is a temptation to divert the relatively large sums involved into some private acquisition such as a shotgun or outboard motor. This cannot happen because no one individual or domestic group contributes or controls all the money. All close relatives of the deceased will be expected to contribute, and they will be spread among several family apartments (*uku*) in the longhouse. Since the co-residents of an apartment share a common farm or farms, and pool the products of their labour, this means that the resources of several productive units within the community are drawn upon immediately. But the load is spread even more widely. Every family, and almost every adult person, will make some contribution, however small, to every funeral that occurs, excluding only the briefest. Funerals have a powerful integrative function for the longhouse. Consistently to fail to contribute or participate is to cut oneself off. In the case of a deceased person who has married in from some other Berawan house, the obligation extends also to members of his or her natal community.

Although the contributions are numerous, most are not large. Figures 1–3 present details of two major death rites (all sums mentioned are in Malaysian dollars). The series on the left hand side of the figures refer to a moderately expensive funeral (*patai*), and those on the right to the *nulang* held in 1973. Figure 1 shows how the value of small contributions were distributed, 'small' in this context being less than $100. On both occasions, most contributions were of less than $5, with steadily fewer in each succeeding category, and only a few in the $40 to $70 range. The effect is more marked in the case of the *nulang,* reflecting the fact that it had been planned over several months. The advance notice thus provided allowed community members to make substantial contribution in kind. Even so, over nine hundred Malaysian dollars in small contributions were raised at the *nulang,* versus six hundred and thirty at the funeral.

Figure 2 shows how the expenses of the rites were met. The *nulang* was considerably more expensive, yet the funeral still amounted to nearly three-fifths as much. The commitment of resources can best be understood in terms
Figure 1. Comparison of the costs of an important funeral (patai) and a nulang: numbers of contributors making donations of one hundred dollars or less. All sums are in Malaysian dollars.

Figure 2. Comparison of the costs of an important funeral (patai) and a nulang: share of the expenses raised from various sources. ‘A’ indicates the small contributions from the natal house of the deceased, ‘B’ from the village that he married into.

Figure 3. Comparison of the costs of an important funeral (patai) and a nulang: relationships of major contributors to the deceased.
of local wage rates, then about five dollars per day for casual labour in lumber
camps, so that the nulang cost the equivalent of about five hundred man-days
of cash labour. Moreover, this computation does not include the very
considerable non-cash contributions which are by their nature difficult to
quantify, such as food provided to guests accommodated in almost every
family apartment in the house, and labour donated for the innumerable chores
that such festivals entail.

This nulang was the most expensive death ritual to occur during 1972 and
1973. The one held in 1975 was on a more modest scale, and the cash
expenditure for it did not exceed $1,800. During the period of fieldwork there
were funerals (patai) more costly than that analysed in the figures, but none
exceeded $2,000, and there were also, of course, cheaper funerals. A stillborn
baby is buried at once, so that the funeral, if so it may be called, costs next to
nothing. The brief and simple rites performed for a child less than ten years old
might cost one to two hundred dollars, those for a teenager or adult of no
particular standing perhaps six to nine hundred dollars, and more elaborate
affairs for people of substance a thousand dollars or more. Although the most
expensive rites of all are invariably nulang, and the least expensive patai, there is
thus a considerable range of overlap in costs. If one knew only that a mortuary
rite had cost between one and two thousand dollars, it would not be possible
to predict with confidence which event it was.

Aside from the difference in total cost, figure 2 shows an overall similarity in
the manner in which the money for the two rites was raised. Despite the great
number of small contributions, in both the nulang and the funeral more than
half the costs were borne by a handful of major contributors (57 per cent. and
59 per cent. respectively). Visitors’ contribution made up only a thin slice of
the costs of the nulang, and were insignificant at the funeral. The small
contributions to the nulang are shown divided between two communities. The
dead man had married into the traditionalist house at an early age, but had
never lost his ties with his birthplace. The long preparations necessary for his
final rites had allowed time for significant support to be mobilised from his
natal house. His surviving siblings were two of the major contributors.

The relationships of major contributors to the deceased are shown in
figure 3. In both cases, the dead men themselves appear as major contributors,
and this represents their cash savings at death, augmented perhaps by the sale
of some valuable item. The most common items sold are groves of trees.
(Clothes, beads, jewellery, musical instruments, and other property intimately
associated with the dead person cannot be sold nor even given away.) For
instance, the widow of the recipient of the nulang was obliged to sell a small
plantation of rubber trees to a local trader in order to pay her contribution.

At the nulang, the largest contributions came from affinal kin, and a son by a
previous marriage. Donations from the surviving siblings of the dead man
were significant, but less than those of his affines, reflecting where the major
part of his life had been spent. In the case of the funeral, the deceased had
married the elderly widow of a Penghulu (government appointed chief). Since
the affinal kin were of high rank, they made a substantial contribution, much
of it coming from the husband of the daughter of the previous marriage. This
man had joined his wife upon marriage, as Berawan custom dictates, and after his wife’s mother’s husband’s death, he found himself the senior man of the domestic unit and thus obliged to contribute substantially. Two major contributors to the funeral were consanguineous kin, a nephew of the dead man and the newphee’s son. The poor son worked as a primary school teacher, and was always asked on these occasions since he had a regular cash income. His father had a particular attachment to the dead man, because of a shared enthusiasm for the old religion. These examples hint at the web of responsibilities and motivations that determine who the principal contributors will be. There is always the possibility that no one will choose to commit any substantial amount of money to a funeral, and then it will be held on only a small scale. In contrast to other parts of Borneo, there is no particular individual, whether spouse or sibling or child, who can be held responsible for making sure that rites are conducted on a specific scale. On the other hand, if there is a close kinsman who has been awaiting the opportunity to make a display of organisational ability, then he will set to work squeezing money out of anyone who can conceivably be construed as having an interest in the affair.

The flexibility of response is an important feature of Berawan death rituals, making them a crucial locus for status competition.

Cash collected in this fashion is spent on the myriad items required to conduct the ritual, prepare the mausoleum, and feed and entertain the great crowd of guests that defines a ‘large’ funeral. There is no doubt that the necessity for cash to meet recently created demands has increased the expense of modern mortuary rites. Thus concrete has come to be regarded as a necessity in constructing tombs, and cement is not only expensive to purchase initially, but must also be hauled upriver in longboats pushed by fuel-hungry outboard motors. Again, the modern Berawan would be ashamed not to offer his guests coffee and biscuits, and both are served several times during each night of a funeral or nulang. Coffee is drunk sweet in interior Borneo, and refined sugar is expensive. Moreover, the guests think it a fine joke to pelt each other with the costly trade store biscuits, a gesture of improvidence thoroughly appropriate to a funeral.

But if nulang have become more expensive, then so have patai also. Nulang is not simply a costly afterthought to the death rites, but is planned for from the moment of death. If a nulang is decided upon, then the patai is conducted on a very modest scale, brief and without guests. Thus the cost of the extended rites is not double that of the abridged rites, and no one person saves enough by avoiding nulang to buy even the most decrepit of outboard motors. When an important member of the community dies, the only decision is between an expensive patai held immediately, or a marginally more expensive but deferred nulang.

Moreover, despite modern demands for cement, sugar and such, the main requirement remains what it has always been: rice. By far the largest item in the budget is the cost of food and drink for the guests and all those engaged in the labour of the funeral. Rice provides the staple food eaten in bulk, where coffee and biscuits are mere luxuries. Rice also provides raw material for the main drink, fermented in the form of rice beer or distilled into a strong spirit.
Great quantities of both are drunk during the nights of the festival. Rice flour is the basis of many of the special cakes and delicacies prepared by the womenfolk, and these can be substituted for trade store biscuits. The other essentials require not cash but labour: labour to hunt for game to provide meat for the guests, to fish, to cut the timber for the death edifice, and to erect the mausoleum, to prepare and cook rice, and so on. The ability to persuade people to devote their efforts in this way, to associate the prestige of the kinsmen of the bereaved with the prestige of the whole house, is a mark of high status. Rice and labour are as essential ingredients now as they were in the pre-cash economy.

*Social status and choice of ritual sequence*

In terms of scale, the mortuary rites make a statement about the social standing of the deceased and his or her close kin. Where an emphatic claim is to be made, the events are held on a large scale; where there is less at stake, a simpler affair serves the ritual function just as well. This is the phenomenon of ritual economy. We may now return to the question of format. *Nulang* is certainly not for the poor, but neither is it the preserve of a small élite; it is an option also for people of the middling sort, and consequently how one sequence is chosen over another calls for explanation.

On each occasion that a death occurs, the particular circumstances of the case must be weighed, and decisions made about major features of ritual format. Alternatives are discussed very soon after death occurs, usually within an hour or so. In attendance are the close kin of the deceased, senior people of the community, and anyone else who feels that he or she has an interest in the matter. It will be decided whether to use a jar or coffin for storage of the body, how many days the funeral is to last, who is to be invited, and so on. But the very first decision must be between the extended and abridged sequences. Frequently there is one circumstance that weighs so heavily in that decision that it immediately tips the balance. However, what that circumstance might be is complicated by the heterogeneity of potentially relevant factors, and also by the changing force with which they have been felt in recent decades. In the interests of simplicity, I first describe the range of factors involved, including ritual efficacy, social status, scheduling and availability of resources, and then consider the impact of modernity upon them.

In strictly ritual terms, close kin are unlikely to feel any particular restraint. *Nulang* is not necessary in order to transmit the deceased to the land of the dead, nor does the promise of it avert the danger from the errant soul in the interim. As noted above, Berawan insist that the two sequences are ritually 'the same thing'. It remains true that only in *nulang* are Berawan notions of eschatology expressed in full. But the need to express those notions is not an important consideration for the major contributors to the event. From the point of view of the community, there are definite benefits to be gained from the occasional performance of *nulang* because the totality of the ancestors, from whom come many blessings, are brought into communion with the living. But only if several years go by without any performance will there develop
opinion in favour of one. For the recipient of the rites, *nulang* provides a moment of consummate glory, yet there is no suggestion that the dead who receive secondary treatment enjoy any special privilege in the land of the dead. Only if an august older person has expressed a sentimental desire to receive *nulang* will the close kin feel obliged to favour this option for ritual reasons.

In terms of social status, there is, as we have seen, no direct relationship between rank and ritual sequence. We cannot assume that the ‘best’ people receive *nulang* and the rest only a funeral. Events may turn out to the contrary. Noble families can afford *nulang*, but they are also more likely to have on hand the necessary surplus of rice, pigs, and other necessities to enable them to proceed directly with a *patai* funeral on a grand scale. If they happen also to have a family vault already prepared, and do not wish to make an individual edifice for the dead person, then there is no need of delay. High prestige death rites of the abridged kind have always occurred. In 1972 a Wakil Penghulu (assistant government chief) died after a long illness. His death was not unexpected and plans had been made to accumulate the necessary surplus. He also died at a convenient time, after the harvest, when rice stocks were at their largest and manpower could be readily diverted from other activities. Moreover, his vault lay waiting for him, having been initially constructed some years before for his brother. Under these circumstances there was no reason to delay, and no loss of prestige. This illustrates that, within certain limits, it is not social status *per se* that determines choice of ritual sequence. Instead it tends to be factors of a practical nature.

A compelling reason for selection of the extended rites is the occurrence of death at an inconvenient moment, for example during harvest. With urgent work to be done at the farms, it is next to impossible to conduct any but the meanest of funerals. Even were the close kin prepared to settle for this, pressure from senior members of the community would be exerted to bring about a *nulang*, assuming that the deceased was of some importance. Unlike death itself, *nulang* can be scheduled to fit into the season of greatest ritual activity between the end of one agricultural cycle and the beginning of the next.

When two villages are involved, extended rites are often indicated. For instance, if a person dies while visiting another Berawan community, it is more convenient to store the corpse temporarily in the graveyard of that house, and to bring the remains home later when putrefaction is completed. Again, if an individual (usually a man) has married into a longhouse other than his natal one, then there will be two sets of kin that need to be mobilised on his death, and consequently the extended rites are called for. It is often men of the more prominent families that marry in this way, so that *nulang* becomes associated with high status through this third variable.

A more important instance of the indirect association of format and hierarchy concerns the building of mausoleums. Traditionally these monuments stood up to thirty feet tall, were built with dense hardwoods and elaborately carved. Since they took many months to complete, extended rites were necessary at least for their first occupants. The construction of such tombs involved greater commitment of labour than the rituals, and constituted
communal recognition of those responsible for building them.

Perhaps the weightiest factor of all is the availability of resources, principally rice. Traditionally, it was unusual for rice stocks on hand to be sufficient for a grand funeral, unless the death occurred right after harvest. Otherwise there was no choice but to plant more farms and plan a mulang. At one Berawan longhouse, the final rites for a leader who died in 1940 were postponed year after year until 1946 because the Japanese occupation forces kept requisitioning the surplus rice that the community diligently assembled. The circumstances were exceptional, and thirty years later old people there still complained bitterly about it. But had it been a series of bad harvests that had brought about the shortfall, their response would have been the same: to postpone the death rites until a stock of rice was available.

These are the kinds of circumstances that bring about the selection of an extended mortuary sequence. Where none of them is operative, close kin generally opt for the abridged sequence because of its marginally lower cost and considerably fewer demands on time. However hectic, a funeral is over in a couple of weeks, whereas a mulang can take months to prepare. Meanwhile the ritual equivalence of the two sequences ensures that no one will be accused of impious or unfilial behaviour. Nor is this anything new.

What has tipped the balance away from mulang with increasing frequency in recent decades is a side effect of the intrusion of a cash economy, namely, the availability of credit. Many Berawan families, especially those of solid standing in the community, are known on a personal basis to shopkeepers in the bazaars, mainly Chinese with wideranging business interests. To these entrepreneurs, or their agents who trade up-river out of small boats, the Berawan sell rubber, fish and jungle produce. From them it is possible to raise cash, sometimes by the sale of rubber gardens or heirloom property such as antique brassware, but more commonly in the form of a loan against future earnings. Some of these shopkeepers are familiar with Berawan ways, and readily understand the need for a loan. Previously, when grand mortuary rites were called for, there was no alternative but for the community to accumulate rice over a period of time. Nowadays a family is able to proceed as if it had a large stock of rice on hand, by simply borrowing it from a trader.

It might seem at first glance that this would undermine one function of the rites. It is the exceptional nature of large-scale rites, with their multitude of guests, that makes them important events in the negotiation and confirmation of power relationships. Nowadays, evidently, lesser men could out of hubris commit themselves beyond what is appropriate. But this does not happen. In the first place, it is unlikely that all who would be called upon for a major contribution would be prepared to go into debt in order to make such a gesture; more importantly, the solid backing of the entire community is still essential. By failing to provide labour, or invite guests and accommodate them in their own rooms, or even themselves participate in the gatherings, the majority can very easily undercut the proceedings regardless of how much money is spent.

Availability of credit is the primary reason for the recent decline in frequency of mulang. A secondary feature working in the same direction is the
move to concrete in the construction of mausoleums. Since the second world war, only a handful of the lofty and beautiful wooden tombs have been built. Increasingly, mausoleums are chunky concrete boxes. These require a lot of labour to build the boxing and pour the concrete, but if the manpower and materials are available they can be built relatively rapidly. Consequently it is possible to complete a death edifice during the ten day maximum duration of an elaborate funeral. By contrast, the construction of a wooden tomb could not be hurried; it required the attention of skilled carpenters and carvers over several months. It is this feature of wooden tombs that explains the persistence of *mulang* in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, when some Berawan houses became wealthy, by the standards of the times, from the profits of their extensive rubber gardens. This wealth might have tipped the balance away from *mulang* at an earlier date, had the new styles of tombs and the materials to build them been available. As it was, some of the most magnificent wooden tombs date from that era.

Credit and concrete are the novel features that have made *mulang* a rarity. They represent the impact of sociological and technological innovation. But they operate in a very different manner from that envisaged in our original concept of ‘acculturation’, which masked just how much had *not* changed about Berawan ritual activity. Berawan continue to invest significant resources in death rites. Now as in the past, they have the option of doing so either within the abridged sequence or with *mulang*, at least in the traditionalist village. And what is required to bring off the festival remains the same: access to a stock of rice and the cooperation of the community.

The first effect of this economic analysis is to show the inadequacy of ‘common sense’ assumptions about culture change. The point has been made before, but is worth underlining, that acculturation in and of itself provides no explanation for the way things are. As is the case of its nineteenth-century equivalent, diffusion, specific theories must be called upon to explain what innovations are adopted and how. Perhaps because the process of acculturation seems so prosaic, we constantly talk as if its effects were immediately recognisable and its outcome certain, and they are not.

Hertz fell into this error. By citing the effects of ‘foreign influence’, he avoided dealing with the implications of exceptions to the rites of secondary treatment. This blind spot distorted his view of the rituals, so that he failed to make a place in his schema for grand but abridged rites, such as the Berawan have. This flaw is real, because it hampers our ability to apply his symbolic argument to the full range of mortuary rites found in Borneo, but a small one. Meanwhile, some writers have seen a more serious objection.

*Materialist versus symbolic explanation*

A second effect of this analysis is to demonstrate the extent to which economics controls the form that Berawan mortuary rites take, and consequently to throw doubt upon competing ideological explanations. Almost a century ago, the Dutch ethnographer Wilken argued that the lapse of time that occurs between death and secondary burial is simply a function of the necessity
to accumulate sufficient wealth (1884: 77). With its own idiosyncrasies and elaborations, the Berawan material bears him out. So what was there left for Hertz to explain?

Miles (1965) has put forward a similar argument. He provides a valuable account, one of the very few based upon modern fieldwork, of socio-economic aspects of secondary burial among the Ngaju of southern Borneo. Berawan and Ngaju are separated by hundreds of miles, and it is not surprising that there are many differences of detail in their death rites. Berawan store corpses awaiting secondary treatment in coffins or jars above ground; Ngaju simply bury them. Secondary storage is also dissimilar: the Berawan have separate containers for each set of remains within the mausoleum, whereas the Ngaju put them together in a communal bone depository. This might be taken to imply that Ngaju funerals are the occasion for the expression of great community solidarity, but this is evidently not so. In contrast to the Berawan case, the responsibility to carry out secondary rites falls on particular individuals, and is the subject of litigation (Miles 1965: 171–3). This individualisation of ritual duty may be a result of the abandonment of the traditional longhouse in favour of dispersed residence.

In the present context, it is the similarities with the Berawan case that are striking. The Ngaju equivalent of Berawan *nulang* is called *tiwah*. *Tiwah* may be celebrated on a very grand scale, or more modestly, or not at all, showing the same range of variation as the Berawan death rites. Moreover, the variation is predominantly a function of wealth, what I have called ritual economy. Miles finds Wilken’s explanation validated, and, by implication, Hertz’s redundant.

In addition Miles finds a technical fault in Hertz’s symbolic analysis. Ngaju informants told him that if sufficient resources were ready to hand *tiwah* could be performed immediately after death occurred (Miles 1965: 163, 169). This makes no sense in Hertz’s plan of things, because the soul cannot be transmitted to the land of the dead until the bones are free of putrescence. Here is a situation where the economic and symbolic explanations predict different outcomes, and the former appears supported. Can we not now dispense with the latter?

I believe not. First, let me deal with the technical point. *Tiwah*, we are told, may be performed immediately after death, in ideal circumstances. But what does such a *tiwah* comprise? If secondary treatment in the Ngaju manner were applied to a corpse only recently buried, it would involve digging up an only partially decomposed body. Even were this tolerable, how could such a corpse be put into the communal depositaries, which are boxes or jars designed to receive only bone fragments? Miles concedes that *tiwah* does not necessarily involve secondary treatment of the corpse; sometimes the participants content themselves with planting a pole over the grave as a memorial (Miles 1965: 163). Miles’s error is terminological. The Berawan term *nulang* genuinely refers to ritual format: secondary treatment is implied etymologically and required ritually. This is not true of the Ngaju term *tiwah*, which would be more accurately glossed as ‘festival of the dead’. It refers to scale. Hooykaas (1965: 388) notes that the Balinese term *tiwa-tiwa* is cognate with Ngaju
tiwah, and glosses both simply as ‘mortuary ritual’ without any implication of secondary burial. When tiwah is performed immediately after death it is simply the equivalent of Berawan abridged rites celebrated on a grand scale.

As to the charge of redundancy, this impression is also created by collapsing variables of format and scale. Two minimal features define secondary burial, and economics can only provide explanations for one of them. Wilken offers a credible explanation for why large-scale funerary rituals might be delayed, and hence a reason for the two phase nature of the rites. Death cannot be conveniently scheduled, nulang and tiwah can. But the same argument applies to any of a whole host of memorial ceremonies for the dead, some individual, some collective, some calendrical, some not, found in different parts of the world. For example, the festival of the dead (gawai hantu) of the Iban of western Borneo shares these features with tiwah: it is expensive, irregular and planned over a considerable period. But it is not a rite of secondary treatment. What most distinguishes nulang and similar rites is that they involve manipulation of the remains of the deceased, including moving them from a place of temporary storage to some final resting place. There is nothing in the economics of the rites that explains this feature. Innumerable ritual formats could be devised that would allow the expenditure of resources on a grand scale. The question is: why this one?

This is, in the end, the most interesting question about the secondary burial rites of Borneo, and it is the one that Hertz answers. Even if he failed to take account of grand but abridged rites, Hertz was aware of the variability of scale in the mortuary rituals of Borneo, and what underlay that variability. He points out that the death of a chief calls forth a much greater response from the community than that of a person of lesser status. This is explicitly a socio-economic argument, its conclusion relatively unexciting. The more stimulating aspect of Hertz’s discussion is the symbolic one, because it preserves and illuminates the peculiarity of Bornean practices. Moreover, it does not merely explain the gross features of the death rites (the double funeral, the manipulation of the bones) but also the details of a long ritual cycle. In the Berawan case, for instance, the mourning usages visited upon a widow, the practice of offering food to the corpse, the songs sung at the nulang, and much else besides, can all be clearly understood by grasping the symbolic identifications that underlie the whole cycle and give it coherence (Metcalf & Huntington 1979: 68–81). None of this would be accessible to explanation in terms of economic variables. Hertz’s contribution is that he shows us how the essential values of a culture may be thrown into particular relief by its use of the corpse as symbol.

One final point. I have allowed that certain aspects of Berawan and Ngaju death rites are best explained in terms of economics, while others can only be understood by a symbolic analysis. I am consequently open to charges of eclecticism, which in the view of some anthropologists (Harris 1968: 284) implies theoretical woolly-headedness. I hope that it is clear why I think that different explanatory frameworks are necessary in order fully to understand the nature of ritual behaviour. If this is eclecticism, so be it. It seems to me merely the realisation that different questions have different answers.
NOTES

1 As Lévi-Strauss has pointed out (1862: 224), substitution is specifically a feature of sacrifice. The feature that I am pointing to is a more general one, and can be observed in other domains of ritual. To cite a trivial example: a Berawan shamanistic performance requires the preparation of a food offering including eight boiled eggs, eight being a ritually significant number. But Berawan allow their chickens to range freely around the house, and finding that many eggs may be laborious. If the hour is late, or the circumstances not serious, a single egg will do.

2 Hertz's essay concerns those societies that do not see death as instantaneous but rather as a process. The secondary burial rites of Borneo provide his key material. Hertz argues that during the 'intermediate period' between initial and final mortuary rites the individual is conceived of as neither alive nor finally dead. During this time the soul undergoes a metamorphosis similar to that of the corpse; the latter provides a model for the former. As the corpse is formless and repulsive during the process of decomposition, so the soul is homeless and malicious. Unable to enter the land of the dead, it lurks miserably on the fringes of human habitation. In its discomfort, it may inflict illness and further death upon the living. Mourning observances are designed to deflect this hostility. The 'great feast' terminates this ugly period by honouring the now dry bones of the deceased, and celebrating the admission of the soul to the company of the ancestors. Hertz allows that the secondary rites may be delayed by the need to accumulate a surplus, but he argues that the irreducible period that must elapse is the time required for the bones to become free of decaying flesh (Huntington & Metcalf 1979: 61–7).

3 Shorn of its many small familial observances, the sequence consists basically of two extended public rituals that require the co-operation of the entire longhouse community, separated by a period when the corpse is allowed to complete the process of decomposition. Immediately after death, the corpse is subjected to ritual processing, culminating in its insertion in a coffin or large jar. A funeral is held, lasting up to ten days, during which a vigil is kept over the corpse and non-kin are enjoined to make merry. After the funeral (patay), the coffin or jar is stored for many months, perhaps years, usually on a rough platform in the graveyard. When this period terminates, the now dry bones of the deceased are brought back to the longhouse for the rites of secondary treatment. Sometimes the bones are cleaned and rehoused in a finer container, and songs are sung to mark the transit of the departed soul to the radiant land of the dead. But more obviously the occasion is one of great public exuberance. Large crowds gather to feast and drink, day and night, for up to ten days. Finally, the bones of the person so honoured are taken to their place of final storage, a finely decorated mausoleum in the graveyard.

4 Luckily I was present on both occasions. Fieldwork was conducted in Borneo between December 1971 and January 1974, supported by the Foreign Area Fellowship Program, the National Science Foundation, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation. I was also able to make a brief return visit in May, 1975, in order to see the second nulang, under the auspices of the Committee on Research and Exploration, National Geographic Society. I thank all these organisations, and the Sarawak Museum which sponsored the work.

5 (Metcalf 1977b; Metcalf & Huntington 1979: 68–80). Briefly, I argue that an identical set of symbolic representations, revolving around the metaphorical relationship of body and soul, are expressed in both the abridged and full sequence. But they are not expressed with equal fullness, and that is why the rites of secondary treatment are an honour. However, the fate of the soul is similar in either case. Even in the abridged rites, the soul does finally enter the land of the dead, although that event goes unmarked by ceremony. Nulang is confirmatory in nature and not instrumental.

6 My remarks mainly concern the longhouse that has continued in the traditional religion. But I have some evidence to show that even in the Christian communities, funerals (without nulang) are still occasionally celebrated in grand style.

7 A further category of contributions is not included in fig. 1, those from 'visitors', non-Berawan who attended simply as sightseers. Many came to the nulang, mostly Iban from nearby houses. Their contributions were numerous but very small—in many cases only 25¢. Their main interest was in gambling, cockfighting and card games. Partly to discourage these activities, cockfighting winnings were 'taxed' 10 per cent., and cash raised in this way is included in the visitors' contribution.