

Chapter 9: 'Crying the Death' Yamba Death Rituals

The Story of *muku-shashaŋ*

I would like to begin this Chapter with a story, told to me by my informant Pa Monday Kongnjo of Gom. This story does not explain the origin of death but rather how, for a time, death was overcome by artful deception and human ingenuity, an art only to be lost again by human avarice and greed.

A forebear went into the palm bush to cut palm nuts. As he was up a tree cutting a bunch of nuts he heard some noise. He looked down and saw a hunter with a strange hunting dog approaching. The 'dog' was a ground squirrel by the name of *muku-shashaŋ*. The squirrel ran to this side and that in search of animals. The man on the palm tree continued to cut the bunch of nuts and it fell to the ground at the very moment that the squirrel was passing the tree. The heavy bunch fell right on top of the squirrel and killed it. The hunter cried out and picked up the dead animal. Then he searched the bush and cut seven leaves. He pressed the leaves in his hand until some liquid oozed out. This he let drop into the mouth and the anus of the squirrel. Presently the squirrel began to kick its legs and breathe. It opened its eyes and was completely restored. The hunter put it down and they continued to hunt. Soon they were out of sight. Now the man on the palm tree hurried down. Having carefully marked the spots where the hunter cut the leaves, he soon found the seven plants and cut one specimen of each. Then he went back to his house.

Not long afterwards, a young girl died. When the man heard the wailing and shouting he ran to the bush to cut the seven leaves. He went straight to the death compound and told the people to be quiet. Taking the dead girl aside, he squeezed the leaves and let some liquid drop into the mouth and the anus of the child. As the medicine began to act the girl jerked her arms and legs and began to breathe. She opened her eyes and the man helped her to stand up. She was completely restored to health.

The news spread all over the neighbourhood and beyond. Whenever somebody died, the man was called and he brought them all back to life again with the help of the life-charm. In the beginning he did not ask for any payment but later on he demanded at first five wedding shovels (*so*), then ten and finally twenty. When the god – for the hunter was none other – heard this he was very angry. 'Why does this man demand payment when I showed him the leaves for nothing?' Then he 'locked' the power of the leaves so they would not act again. The man did not know this, so when another death occurred he tried to raise the dead person but to no avail. The life-charm was lost because of his greed.

Death

For the Yamba, the ideal of a good life is to live to a ripe old age, bear many children, see one's children's children, and be held in general respect. But few people attain this ideal. Infant mortality was very high in the past, sometimes up to fifty per cent, and is still high today. Many people die young. Serious illness and death are not generally ascribed to 'natural' causes. Even the death of an old person is often suspected by close relatives to have been caused by mystical or superhuman agents. There exists among the Yamba what amounts to an almost obsessional desire to find out the cause of death. Yamba fear that if they do not know the cause of somebody's death other deaths may follow in the family. The cause has to be discovered and appropriate measures taken to eliminate further deaths.

To a casual observer it might seem that witchcraft is the foremost cause of serious illness and premature death among the Yamba. This is not the case. It is the task of the diviners to reveal the mystical agents responsible for the affliction and how to prevent further affliction. In the final analysis, serious illness and death are always symptoms of social conflict. That is why Yamba are particularly vexed if a death happens suddenly because it leaves them no opportunity to discover the cause of the sickness through divination and to 'judge the case', i.e. to remedy the situation and avoid the death of the afflicted.

The list of causes is a long one and one can detect a certain preference for some causes in different age groups or categories of people. I give here the most common ones:

1. The death of babies and small children is invariably attributed to cannibal witchcraft (*rūm*), but it may also be caused by the anger of in-laws, even in-laws 'of behind', adultery of the mother (*fua'*, *nforo*), or because the parents are too closely related (*nsaŋ*).
2. Serious illness and death of young people are often divined as being caused by their own folly. They have 'come out witches', usually as leopards (*mbe*) or a witch-breeze (*songoŋ*). Their inexperience and carelessness in venturing into the dangerous world of witches often proves their downfall. While their bodies lie sick and dying at home, their double (*ma-lulūi*, *ma-tsəntsən* — shadow) may be trapped in a hole or pressed under a fallen tree, victims of more powerful and more experienced witches. Serious illness in young people often leads to witchcraft confessions. But young boys may also be afflicted because their fathers are slow and reluctant in initiating them into the various Yamba cults.
3. Adult deaths might be caused by transgressions of the prohibitions of the *ŋwantap* cult. Such transgressions may be theft, damage to property,

engaging in various types of witchcraft, bringing 'bad things' into the village, etc. Other common causes are the affliction of the 'grave' (*nfəssie*) of the recently dead, the contagion of violent deaths causing pollution (*fɛ*), vengeance magic (*gwɛ ɲwɛ, gwɛ raŋ, or gwɛ so*), the adultery of a wife (*fua*'), mishandling of power-inflated objects, the witnessing of a cult performance or seeing the cult *sacra* by women and the uninitiated, lawful appropriation of an office, the effects of sorcery sent by an enemy, and many more.

Two kinds of death are considered 'bad' by the Yamba. Death caused by leprosy, epilepsy and swollen belly are held to be an abomination. People who die such 'bad deaths' are buried in the bush by specialists and are not 'cried'. Other deaths considered bad are 'violent' deaths which cause pollution (*fɛ*) such as suicides, death by drowning, accidents in hunting, or manslaughter. People who die 'violent' deaths are buried in the compound (although for suicides a ritual specialist must be called in to cut the rope and bury the corpse) and they receive full funeral celebrations. A special ritual called *dzəp fɛ* has to be performed to cleanse the people and the village from pollution (see Chapter Five).

Deaths are celebrated for good as well as 'bad' people. It does not matter whether a person was liked or hated in his lifetime, whether he was generous or stingy, whether he was hardworking or useless. Even known witches receive a full death celebration. When I asked Pa Monday Kongnjo whether the death of a known witch was celebrated, he said, 'Of course! People sing and dance all the more since they know that a bad person has gone!'

Yamba death celebrations are practically the same for all adults. This is a fact which seems to reflect the extreme egalitarianism of Yamba society. Since Yamba do not have societies and associations through which men or women could gain titles and prestige, as in many other Grassfields' societies, death celebrations do not differ greatly from each other. Gender makes no difference in the duration of death celebrations, as it does for the Mambila, eastern neighbours of the Yamba, where the funerary celebrations for a man last three days and for a woman four, the latter being linked to the four-handled carrying basket of a woman. I have observed the same among the Wimbun and other Grassfields' communities. For the Yamba the duration of the funeral celebrations is the same for men and women.

In most Yamba villages, with the exception of Bom and Mfe, death celebrations are now delayed from a few months up to several years. This practice is now common and on the increase. I have seen an invitation to a delayed death celebration in Mbem for seven members of a descent group who had died during the previous four years.

In what follows I shall give a detailed description of the elaborate sequence of mourning events as practised by the people of Lower Yamba and indicate some of the differences with Upper Yamba. I shall also document the changes which have taken place over the last fifty years, first outlining the practice as it was reported to me by my informants for the first half of this century and then compare it with what is done today. It will be seen that most of the rites are still observed today, the main difference being that almost all death celebrations are now postponed. Other changes concern the funeral celebrations of Christians.

Yamba Funeral Celebrations: Pre-burial Rites

a) *Wa kpɯ* (Wailing Death)

When somebody dies the women start wailing and weeping. They fall on the corpse holding and hugging it and trying to raise it up.⁶⁰ The death drum (*ncum kpɯ*) is beaten. The death cry (*ɲguɲ*) is taken up by all the people in the vicinity.⁶¹ It is like a summons to all people of the hamlet to come to the death compound. The wailing is especially dolorous for small children and even hysterical when young people die. After some time the lineage head will tell the women to stop crying and get ready for the people who will be arriving for the wake (*re kpɯ* or *noɲ kpɯ*) and the burial. The women will go to their stores or farms to bring food, while men bring firewood for the *mis kpɯ* (fire death) which will be lit in the centre of the yard during the night and arrange for a supply of palm wine. An envoy is sent to the *tɛ'tsə* (MF/B, the matrikin) of the deceased to inform him of the death. For a man's death they take his bag along, if a woman dies her basket is brought to him. Any old bag or basket will do.

A bamboo structure (*ntəɲ*) is erected in a shady place of the main yard to which the corpse, after it has been washed, is tied. Lineage heads and old people are put in a sitting position up on the *ntəɲ*, young people in a standing position. A man's personal possessions such as his war shield, gun, cutlass,

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60. Pregnant women may look at a corpse but may not touch it. Physical contact with a corpse is believed to harm the child in the womb. But there is no injunction against pregnant women being present at the burial.
61. Gunshots are not part of the funerary practices in Yamba as is reported from other Grassfields communities (Jindra 1997). Death was announced by the death cry (*ɲguɲ*) and the beating of the death drum (*ncum kpɯ*). Nowadays one can occasionally hear gunshots at delayed death celebrations. But this is an innovation introduced by Yamba living outside their native villages.

iron rattles (*njan*), wicker rattles (*mbak*), and bag are hung on or placed near the *ntəŋ*. A spear is tied to his hand. For a woman, her basket containing her personal belongings is put either on her back or next to the bamboo structure together with her hoe. Some poles are stuck in the ground around the *ntəŋ* and a blanket or some cloth is draped around it. People coming to the death compound would go straight to the *ntəŋ*, open the blanket and look at the corpse. According to Pa Monday Kongnjo, one has to see the dead person before tears come to one's eyes. 'The reason why Yamba tied the corpse to the *ntəŋ*', he said, 'was to allow people to have a last look at the deceased. If you don't see the dead person tears won't come to your eyes. You must see him before memories come back to your mind: "Yes, this is the man! We walked together. He came to my bush kitchen to greet me any time. Why did he have to die?" Then you start crying.'

There was a common belief among the Yamba that when a corpse is tied to the *ntəŋ* one won't see its shadow (*ma-lulwi*, *ma-tsəntsən*) if the person has really died (see Chapter Eight). Moss (n.d.: 48) reports from Mbem, apparently independently, that 'should there be shadow the people would say that the spirit has not left the body, and some would say that the spirit was being judged if the shadow showed on the ground'.

The colonial government forbade the common practice of exposing the dead on a bamboo structure but in more distant villages of Yamba it was still practised in the 1960s. The reason for outlawing this practice was most probably sanitary. I was told that in some cases, for example if an important man had died, the corpse was left on the *ntəŋ* for several days, to allow people from far away to attend the funeral. People would then stuff their noses with cotton or leaves because of the stench coming from the decomposing corpse.

***Ma' se' kpu* (Gom dialect), *ma' nses* (Mfe dialect)**

As soon as the corpse is tied to the *ntəŋ*, the women of the descent group, especially the deceased's mother, sisters, wife or wives, and daughters, bring raw groundnuts, cocoyams and corn, and throw them down at the foot of the *ntəŋ*. This is called *ma' se' kpu*. One informant told me that by this action the deceased is told, 'Take this your last food. Do not grudge our own. Do not spoil our own. Let us have plenty of food.' Or in the words of Pa Monday: 'Take this, this is your own food. Go with it. As you go, take it with you. This is the food you have eaten with us. Take it with you.' The implication is that the deceased who in his lifetime has been eating with the people of the compound should not grudge the food he left behind but rather bless it, so that those left behind may have plenty to eat.

Only full orphans (young and old) are allowed to pick something from the food thrown at the foot of the *ntəŋ*, roast and eat it. 'If your father or mother is still alive and you eat of it, it is as if you wish that they should die' (Sam Kobuin).

Formerly, when a lineage head died, the outmarried women of the descent group (*nje'gu*) would come, go to the *ntəŋ* and 'feed the corpse' by pressing cooked meat into its mouth. Another *nje'gu* would take the piece of meat out of the dead man's mouth crying, 'This is our father who looked after us well. He did not waver. Now he is dead. I'll eat it at the same time.' Then she would eat the piece of meat and press another piece of her own between his teeth. Pa Monday commented that in those days people had little fear of corpses.

In Mfe, Upper Yamba, *ma'nseŋ* is done in the morning after the wake (*re kpɔ*). The *nji* (quarterhead) or, if the *nji* is not present, the lineage head, gives two carrying baskets (*ŋko'*) to the *nje'gu* of the compound, one large and one small. The *nje'gu* go to the wives of all the male members of the lineage, who put corn, groundnuts, and cocoyams into the baskets. When moving around from house to house they do not greet or speak to people they meet. They only converse among themselves. When they have returned to the death compound they go to the *ntəŋ* and circle it three times. Then the *nji* or lineage head takes the two baskets and places them on the ground. He removes some food from the small basket and throws it at the foot of the *ntəŋ* three times. The *nje'gu* then take the big basket and share the content among themselves. The *nji* takes the small basket as his own share.

Next a calabash of wine is brought. The *nji* fills his cup and addresses the deceased saying, 'This is the wine you drank with your brothers. We all drank together. We tapped wine together in the raffia bush. We ate out of one pan. We walked together with 'one foot'. Now you have gone. If you now want to spoil this wine because you have gone saying why do we drink this wine, very well, take this, this is your own'. He throws the cup of wine towards the west. Filling his cup again he continues, 'Yes, this is our wine which you left us, may you bless it. May fowls and goats multiply, may crops grow well in our farms. May you bless this wine so that when we tap it will flow abundantly. When we work our farms may crops grow well, may our children do well, our goats do well, everything we plant do well.' Throwing the wine towards the east he ends by saying, 'This is our own. May you bless this wine.' After this he pours himself another cup and drinks.

***Re kru* (or *noŋ kru*) — The Wake⁶²**

When it is getting dark a fire (*mis kru*) is lit in the centre of the yard and the drums (*ncum kru* and *ncum barə*) are brought out. This is the sign for the women to disappear into their houses because *rum kru* (cult, death), that is the *cimbi* dance, will soon make its appearance. Two kinds of drum are used, *ncum kru*, the death drum and *ncum barə*, literally ‘drum stranger’. *Ncum kru* is about 80 to 100 cm high and made out of a log of wood. The upper section has a diameter of about 30 to 40 cm and is hollowed out like a mortar, the open end covered with an animal skin. The lower part is stepped in to form a single solid foot, 10 to 15 cm in diameter. The *ncum kru* is laid on the ground, the drummer sitting astride the drum and beating it with a piece of thick rope made from fibres of a plantain or banana stem. The *ncum barə* are double faced drums, about 30 cm long and 40cm in diameter. A rope is attached to either side which the drummer puts over his shoulder so that the drum hangs in front of him. He beats it with a baton which he holds in his right hand, and with his bare left hand.

The *cimbi* instruments consisting of four calabash horns (the fifth calabash horn called *ma-tsəm ŋgwi* does not appear during the wake) are brought from the *nda rum*. These instruments were described in Chapter Seven above. The four players stand behind each other in a line in front of the *ntəŋ*, but a few yards to the side. Each player wields a wicker rattle in his right hand. They hold the instruments with their left hand intoning into them. Feet apart, the players step from side to side and occasionally run round the *ntəŋ* once anti-clockwise before taking up their old position again. The rhythm is supplied by the drums and the wicker rattles.

Other men and boys sit or stand around chatting or drinking wine. Every now and then somebody comes forward and takes over a calabash horn or a drum. No player continues for more than five to ten minutes. The men are given wine to drink and they may roast plantains, corn and groundnuts at the *mis kru*. Sons-in-law have to provide a jug of wine (*ruk dzəp lis* — wine, tears) each, to ‘wipe away the tears of the mourners’. They also each bring a fowl or cooked meat (*njap dzəp lis*). After midnight cooked food which the women have prepared in their houses is brought out. Women are excluded from the wake. Since *cimbi* is *rum* (‘juju’) they are not allowed to see either the instruments or the dance.

62. *Re kru* means “cry” death and *namə kru* “sleep death” (Upper Yamba *noŋ kru*). These two terms are used interchangeably. For delayed death celebration *namə kru* is preferred since death has occurred many months or years earlier.

Cimbi is danced during the wake of all adult men and also women who have delivered more than one male child. For the wake of women who have delivered only one male child or none the women's dance *mandeŋ* (*ndeŋndeŋ*) is brought out. If a member of the male *cam* association dies, *cam* is brought out at about 4 a.m. and dances till daybreak. The *cam* dance in this connection is called *cam fə* (*cam*, the deceased).

A lo sam (samdə) and to mbale

At dawn, after the wake, *so'*, the only masquerade of the Yamba, is brought out. One of the men dons the fibre suit. All the men who were present at the wake run along the footpath leading to the deceased's palm bush (the most likely place to look for a man if he is not at home). But according to some informants they run towards the east, the side of the living. They perform a sort of running dance (*samdə*), clanging their cutlasses and sounding the *so'* cry. They are accompanied by the masker and the *ncum barə*. After having run some distance they stop and one man of the deceased's family calls out the dead man's name three times. Receiving no answer all men reply each time in a chorus — hoooo! If the dead man's farm is near, they would cut some heads of plantain and return to the death compound.

The meaning of *samdə* was explained to me as follows: *so'* (all men and teenage boys are members of the *so'* cult) goes crying in search for one of its members. In one version they go towards the east, the side of the living; in another version they go to his palm bush, the most likely place where to find him. They call his name three times but receive no answer. The man is no more. *Samdə* is only performed for men. At the death of older women a similar running dance is performed by women called *to mbale*. They too run some distance towards the east or in the direction of the farm of the dead woman calling her name. They sing a special women's song called *mbale*. Sometimes *mbale* is referred to as women's juju even though in Yamba women have no juju which men are not allowed to see or should be afraid of. When the women return they are expected to be given wine and a fowl. If these items are not forthcoming quickly their mood begins to turn nasty. The women start to pull out thatch from the roofs of houses or knock the zinc roofs with sticks. This never fails to get a quick response.

A lo sam or *to mbale* is followed by an interesting ritual called *mbirə'* in Gom and Bom and *maŋkomuin* in Mfe. This ritual which I have described elsewhere (see Chapter Two) is performed for great-grandparents who had many children and grandchildren. In Nkwi, a quarter of Gom, I have been told of

another ritual called *wum nyam* (see Chapter Three) which is performed at the death of a huntmaster (*ɲgwa nyam*). A mock-hunt takes place after a *lo sam* followed by the installation of the new huntmaster.

***Lu so'* (Wrestling)**

Back at the death compound a wrestling match (*lu so'*) takes place. The men stand in a circle. One man of the family who has a reputation of being a good wrestler would enter the circle of men and with his right arm raised and the index finger pointing to the sky would go round singing the praises of the dead man's wrestling skills. Before long somebody would challenge him and the two would square up for a fight. The one who is thrown and whose shoulders touch the ground is declared the loser and is replaced by another man. The mood is good-natured and friendly. When there are no more challengers all men present are rewarded with a jug of wine (*ruk so'*). As to the meaning of the wrestling match I was told that it was a last tribute to the dead man who had been a wrestler and fighter.

Rites performed by the *tɛ'tsə* (MF/B)

When a *monje'* dies the family has to inform his *tɛ'tsə* immediately by sending him his bag and a fowl. The *tɛ'tsə* accompanied by some of his family (the matrikin) will come to the death compound. If he is living nearby he will come to the wake, otherwise he will come for the burial. Jikong (1979: 75) reports that when he arrives he will start speaking harshly to the family of the deceased saying, 'Why have you plucked off the heart of my child, etc.' After this he goes straight to the *ntəŋ* placing a leaf-medicine (*raŋ*) at its foot.

Raŋ is a 'medicine' used to protect property from thieves. A tapper would place a *raŋ* on top of the earthenware pot in which he keeps wine in his bush kitchen. There is not just one kind of leaf used by everybody. Each descent group may have, and usually has, its own different *raŋ*. When a man 'opens' a palm tree or raffia stand to tap wine he will call his *monje'* to 'fix' the wine by making a libation with the first wine tapped. A *monje'* is not afraid of his uncle's *raŋ*. He may enter his uncle's palm bush, remove the *raŋ* lying on the pot and help himself to some cups of wine. He does so with impunity. At the death of his *monje'* the *tɛ'tsə* places the same *raŋ* at the foot of the *ntəŋ*. He also brings some cooked meat (*fua' raŋ*) and a calabash of wine (*ruk raŋ*) which he also puts down in front of the *ntəŋ*. He fills his cup with wine and facing the corpse he makes a ritual invocation saying, 'Aha, you are my *monje'*. When I "opened" a palm tree I called you to come and make the libation with *dzə te* (new, palm tree, i.e. new wine tapped from a palm tree). When

I “opened” a raffia stand, I called you to come and make the libation with *dzə ŋka*’ (new raffia, i.e. new raffia wine). This is the wine you came to “fix”. You have left us today. Drink this wine.’ Holding the cup against the dead person’s mouth he empties it. He takes another cup and splashes it over the corpse to ‘wash’ it. Next he takes a small calabash of palm oil which he has brought along and pours some on the lips of the deceased. He also rubs oil on the face, the arms and legs of the dead person. He leaves the calabash of wine and the food he brought near the *ntəŋ* and sits down. What is addressed here is the beneficial role a *monje*’ plays in the life of his *tɛ’tsə*. The ritual invocation shows the concern of the *tɛ’tsə* that his dead *monje*’ may reverse this beneficial role and become the cause of affliction instead.

The family has to reciprocate the gifts brought by the *tɛ’tsə* by giving him wine (*ruk raŋ*), and cooked meat (*fua’ raŋ*). Only then will he remove the *raŋ* which he has placed at the *ntəŋ*. Should the family fail to give him these items even after the burial he will leave the *raŋ* on the grave till they comply. They will try to do so quickly because the *raŋ* will bring them bad luck. If the matrikin comes with their own *cimbi* dance to perform before the corpse the family has to give them a fowl (*mvəp rum*, fowl juju).

The Dance with the Basket

When a woman dies the women’s dance *mandeŋ* (or *ndeŋndeŋ*) is performed during the day. The instruments used in this dance are pieces of flat wood, three to four feet long, each woman holding her own piece and beating it with a stick. The sound produced is like that of a xylophone. Additional rhythm is supplied by drums (*ncum barə*) played by men, and wicker rattles. Men may join the dance and some may even play an instrument. While the dancing goes on a daughter-in-law of the dead woman is given a carrying basket which she puts on her back. A mat (*wam*) is placed in the basket. The *nje’gu* of the compound throw cocoyam seeds, mature cocoyams, maize, and groundnuts into the basket. Then the daughter-in-law dances with the basket on her back. If there are several daughters-in-law they take turns in dancing with the basket.

When they have danced for some time a senior *nje’gu* takes the basket and puts it down. She removes some cocoyam seeds, rubs them with oil and places them in the hands of each daughter-in-law. They wrap the cocoyams in leaves and keep them. The death celebration over they will go and plant these seeds in the centre of their farms. If it is not the planting season they put them in dry ground where they store them with their other seeds. This episode is rich in obvious regenerative symbolism involving oil and seeds. I was told that it was done so that the descent group should never lack food and should

never go hungry. Note also the part played by the *njɛ'gu* who are believed to enhance the fertility of the descent group.

A married wife for whom bridewealth had been paid must be buried in her husband's compound otherwise bad luck would follow her children.

The Autopsy (*to mvəm*)

Formerly, an autopsy was performed on every person above the age of ten or twelve years who died. It was carried out by a member of the deceased's matrikin (it had to be a man who had a 'strong stomach and would not vomit'). The corpse was placed on the ground next to the open grave. The 'operator' made an incision across the lower belly and then cut upwards through the ribs to the collarbone on both sides of the torso. The skin flap was then lifted and placed over the dead man's head. Next he cut through the gullet and windpipe and tore out the entire intestines. The autopsy was performed to search for signs of witchcraft or its absence. If nothing suspicious was found, the *tɛ'tsə* would say, 'What has happened to my child? These are his intestines. Where is the thing of which he died? Where is it?' Then he would demand compensation from the family for the death of his *monjɛ'*. If the family was reluctant or slow to comply a fight would break out and people would get injured. The matrikin would not allow the dead man to be buried unless the family paid. As payment up to twenty marriage shovels (so) were demanded and a goat. If signs of witchcraft were discovered people would exchange furtive looks. The dead person was guilty of his own death. The autopsy completed, the intestines were pushed back into the body cavity and the flap of skin pulled down. The 'operator' was given a fowl for his work (*mvəp to mvəm*). Except in rare cases, autopsy is no longer practised.

ŋgoma

A peculiar custom was observed when a Yɛfak (farm master or 'priest'), Bumtu (head of the *nzɯr* or red feather society) and certain lineage heads or senior men who are in possession of 'medicines' like *ŋgo mbɛ* (skin, leopard) died. Bumtu and members of the *ŋgo mbɛ* cult were put on the *ntəŋ*. A string of banana or plantain fibres was tied around their waist and *ŋgoma* leaves tucked into it in front to cover their genitals. The *ŋgoma* is a plant with long, broad leaves growing in the forest. It produces a 'head' like a maize cob. Before the autopsy the leaves were removed. Yɛfak, who is second in importance only to the chief, was not put on a *ntəŋ*. His corpse remained in the house in which he had died. Only another Yɛfak and some senior people of

the hamlet who have been initiated into the *ngoma* cult were allowed to enter. *Yo* and *mbəmbuəm*, leaves associated with Yefak's ritual office, were placed at the door to prevent other people from entering the hut during the wake. Yefak's corpse was covered with the *ngoma* leaves inside the house (but no autopsy was performed on him). He was buried by the second Yefak of the hamlet, the members of the *ngoma* cult and other senior men. All the people who came for the wake had to disappear when he was buried. They were not allowed to see the corpse of a Yefak being put down into the grave under pain of losing their hearing. As soon as the corpse was in the grave these other men came to help fill in the grave. After the burial they were doused with medicated water. All of the men who received the *ngoma* treatment were buried in separate graves and the grave was filled in with soil while other people were buried in common graves.

Nowadays, Yefak, Bumtu, and members of the *ngoma* cult are still 'dressed' with the *ngoma* leaves before burial and Yefak is still buried out of sight of ordinary people. Information as to why these people are covered in *ngoma* leaves is difficult to obtain and vague. Some suggest that it is done because such people are possessors of 'strong medicine' and *rum* (juju). I have not been able to obtain any information as to whether a chief is given the same treatment: events surrounding his death and burial are even more secret.

Agathe Schmidt reports from Nsei (1943: 128) a ritual element in which a stone was touched to the forehead of a dead person and then be buried in the top part of the grave, but I could not find any trace of this. In all my many years among the Yamba I have never observed any ancestral stones on which they could make libations and sacrifices to their ancestors.

Burial

Among the Yamba, the dead are buried by their matrikin, a custom which is still strictly adhered to. Although the actual burial will be done by the family the *tɛ'tsə* (MF/B) or some of the matrikin of the deceased must be present. In Lower Yamba, the family may dig the grave but may on no account bury the dead in absence of the *tɛ'tsə*. In Mfe, Upper Yamba, the family may not even dig the grave unless the *tɛ'tsə* has traced it with a cutlass or hoe.

Formerly, burial took place in the afternoon after the wake (*re kpɛ*). A 'big man' might have remained on the *ntəŋ* for several days before he was buried to allow people from far and wide to come to perform at the extended wake. Nowadays, a person is buried the following day if he dies in the evening or during the night or the same day if he dies in the morning.

In Lower Yamba the grave was dug in the form of a well-shaft with a small opening at the top and a widening at the bottom. The corpse was let down feet first till it rested in a crouching position, men facing east and women west. No earth was put in the grave. A large, flat stone was placed over the hole. Around its edge rotting plantain stems were tucked in in order to prevent any smell escaping from the grave. The grave was not reserved for one person. A number of people were buried in the same grave. That was the reason why no earth was filled in. After many years, when the bones started to pile up, they were removed before a new burial. When the corpse had been lowered into the grave the bones were thrown back in the grave. A new common grave was dug when there was no longer any room to bury another corpse. Heads were not removed, except in cases when the dead person ‘came out’ of the grave and continued to afflict members of the descent group. If his grave has been ‘cooked’ (*lam nfæssie*) several times without the expected result the grave was opened, the skull of the recalcitrant forebear removed and unceremoniously thrown into the river.

After the grave has been covered with the flat stone, some palm nut chaff (*nyem zok*) was placed on top and burnt with *liŋ* (incense) and *sen* (leaves of a strongly scented shrub). Everybody present would come forward and ‘wash’ their faces in the rising smoke and pass their right foot over it. This was done to prevent people from dreaming about the dead person. Men and women are present at the burial.

Nowadays, people are buried in single graves. A pit is dug about six feet deep. At the bottom a shallow trough is carved out into which the corpse is laid. A man is placed in the grave lying on his left side, his face towards the east and with his right hand raised to the head. A woman’s body is laid on her left side facing west and her left hand raised to the head. Pieces of bamboo and plantain leaves are put across the top to prevent earth touching the corpse. All present throw a handful of earth in the grave. The grave is then filled and pressed down with bare feet. The custom of burning *liŋ* and *sen* and ‘washing the face’ is still observed today.

Post-Burial Rites and Obligations

Payments given to the MF/B

After the burial the *tɛʼtsə* will ask to see his *monje*’s personal bag to examine its content. If the *monje*’ practised divination (*ŋgam*) or made ‘medicine’ and has learned these crafts from his uncle he will take away the *ŋgam* leaf-cards and the medicine bag. He will also take his *monje*’s cutlass, spear, knife and

the blanket which was draped around the *ntəŋ*. Finally, the *tɛ'tsə* will demand to be given *kəa nzəm* (etymology unknown). In Lower Yamba the family has to give seven marriage shovels (*so*), nowadays seven thousand francs CFA. The meaning of *kəa nzəm* was explained to me as follows: the descent group has benefited from the fertility and labour of the woman they married. She has provided her husband with children. On the other hand, her sons (*monje'*) had a beneficial influence on her father's (*tɛ'tsə*) lineage. When a *monje'* dies the *tɛ'tsə* looses this 'blessing'. He now asks to be compensated for it. In the words of Lawrence Nsangong, my informant in Mfe, the uncle would say, 'I have finished with you, finish with me!' Another informant told me that it is a payment to gain 'independence'. The family has no more obligations towards the dead man's *tɛ'tsə*.

There is another custom which may throw light on the practice of *kəa nzəm*. If a *monje'*'s wife commits adultery (with a man of the hamlet) he will call his uncle and together they will go to the adulterer's compound and demand *lip co* (*lip* means to beat, *co* can be translated as cargo, wealth). The adulterer has to pay seven marriage shovels (nowadays seven thousand francs CFA) and a goat. The *monje'* will then hand over the marriage shovels to his uncle in lieu of *kəa nzəm*. At his death the uncle will not ask for it again (see Chapter Five).

When an outmarried *nje'gu* (female dependent) dies, her lineage head (the bride-giver) will demand to see her basket. He will want to find out whether his *nje'gu* practised witchcraft. Should he discover a witch-rope (*fərə*) or a piece of animal skin (*ŋgop*) the lineage head will take it away with him if he recognises it as coming from his lineage. The husband or family has to give a fowl (*mvəp fərə* or *mvəp ŋgop*). Should they fail to do so, he would leave these items with them and they would be harmed.

***Dzə kpu* — Rest Day**

The day after the burial is observed among the Yamba as a rest day by the mourners, although several rituals take place.

- *To bum*

In the morning at sunrise *cimbi* is brought out again and the calabash horn band dances three times around the empty *ntəŋ* after which the instruments are finally put back on the loft of the *nda rum*. This is called *to bum* (*to* means to close, and *bum* is country fashion, tradition). After this, the bamboo structure (*ntəŋ*) to which the corpse had been tied is removed by a *monje'* (D/ZS) of the family and thrown into the bush behind the *mbambiŋ*. This is done to prevent women from inadvertently picking up the sticks or the bamboo poles and

using them as firewood, which would result in bad luck. The *mambij* is out of bounds for women. No woman may go near it.

- *Co ŋgo kpɛ*

As soon as the *ntəŋ* has been removed, all the members of the bereaved descent group go to the stream to wash. This is called *co ŋgo kpɛ*, to ‘wash away death’. Coming back from the stream the women carry a basket of sand which they throw on the grave to ‘level the grave’ (*laŋse tu shie*). Then all the mourners will either shave their heads completely or have a lock of hair cut. This is a sign symbolising the cutting off of the dead from the living. All tie a raffia fibre (*se’ kpɛ*) around their necks, except pregnant women who tie it around their ankles. *Se’ kpɛ*, I was told, is not a ‘medicine’. It is tied around the neck to avert ‘bad luck’ (*ndo*) because of the death of a family member. As one informant put it, ‘If you don’t tie *se’ kpɛ* around your neck you won’t succeed in anything’. Since *se’ kpɛ* is a thing connected with death pregnant women must not tie it around their necks, otherwise their child would be harmed. Either the woman would have a miscarriage or still-birth, or the child would die soon after birth. (Children who become orphans will have a cowry shell (*mbam njiŋ*) tied around their necks).

In Mfe, Upper Yamba, *co ŋgo kpɛ* and *laŋse tu shie* are not known. Instead another ritual is performed called *kuru bum* (sweep country fashion, tradition) which I have already described in detail elsewhere (see Chapter Two).

- *Ma’ be’ kpɛ*

Finally, on the same rest day an exoneration from witchcraft is performed called *ma’ be’ kpɛ* (throw, food, death). A fowl is cooked. Women prepare fufu and men bring wine. When everything is ready the lineage head takes a small lump of fufu, opens it and puts a piece of meat in the middle. Then he closes it and forms it into a ball which he dips into the oil in which the fowl has been cooked. Then he goes to the grave and says, “If you have died a natural death, fine, then it was the will of God. If somebody has killed you (by witchcraft) let him eat this food above ground while you eat it below ground, shifting nearer to him all the time till you two meet. When you meet you shall hold him, may he too die.” Then he throws the food on the grave and the people start to eat and drink. No dance takes place.

Pa Monday Kongnjo explained the rite, taking the death of a child as example, as follows: ‘Now they have thrown the food on the grave, and if you have tried to taste the child’s flesh, you eat your food, you laugh saying that you are eating fine food, but the child below (the ground) is eating too. As you eat your own, the child eats his own, edging nearer and nearer to you. When he touches

you, his *nfæssie* (“grave”) has caught you! When you fall ill and you go to a diviner he will tell you, “Yes, the grave of a child has caught you!” If you confess saying, “Yes, I know this man’s child. I have gone to see the place where he was staying”, then everybody knows that the child is in your “belly” (that you have eaten the child). Nobody will say a thing; nobody will do a thing (to help the sick man). This kind of transgression is not “fixed”. Such a man is left to die.’ Thus, the offering of food to the dead person in the grave will result in the automatic sickness and death of whoever caused the death by witchcraft.

***Lam rom* — Cooking the Ill Will of the Dead**

Lam rom is performed on the *ntɛzuru* or *ntevin* of the eight day Yamba week, following the burial. Early in the morning women go to the stream to catch crabs, fish or tadpoles. When they come back a large cooking pot is placed outside in the main yard of the compound. Men and women of the descent group, and other people who come for the performance throw something in the pot: crabs, fish, tadpoles, or dry meat. These food items thrown in the pot are called *shwep*. If somebody has nothing he may put salt or oil instead in the pot. A fire is made under the pot and the food cooked. The cooking stick to stir the stew must be of *susun* wood. When the food is done the pot is turned out on banana or plantain leaves which must be without a hole or tear. The liquid as it runs along the leaves is observed. If it flows in a single line it means that all is well. If it divides into two or more lines there is something amiss (but nothing is done).

Now the women bring baskets containing loaves of fufu which they have cooked in their houses. The lineage head takes a small amount from each basket and forms it into a ball. He opens it and puts a piece of meat or crab in it. He closes it and rubs the ball with oil from the soup. Then he goes to the grave and makes a ritual invocation saying that since the deceased has been eating with them he should take this last food and should not grudge the food people eat nor the wine they drink. He takes the *susun* stick which was used to stir the stew and sticks it on top of the grave. He places the ball of fufu on top of the stick. If this ritual is not performed it is believed that palm trees will neither give wine nor produce nuts. Fowls and goats will not do well and hunting will not be successful. The dead man’s ill will is to be blamed for this (‘Why should those left behind enjoy what I left behind?’).

Thereafter, the food cooked in the houses is brought (the family will have killed a goat or some fowls) and mixed with the *shwep*. The food is distributed according to groups: the *nje’gu* (married female dependents of the family), the *monje’* (D/ZS), the in-laws and the family, all get their own share.

Meanwhile a large earthenware pot is stood in the middle of the yard into which every man who comes to the performance pours some wine. The men of the lineage provide a jug of wine. The lineage head fills his cup and makes a ritual invocation saying that the deceased has been drinking wine with them. Now all share with him their wine for the last time. ‘Take this your last wine and drink and do not spoil our wine’. Saying this he throws the wine over his shoulder towards the west. Filling his cup again he says, ‘As we are alive we look towards the sun. May you “bless” this our wine so that it will flow abundantly’. Then he throws the wine towards the east.

This done, the wine is shared out. When the pot is half empty it is refilled. This is done three times. The third time the pot is emptied completely and then taken away. If there is more wine it is now brought in calabashes and the drinking continues. No dances take place for the *lam rom* ritual. In this ritual of *lam rom* the emphasis is on commensality. All those with whom the dead person has been eating and drinking join for a last common meal and drink.

Lyem kpɔ

There are three different types of *lyem kpɔ* (feasting gift, death). First of all, it is part of the marriage payments given by a son-in-law (*tsəgu*). After the death of his parents-in-law a son-in-law has to provide two ‘leaf-beef’,⁶³ a basket of fufu, and two jugs of wine. He also has to give seven marriage shovels (nowadays seven thousand francs CFA), three for his father-in-law and four for his mother-in-law. He will combine this celebration after the death of both his parents-in-law whenever he has the resources. Should he fail to *lyem kpɔ* his parents-in-law, at his own death the feasting gifts brought by his own son(s)-in-law will go to the family of the in-laws ‘of behind’.

Secondly, a married daughter, helped by her husband, has to give *lyem kpɔ* on her mother’s death. She will cook a basket of cornflour-fufu and a fowl and provide one jug of wine which she will give to her ‘fathers’, i.e. her own descent group. If she fails to do this it is believed that her farmwork will not prosper. The deceased’s ‘devil’ (*zɛ*) will spoil her ‘hand’ and her farm crops will not do well. The daughter has to give *lyem kpɔ* to drive her mother’s ‘devil’ away.

Thirdly, there is *lyem kpɔ* of the family. The sons (full siblings) of a deceased parent will jointly make this celebration which usually takes place on a *ntɛzuru* or *nteviŋ* after *lam rom*. They provide food (fowls and fufu) and

63. Formerly, cooked meat was cut up and budled up in leaves. There was a standard measure of size for such bundles.

wine. In Nkwi, the whole hamlet is invited to take part. Food and wine are divided into two parts to be given to the two 'sides' of Nkwi, Bu-Fəm and Ma-Kwak.

In Mfe, Upper Yamba, where *lam rom* is not known, *lyem kpɔ* of the family and of the in-laws is jointly made with *ma' be'* on the day after the burial (but often it is delayed some weeks). In Mfe, *lyem kpɔ* and *ma' be'* are used synonymously. The family kills a goat and each son-in-law has to give a fowl and a jug and ten litres of wine.

Recent Changes

With the opening up of Yamba area since colonial times and with the advent of world religions change has been inevitable. Yamba funerary celebrations have also been affected although the rituals of the mortuary cycle have, surprisingly, withstood major changes. As indicated above, corpses are no longer displayed on a bamboo structure and no post-mortem takes place. Both these practices were outlawed by the British Colonial Government but it took a long time before they were abandoned completely. In remote villages they were still practised well into the 1960s.

A major change has been the postponement of the death celebration. Whilst formerly the celebration immediately followed the death and burial of a person it is now delayed (with the exception of the villages of Bom and Mfe) for some months or even years and often combined for several deaths which have occurred over a period of time.

It is interesting that the delay of death celebrations did not come from within the Yamba area. All my informants stated that this practice has been introduced by Yamba living outside their native area. Yamba living abroad witnessed delayed death celebrations (Babessi and other villages in the Ndop plain are often mentioned). As I have indicated already, more than half of the Yamba are living outside their native area. That means, roughly speaking, that about half of Yamba deaths occur outside the Yamba area. According to Yamba custom, all deaths have to be celebrated by the families concerned in their native villages. Of those who die outside Yamba area only a few are brought home for burial, mainly those who have worked in government services, in the army or the police force. All the others are buried where they die. But the death celebrations have to take place in their respective villages. It is obvious that a delayed celebration is far more convenient for all family members concerned. It allows for adequate preparation and for choosing the most suitable time for those living outside the Yamba area to attend. So the reason

for delaying death celebrations among the Yamba is mainly of a practical nature and does not imply a change of attitude towards the dead.

As for other changes, which I have already indicated when describing the different ritual procedures, they will only be summarized here. The dead, in Lower Yamba, are no longer buried in communal graves. Nowadays, each dead person has his or her own grave. The use of coffins is on the increase and one occasionally sees cemented graves, but this is still rare. The baptist Church, the main Christian body in Yamba, does not allow *cimbi* to dance during the wake (*re kpɔ*) of a Christian. Church dances and songs are performed instead to allow women to participate in the wake. Graves of Christians are marked with a simple wooden cross. In all these changes, introduced under the influence of Christianity, one can detect a 'tendency towards individualization' (M. Jindra, p.c.).

Death and Burial Today

The burial takes place on the same day or, if death occurred in the evening or before midnight, the following day. *Liŋ* (incense) and *sen* (strongly scented leaves) are burnt on the grave mound and all people present 'wash' their faces in the rising smoke to avoid dreaming about the dead. The *tɛ'tsə* and his people are given a calabash of wine before their departure. On the third day there will be a modest contribution of food and wine by the family during which the rite *ma' be' kpɔ* (an exoneration from witchcraft) takes place.

In Lower Yamba, the ritual *lam rom* (cook ill will) is performed a week after burial if the deceased was a man who left behind a wife who has just weaned her child. This is done to allow the wife to choose her new husband from among the male members of the descent group (see Chapter Two).

The Delayed Death Celebration

At a family meeting a date for the funerary celebration and how much each member has to contribute is decided upon. All members of the lineage at home and abroad are then informed. Delayed death celebrations in Lower Yamba start on *ndes* of the eight-day Yamba week. In the afternoon the bamboo structure (*ntəŋ*) to which formerly the corpse was tied is erected. A photograph of the deceased is hung on the *ntəŋ*, or failing that, a plantain stem is placed there. A blanket or cloth is tied around the *ntəŋ* and some of the personal items of the deceased put around it as was done formerly. The *nje'gu* of the descent group throw some foodstuff — groundnuts, maize cobs and cocoyams — at the foot of the *ntəŋ* (*ma' se' kpɔ*).

Goats and fowls, sometimes also a cow, are slaughtered and the meat divided among the women of the compound to cook. As soon as it gets dark, a fire (*mis kpɯ*) is lit in the yard and *rum kpɯ* (the *cimbi* instruments) is brought out but for a Christian the members of the church come to sing and dance. Even though the dead person has been interred for many months what takes place at a delayed death celebration is best described as wake. Since people have by now recovered from the first shock of the death, postponed mortuary celebrations are conducted in a celebratory mood. The food cooked by the women in their houses is brought out after midnight (*be' kpɯ ŋge zok* — food death at night) and shared among all present. For this purpose the people are divided into groups according to quarters. Each group is also given wine (*ruk ŋge zok* — wine at night). At dawn, the ritual *samdə* (running dance with the *so'* masker) and *lu so'* (wrestling) are performed for the death of a man, or *to mbale* for a woman. The dancing goes on during the day but no more food is given, except to the matrikin head (*tɛ'tsə*) and his party who are still given more food. If there is wine it will be shared among all present.

Early morning on the third day, *cimbi* is brought out again. The calabash horn band dances three times around the *ntəŋ* (*to bum*) before the instruments are finally put back into the loft of the *nda rum*. A *monje'* of the family then breaks down the bamboo structure and throws it behind the *mambiq*. This is followed by *co ŋgo kpɯ* (wash away death) and *lanse tu shie* (levelling the grave). *Ma' be' kpɯ* (exoneration from witchcraft) has already taken place after the burial and is not repeated. The *lam rom* ritual, which concludes the mourning cycle, is performed on the following day.

Some Conclusions

The above rather detailed description of the Yamba mortuary cycle allows me to draw some tentative conclusions:

Yamba funeral ceremonies mirror the stark egalitarianism of Yamba society. In terms of ritual performance all deaths, except those of small children, are treated alike. Old and young, male and female, all receive the same full mortuary rites. For well-known personalities the celebrations may be more elaborate and more competitive, but the ceremonies are the same for all.

This is not surprising given the fact that Yamba society does not have a distinct hierarchical social structure like that of the Nso' or the Wimbun. Yamba society is not structured into royals, retainers, commoners, and slaves. Their chiefs have little authority. Every quarter of a village has its own chief of whom one may have a ritual primacy. The Yamba have no regulatory society,

and no societies or associations which men pay to enter and gain titles. They only have a few offices which are hereditary, i.e. *nji* (quarterhead), *Yefak* (farm-master or ‘priest’), *Bumtu* (leader of the *nzɥr* cult), and *ɲgwa nyam* (huntmaster), etc. There are variations, Upper Yamba (especially Mbem) having more offices (e.g. *Nkongmbo*, *Nangong*, *Yakong*, *Gbe’ko*, who are at the same time descent group heads).

This egalitarianism fits in well with the non-ancestral orientation of the Yamba. Authority among the Yamba is not so much legitimised by the ancestors as by *ɲwantap*, the most important cult of the Yamba. Lineage heads are the custodians of the *ɲwantap* cult and they form a sort of gerontocracy. Yamba do not practice head removal and have no ancestral stones or shrines on which sacrifices or libations are performed. They do not plead to ancestors. In time of sickness and misfortune they rely on divination and the efficacy of their rituals. The dead do not figure largely in the explanations of misfortune.

The main purpose of the funerary rites is to dismiss the dead peacefully and to cleanse the pollution of death. The dead are told to leave without grudges or a ‘bad heart’ and they are asked to ‘bless’ those left behind, their food and wine, their farms and animals. Some rituals are clearly intended to prevent the dead from taking fertility along with them to their graves or from reversing the beneficial role they exercised when alive.

Death celebrations have no effect on the condition of the dead nor do they change their status. They are for the living. The stress is on commensality. A last meal is shared with the dead. The statement of one of my informants when asked what would happen if a death is not celebrated is illuminating. He said, ‘The deceased will cry in his grave saying, why have you thrown me away like that? Why do you not ‘cry’ me so that people may eat?’

Richard Fardon (1990: 109) found that among the Chamba ‘funerals are exemplary enactments of sociality’. To a large extent this is also true of the Yamba. Everyone — family members, in-laws, matrikin, friends, etc. — all know what they ought to be doing. The social structure of rights and obligations, the relationships which exist between people and which are supposed to inform everyday behaviour become visible at the performance of obligations following death.

The important role of the matrikin at the burial stands out clearly. In Yamba the dead are buried by their matrikin. This shows how strongly an individual is linked to the matrikin although the Yamba are a patrilineal society. The relationship between *tɛ’tsə* (MF/B) and *monje’* is ambiguous. Both have a bene-

ficial influence on each other's life but may also be indirect agents of supernatural sanctions affecting each other's work and well-being.

I may add here another point which I have not mentioned so far mainly because it does not seem to be important to the Yamba. I am referring to their belief in the afterlife. Yamba are very vague about where the dead go to and what their status is in the afterlife. When asked old Yamba informants usually point to the ground saying that the dead live underground but they confess their ignorance as to what kind of life they are living in the afterworld. They are unanimous in stating that the dead live on but as to the how and where they do not speculate, and they are content as long as the dead leave the living alone and don't bother them.

Finally, due to the influence of Christianity and the experience of Yamba living abroad there has been an 'individualising tendency' (M. Jindra) as regards burials and death celebrations in Yamba. Although status difference was never stressed among the Yamba as it is in other Grassfields communities — all men and women above the age of ten receive full funerary celebrations — the dead, in Lower Yamba, were buried in communal graves. Nowadays, the dead are buried in single graves, they are buried in coffins and the grave is marked by a simple wooden cross for a Christian. Sometimes the graves are cemented. Among the Yamba it is this 'individualising tendency' rather than a 'proliferation of ancestors' which M. Jindra (personal communication) found in other Grassfields communities that is noticeable, a tendency which is closely connected with the influence of Christianity with its emphasis on the full personhood of all.