Separating the dead: the ritual transformation of affinal exchange in central Flores

In central Flores, local people represent obligatory exchanges of objects at funerals as signalling a cessation of relations between affinally related groups, thus contradicting a well-established local principle whereby affinal relationships transcend the lives of individual participants. Illuminating this contrast is a mortuary context that comprises rites emphasizing separation and a particularly negative view of the dead to the exclusion of a more positive representation of relations between the dead and the living expressed in religious ideology. However, as a purely ethnographic analysis cannot actually resolve the contradiction, consideration is given to cognitivist perspectives, and especially approaches focusing on counterintuitive features of ritual and religious representations that contradict ordinary understandings of things.

As elsewhere in eastern Indonesia, funerals on the island of Flores require an exchange of valuables between the deceased’s surviving kin and wife-giving affines. The objects exchanged are the same as those used as bridewealth and counter-prestation respectively. Among the Nage and Keo, who occupy parts of central Flores, identical exchanges of prescribed objects between affines are interpreted in other social contexts as expressing and affirming the continuity of the affinal alliance relationship. As a necessary part of funerals, however, affinal transfers of valuables are described instead as signifying a severance of the deceased’s group from wife-givers (Forth 1993: 51). Yet this interpretation is contradicted by an obvious continuity of affinal relationships after funerary exchanges are completed. By the same token, participants’ representations of mortuary exchanges fly in the face of even the most elementary local understanding of social relationships fundamental to the communities in question.

Since the exceptional interpretation (as I hereafter describe it) pertains specifically to a context of religious ritual, several anthropological approaches should be relevant to this problem. Anthropologists have often tended to a relativist view of religious ideas, including local interpretations of ritual action, as expressions of general ‘beliefs’ epistemologically on a par with common-sense notions of reality. Yet it has long been recognized that ritual acts and objects can acquire a significance radically different
from what obtains in mundane settings. In Leach’s (1968) well-known phrase, ritual typically entails a ‘distortion of secular norms’. For Turner (1967), things employed as ‘ritual symbols’ display polysemy and multivocality, acquiring different meanings not only inside and outside of ritual but also in different ritual contexts. While Turner linked such contrasts with the ambiguity inherent in entailed social relations (1967: 22-5, 55-7), others have attributed differences between ritual and non-ritual meanings to the ‘framing’ of ritual action, a notion derived from Bateson’s work on play (1972: 177-93) which refers to ways rituals are explicitly or implicitly set off from the rest of life, so as to ‘effect an alteration of ordinary action’ (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 75).

Recent theories of ritual and religion challenge or qualify these ideas. While recognizing framing as a common feature of ritual performance, some anthropologists have questioned whether symbolic acts defining rites as bounded activities can in themselves produce the change of rules affecting objects, actors, and relationships inside the ritual frame. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), for example, locate the distinctive quality of ritual not in its framing but in the ‘non-intentional’ quality of ritual acts (see also Bloch 2004: 68-9; Lawson & McCauley 2002: 8-10). Their approach recalls Sperber’s (1975) view of ‘meanings’ locally ascribed to symbolic acts and objects not as real motivations but as statements that merely extend the symbolism and thus themselves require a symbolic analysis. Using ‘symbolic’ to denote a special kind of cognition, Sperber further argues that such interpretations are not simply difficult to discover or subject to ‘blocked exegesis’ (as Turner would have it), but are frequently absent or insubstantial – a fact also taken up by Gilbert Lewis (1980) in his demonstration of how rituals can proceed in the absence of any generally shared knowledge of why specific acts are performed (their ‘meaning’), so long as people know how to conduct them (the ‘ruling’).

As Whitehouse (2004) has argued, where local meanings are available and people do make statements seemingly rationalizing ritual action, these may be the constructs of religious specialists or they might derive from a ‘spontaneous exegetical reflection’ on the experience of ritual participants. Such spontaneous responses might even override more authoritative, specialist interpretations. But in any case, by virtue of their immediate quality and focus on particular experiences, they are more likely to conflict with other religious ideas and broader cultural values than are ‘doctrinal’ rationalizations (Whitehouse 2004: 127-34) that Barrett (2004) has labelled ‘theologically correct’.

Also concerned with the relation between local interpretations and religious practice, Pascal Boyer (2001) posits the disparity between ritual action and exegesis as one of the defining features of ritual. Equally characteristic, according to Boyer, is ritual’s connection with representations that are ‘counterintuitive’ (Boyer 1994; 2001; see also Atran 2002; Lawson & McCauley 2002; Sperber 2001) or ‘minimally counterintuitive’ (Barrett 2004: 22). These are religious concepts, including concepts of spiritual beings, religious objects, and ritual practitioners, which contradict basic ‘ontological categories’ (Boyer 2001) or pan-human ‘modular expectations’ (Atran 2002: 96). For example, while otherwise conceived as human, and thus as having thoughts, motives, and emotions, spirits are everywhere represented as possessing such superhuman abilities as the power to become invisible, assume a variety of visible forms, and pass through physical barriers. Spiritual representations of animals typically combine recognition of their status as wild beasts with a contradictory attribution of distinctively human moral qualities (Sperber 1975: 130-1), while religious objects, although comprising things ordinarily regarded as inanimate, can nevertheless be conceived as
capable of movement or as communicating with people. From an evolutionary perspective, it is argued, this counterintuitiveness lends religious concepts an arresting quality which ensures their memorability, reproducibility, and hence survival (Boyer 2001).

Writing specifically on mortuary rituals, Boyer describes the experience of death as counterintuitive because it produces in the living contradictory ‘inferences about social interaction’ in regard to dead bodies (2001: 222). This would seem rather relevant to the exceptional interpretation of affinal exchanges specifically associated with Nage and Keo funerals. However, it must be noted that this representation is not counterintuitive in Boyer’s sense. For although it represents mortuary exchange as effecting a severance of relationships which in fact continue after the funeral, it does not contradict universal intuitive expectations regarding basic ontological categories: for example, human beings, living things, and artefacts. Nevertheless, in the context of central Florenese society and values, the representation is a contradiction, and in view of the emphasis cognitive anthropologists have placed on the counterintuitive or what Sperber (1975) originally described as the non-rational quality of symbolic ideas and of acts predicated on these, it would seem reasonable to consider how a cognitive approach to religious ritual might illuminate this contradiction.

Another common feature of rituals identified by Boyer is the way they seemingly express and effect changes in the social status of those involved (2001: 235, 255, 260–2), or typically comprise what Tambiah (1985) and others have called performative acts. Insofar as Keo and Nage represent exchanges of objects that accompany mortuary ritual as severing ties between affinally related donors and recipients, they obviously exemplify this feature. Yet the exchanges manifestly do not have this effect (cf. Boyer 2001: 255) – or to the extent that they might do, the change they are supposed to produce is necessarily transient and cannot apply beyond the period of mortuary ritual itself. Although my focus is acts involving objects of a particular cultural significance, the question thus becomes what cognitivist perspectives can contribute to an understanding of inconsistent representations of social relationships to which the acts and objects are fundamental.

This entails a corollary question, namely how a cognitive approach might augment or revise analytical approaches that can collectively be called ‘interpretivist’ (or ‘ethnographic’, cf. Whitehouse 2001). By ‘interpretivist’ I mean particularist analyses which treat social and cultural usages as psychological givens and endeavour to make sense of these by relating them to other usages and to a whole pattern or system of ideas and activities of which they are seen to form a part. The case thus provides an opportunity to compare ways of understanding religious practice and ideology which remain unrec- onciled and may even be growing further apart. In order to define the ethnographic problem adequately, it will be necessary first to attend to various aspects of the more general social and cultural (including religious) context to which it pertains; thus interpretivist perspectives are conveniently considered in the course of exploring this context. How cognitivist perspectives bear on the problem is discussed afterwards.

The wider context of Nage and Keo mortuary exchange
Although by no means exclusive to funerals, exchanges of goods between affines are necessary in the mortuary setting insofar as, formally speaking, a burial cannot take place until transfers of valuables to wife-givers are negotiated, if not actually expedited (Forth 1993: 51). Mortuary exchange is thus fully part of a wider ritual and more
particularly religious performance in a way that other instances of affinal exchange (e.g. at marriages, when inaugurating a new house, or at major sacrifices of water buffalo) are not. To be sure, contracting marriage incorporates ritual acts and, like virtually any social activity, possesses symbolic aspects. But unlike the funeral (and unlike Christian weddings, for example), marriage in central Flores is not of itself a single ritual performance. In fact, extending over a long period, often years, exchanges of prestation between wife-givers and wife-takers are by far its main constituents.

Among both Nage and Keo, the wider mortuary setting in which affinal exchanges take place comprises a complex ritual performance, typically lasting for nearly two weeks, which is clearly marked off from the rest of social life (Forth 1993; 1998: 248-53). When someone dies, agnates and fellow villagers announce the death by firing a ‘bamboo cannon’ (bo mina), an explosive device sounded day and night until the corpse is buried. Also at this time, special rules and restrictions come into effect. These apply especially to the principal mourners, the deceased’s closest agnatic kin, and last until mortuary rituals are completed nine or ten days after the burial.1 In addition to restrictions, the mortuary period is characterized by excess: once guests arrive, the deceased’s kin continually slaughter animals to provide food for all who attend and participate in nightly vigils (pa’i mata) which precede the burial and continue for several days afterwards. Component mortuary rites involve prescribed actors who engage in stereotyped action: they proceed in a preordained sequence and comprise several stages of enjoined duration. On the final day of the rites, the deceased’s family perform rituals which bring to a close the period of mourning and announce the final departure of the deceased’s soul from the community of the living. Forming a single series of acts, and taking place within the village and at certain pre-specified locations outside, mortuary ritual is thus clearly a bounded performance, and any Florenese entering a settlement where the rites were in progress would be in no doubt as to what was going on.

Aspects of Nage society have been detailed in several previous publications (Forth 1989; 1993; 1998; 2004). Residing immediately south of the Nage, Keo people in most respects share the culture and social structure of their northern neighbours (Forth 1994; 2001). Both populations are organized into named clans made up of unnamed houses. Although only houses are strictly exogamous, clans are usually so. Bridewealth secures the incorporation of a woman and her children into the husband’s group, but since bridewealth is not always paid or requested, in a minority of instances children belong to the mother’s house and clan. Nevertheless, Nage and Keo clans normally comprise an agnatic core, and affiliation to the father’s group is strongly preferred. Although marriage with groups previously unrelated to one’s own is always possible, for a man the most valued union is with his mother’s brother’s daughter (MBD) or a similarly related woman in the self-reciprocal category li ana. All other cousins are classified as siblings, and a man is especially prohibited from marrying a father’s sister’s daughter (FZD) or another woman of a wife-taking house. (Relatives removed from ego by three or more degrees are hereafter designated with the usual genealogical notations: F = father, M = mother, S = son, D = daughter, C = child, B = brother, Z = sister, W = wife, H = husband. ‘Father’s mother’s brother’, for example, is thus written as FMB.)

Since by marrying a MBD a man takes a woman from his mother’s natal house, marriage rules imply a continuity of relationship between component groups. Considered as an enduring alliance, affinal connection between houses is supposed to be

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.) 15, 557-574
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perpetuated. Death introduces discontinuity since it removes individuals from active participation in this relationship. But for Keo and Nage it does not sever relations between more permanent social corporations, which remain bound by a series of obligations. Following a major social value, then, death can never cancel the flow of life that is alliance.

Consistent with this continuing flow, funerals among Keo and Nage require an exchange of valuables between affines. Whether agnates or affines, everyone invited to a funeral contributes materially. Wife-takers of the deceased’s house bring buffalo, horses, smaller livestock, and metal valuables. Wife-givers bring cloths, pigs, and rice, while agnates may bring goods of either sort. Goods provided by affines are called ‘oko’.\(^2\) Just as bridewealth and counter-prestation are distinguished as ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ goods, wife-takers’ contributions are distinguished as hard ‘oko (‘oko ta’a dego) and wife-givers as soft ‘oko (‘oko ta’a meku). The distinction is consistent with the nature of the objects themselves, primarily as metal items as opposed to textiles, as well as with contrasting qualities of male and female bodies, not least in the context of sexual intercourse (Forth 2001: 109-11; cf. McKinnon 1991). The symbolically male and female properties of objects given by wife-givers and wife-takers further accord with qualities of their recipients. As is suggested by their designation as ana weta (‘children of sisters’, ‘sister people’), wife-takers may be categorically regarded as ‘female’ and wife-givers as ‘male’ affines. Nage and Keo cosmology does not, however, connect these objects – in the context of either marriages or funerals – with ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ components of a person (such as blood and bone), or in any way that could verify a conception of mortuary exchange as expressing a separation of the deceased’s body (weki, tebo) and soul (mae) or their reconstitution in another realm (cf. Barraud, de Coppet, Iteanu & Jamous 1994: 54; Traube 1980: 96-7). On the other hand, ‘hard’ valuables can be understood as things given to wife-givers in exchange for the body of the deceased, as I presently explain.

Whether contributed by wife-givers or agnates of the deceased, all textiles brought to the funeral are called dhoge, a term applied more specifically to cloths used to wrap the corpse. Material objects brought by affines, it should be emphasized, are identical to those used as bridewealth and counter-prestation. Often deriving from items contributed by the deceased’s wife-takers, the prestations I am concerned with here are but one component of this larger mortuary reciprocity. Nevertheless, they are the most important part. Constituting a debt to wife-givers which heirs of a deceased wife-taker must formally negotiate in the context of the funeral, they are distinguished as geta mata, ‘(what is) demanded (or required) at death’. Wife-givers solicit the goods by presenting the deceased’s heirs with pigs and cloths. Yet such is the obligation of wife-takers to provide them that, following Traube (1980), I shall hereafter designate them as ‘mortuary payments’.\(^3\)

Nage employ a more elaborate schedule of payments than do Keo. Nage are separately obligated to the deceased’s MMB, mother’s brother, and wife’s brother (or brother, in the case of a married woman’s death), while Keo are obliged only to the mother’s brother and (wife’s) brother. Since a person’s mother’s brother and MMB are themselves likely to have passed on at the time of his or her death, payments are actually owed to their houses, the present agnatic descendants of these wife-giving ascendants. Among Nage, if the group of the MMB is extinct, or if a more distant but more prestigious wife-giver (e.g. MMMB) is available, then another group may be summoned instead. All the same, I continue to specify this portion as being owed to the MMB.
Although the amounts required for each category of payment are subject to negotiation, a generally recognized minimum is one water buffalo, one horse, and a pair of golden ear pendants, given in exchange for a pig and a textile. Responsibility for the payments falls on a dead man’s heirs, usually his sons or brothers, and whoever provides the valuables, or the bulk of them, gains recognition as the deceased’s principal heir. When an unmarried child dies, the father is responsible for goods owed to the mother’s brother (and MMB among Nage). When a married woman dies, the widower is responsible for the payments, while at the death of a widow the onus falls on the deceased husband’s brothers, and particularly on the brother who inherited her.

In discharging mortuary obligations, survivors should first attend to the portion owed to the deceased’s MMB among Nage, and to the mother’s brother among Keo. Although none the less required, goods demanded by the wife’s brother (or a deceased woman’s brother) are considered of secondary importance. Recipients of mortuary payments should be the first to be invited to the funeral. Formerly, people say, mortuary payments had to be negotiated and discharged before the deceased could be buried. Since modern government regulations dictate that a corpse should be buried within twenty-four hours of death, nowadays the payments are usually discussed just after the burial and are not actually discharged until all funerary rites are completed.

If members of the house of the mother’s brother (and among Nage, the MMB) are for any reason not invited to a funeral, or if they refuse to attend and receive the payments, then it is a source of great shame for the deceased’s siblings and offspring. For it means that the deceased, and by extension they themselves, have no ‘origin’ (or ‘stem, trunk’, pu’u), a connection traced through out-married women. Failure of a deceased man’s wife’s brother to claim a mortuary payment is also a cause of shame, since it implies the deceased’s marriage was never recognized. Contrariwise, a wife-taker’s failure to provide the payment can be taken by the wife’s brother to mean that the marriage was never completed, and he can then demand that the widow and her children ‘return’ (walo) to the woman’s natal group, a circumstance that can result in their reaffiliation. Similarly, a man’s children can be recalled by their maternal uncle when a man fails to provide mortuary payments following the death of his wife. People describe the ability of a group to discharge mortuary payments as evidence that a dead man’s surviving kin are willing and able to support his wife and children. While this refers more to the portion owed to the wife’s brother than to the MB or MMB, the ability to provide all three sorts of prestations attests positively to their standing and viability as an independent social entity.

It is therefore easy to see how the mortuary payment given to the wife’s brother can be conceived as a completion of bridewealth. So too might be the other payments, though these would complete not the deceased’s wife’s bridewealth, but the deceased’s mother’s (and among Nage, the mother’s mother’s). At the same time, several particulars indicate that mortuary payments are understood as replacing the deceased, and specifically the deceased’s body. In other words, if what is given at marriage is a ‘bride price’, then these payments can be understood as a ‘corpse price’ (cf. Barraud 1990: 224-5, regarding a cannon given to the mother’s brother’s house to replace the deceased’s body in the Kei Islands). This becomes clear from the Keo term tobo, referring to the prestations in general but more specifically to the premier sort Keo owe to the deceased’s mother brother. The idea is more explicit in the complete form of the name tobo weki, ‘body tobo’, and the Keo description of the payment as weli weki, ‘price of the body, corpse’. Further suggesting a connection with corpses,
Keo identify *tobo* with *tebo*, the Nage and Keo word for ‘body, corpse’, while *tobo* alone means ‘corpse’ among the neighbouring Ngadha. Keo and Nage also apply *tobo* and *tebo*, respectively, to valuables of the same kind required for mortuary payments, which are owed to relatives of a man whose death occurred when performing a service for someone else; Nage thus call discharging such a debt ‘giving the body’ (*ti’i tebo*).4

Especially as mortuary payments are supposed to be negotiated before burial, it may be inferred that the Keo payment owed to the mother’s brother is given in exchange for the corpse, so that the deceased’s agnates may bury it.5 This is one of numerous indications, among both Nage and Keo, that even when a father has paid bridewealth and his offspring are considered members of his own house and clan, the children – and in a sense the man himself – retain a connection with the group of the mother, which thereby continues to encompass them. In the same way, a person further belongs to, or is encompassed by, the natal group of his MM, and so on (Forth 2001: 96-8, 113-17). The implicit principle that people, before death and even afterwards, as it were belong to their mother’s brother is fully consistent with Keo and Nage representations according to which individuals ‘derive from’ or ‘originate in’ (*pu’u*) their mother’s brother’s house, and moreover any house forming a link in what has been called a ‘maternal line of origin’ (Forth 2001: 114). In the same vein – but contrary to the usual anthropological idiom – both Nage and Keo also describe a person as ‘descending from’ (*dhodho pu’u* or *poro pu’u*) the houses of the mother’s brother, MMB, and more distant ascendants in this maternal origin line (Forth 2001: 130-3).

An identification of mortuary payments with the deceased’s body is further discernible in the phrase *ulu muku* (‘banana head’, ‘banana stool, cluster’), referring to the portion that Nage owe to the deceased’s MMB. In this context, *ulu*, ‘head’, has partly the same sense as does *pu’u*, ‘source, origin’. Commentators explain the botanic metaphor as alluding to qualities of the recipient. Thus, just as a banana stool gives rise to many young banana plants, so a single group in a chain of wife-givers will, over the generations, give rise to many wife-takers – children born of women transferred in marriage, who, as noted, remain connected to and partly encompassed by their wife-givers. Yet it appears equally relevant that the trunks of bananas, and among plants only bananas, are called *tebo* (‘body, corpse’). Accordingly, when someone is killed and the body cannot be recovered, Nage perform funerary rites using a banana trunk (*tebo muku*) as a substitute. A Keo curing rite similarly involves wrapping a banana trunk in a cloth and burying it; relatives of the afflicted then weep and keen as they would at an actual funeral. This is done to fool afflicting spirits into thinking their human victim has already died, so they will desist and the victim can recover.

Also suggesting an identification of mortuary payments with the body of the deceased is the Nage term for valuables that are given to the deceased’s mother’s brother. These are called *cu’a he’a*, ‘digging stick and half-coconut shell’, implements used to dig a grave (Forth 1993: 41). The name recalls how the payments should be negotiated before a burial can proceed. In addition, a Nage myth describes how the two implements replace a dead man after he returns, illegitimately, to his living kin (Forth 1998: 248). Contrary to his instruction, his widow awakens early in the morning to find, on his sleeping mat, a digging stick and coconut shell in place of the image of his body. In this mythological context, therefore, one might equally see the implements as replacements of the deceased’s soul (*mae*), a spiritual component that can assume the visible form of the body.
Payments made to a deceased man’s wife’s brother or a married woman’s brother are named ‘broken (palm-tapping) knife, split palm wine container’ (tudhi bu’a, léko bhéka). Among Keo, the first of the paired phrases can refer specifically to what is given at a man’s death, and the second to what is given at a woman’s. Contrasting a metal tool with a hollow bamboo container, the distinction suggests the same sexual imagery that is discernible in bridewealth and counter-prestation – and therefore all mortuary payments and their reciprocation. While palm-tapping is an activity of men, it is often women who transport palm wine or gin in bamboo containers when bringing the drink to wife-givers on ritual occasions. Among Nage, the payment owed to a deceased wife’s brother is called ‘palm juice that ceases to flow, vanished fowl’ (tua pota, manu mele). These names also refer to the dead person. But they further allude to the general obligation to supply wife-givers with palm wine and domestic fowls. The two consumables are thus a synecdoche for regular material support, including larger animals and other foodstuffs which wife-takers are obligated to provide to wife-givers of all kinds, particularly in the context of commensal rituals and feasting.

When a dead man has married a MBD, the most preferred spouse, mortuary payments owed to the mother’s brother and wife’s brother are of course given to the same house. Even so, Nage and Keo conceive of these as discrete transactions pertaining to different relationships. The name of the payment owed to the wife’s brother (or a woman’s brother) refers metonymically to a wife-taker whose life has ended and who is therefore no longer able to provide palm wine. It therefore equally expresses the cessation of a relationship which death has interrupted, if not entirely concluded.

**Mortuary payments in relation to mortuary ritual, eschatology, and affinal alliance**

As demonstrated elsewhere with specific reference to the Nage, funerals consist almost entirely of acts designed to remove the soul (mae) of the deceased from the community of the living (Forth 1993; 1998). Component rites thus involve a series of journeys, beginning and ending in the deceased’s house, whereby survivors successively ‘expel a dead person’s soul’ (éga mae) from his or her dwelling, village, and cultivated fields. In terms of Van Gennep’s tripartite scheme of *rites de passage*, therefore, the emphasis is squarely on separation. Like other eastern Indonesians, Keo and Nage speak of a ‘village of the dead’ (bo’a ata mata) where deceased spirits form a community largely comparable to the society of the living. People generally understand mortuary rituals as leading to an eventual incorporation of the deceased into this community. Yet this incorporation finds virtually no expression in the rites themselves. The final mortuary ritual, performed just seven days after the rituals for expelling the dead soul from habitations, is not the grand ceremony of aggregation or incorporation into the afterworld described by Hertz (1960 [1907]). For the most part, it comprises a series of acts affirming the separation of living and dead effected by earlier rituals (Forth 1993: 253; 1998: 249-53). The single possible exception is an offering of cooked food to the dead soul and dead spirits who come to collect it. Performed inside the house from which it was earlier expelled, the act marks the first time the deceased’s soul, previously conceived as a negative entity, is represented in a positive light. Yet, more than an expression of aggregation or incorporation, the offering is another rite of separation, signalling the impending final departure of the newly deceased from the world of the living.
Just as mortuary payments are partly understood as a completion of bridewealth, so Nage speak of death itself as a completion, a concept they further link with discontinuity and severance. In various mortuary rites, these ideas are reflected in a prescribed use of even numbers, spoken of by Nage as ‘complete’ numbers, and especially totals of eight, regarded as the number of death (Forth 1993: 48). Contrasting with seven, the numerical symbol of life and continuity, eight is therefore widely prohibited in non-mortuary contexts, where it is generally considered inauspicious by both Keo and Nage (Forth 1993: 48; 1998: 225, 250; 2001).

Expressed in the emphasis given to breaking connections with the deceased soul and removing it from the living community, the mortuary value on completion and separation further implicates a contrast between maleficent and beneficent forms of spirit. As a negative entity that must be decisively expelled and prevented from returning, the soul (mae) is treated like an extraneous and potentially harmful free spirit (nitu). During the mortuary period, the deceased is further associated with cannibalistic witches (polo) who come to consume both the bodies and souls of the newly buried dead (Forth 1998: 251-2) and whose anticipated presence during the funerary period is the cause of a palpable anxiety. Nevertheless, once the rites are completed, and without any further ritual articulation, the soul joins a community of beneficent ancestral spirits, not disconnected from the living but, on the contrary, reunited with living relatives in a quite different and largely positive relationship. Outside of the funeral, a great deal of Nage and Keo ritual aims at combating or acquiring protection from nitu spirits and witches. By contrast, it is mostly ancestors – humans positively transformed by death – who are considered the source of health, fertility, and general well-being. Yet neither nominally nor in any other way do Keo or Nage distinguish these ancestors from the dead in general, that is, deceased souls who have removed to the village of the dead.

Consistent with the emphasis given to separation as well as the lack of distinction of major spirit categories in the mortuary context are a number of what may be called cosmological and eschatological lacunae. Nage do speak of deceased souls returning to God (Ga’e Déwa), considered as their origin or source. Living souls are also conceived as ‘livestock’ and domestic fowls of God, who calls them home, thereby determining their proper time of death. The theme of returning to a point of origin is further expressed in a Nage reference to death as ‘re-entering the mother’s womb’ (Forth 1998: 256, also 197, 209-10). Yet, unlike some other eastern Indonesians – the eastern Sumbanese and the Timorese Mambai, for example – Nage and Keo do not speak of deceased souls eventually undergoing a second death and being reborn or reincarnated (see Forth 1981: 202-5; Traube 1980: 107). Nor in any other way do they articulate a definite cycle of life and death (Forth 1993: 56; 1998: 254). Another symptom of this unelaborated eschatology is a quite remarkable equivocality concerning the location of the ‘village of the dead’ (Forth 1998: 254-9). Unlike many other Indonesians, Nage and Keo also do not subscribe to a theory of dual or multiple souls (see, e.g., Barraud 1990: 223). Including, for example, a maleficent soul that is consumed by witches (an idea found in eastern Flores; Arndt 1951: 30, 51) and a beneficent soul which becomes transformed into a life-giving ancestor, such a duality could obviously resolve the opposition entailed by their mortuary rituals, on the one hand, and aspects of their mortuary ideology, on the other. But this is a distinction Keo and Nage do not articulate.

These details of mortuary ritual and eschatology are essential to understanding participants’ statements about the purpose of mortuary payments. Yet the transactions
must also be considered in relation to affinal alliance and affinal exchange generally. In view of minor differences between Nage and Keo, it is expedient to concentrate on just one. The following therefore mainly concerns the Keo, who, as noted, owe mortuary payments to the houses of the deceased’s mother’s brother and wife’s brother (or a married woman’s brother). For Keo, the category of ‘wife-givers’ (moi mame, moi ga’e) subsumes all groups that have previously provided women to a person’s own (thus the houses of the mother’s brother, FMB, FFMB, etc.). These I distinguish as ‘direct wife-givers’. Also included are groups further removed in the previously mentioned maternal line of origin. Comprising, for example, the houses of a person’s MMB and MMB, these are groups linked over the generations through a succession of women’s marriages. Although the two types of wife-givers are distinguishable analytically, the mother’s brother – the recipient of the main Keo mortuary payment – of course belongs to both groups, being the closest link in a person’s own maternal line as well as a direct wife-giver of a man’s agnatically constituted group.

When a man dies, other direct wife-givers, particularly members of the houses of his FMB and FFMB, receive gifts appropriate to their status, usually a single buffalo or a golden ornament. These objects reciprocate the cloths and pigs these wife-givers bring to the funeral. But this exchange is of a more generalized and less obligatory character than mortuary payments. The Nage practice of making the premier payment to the MMB underlines this distinction, for it demonstrates that it is a wife-giver representing the maternal line of origin to whom one is most obligated. As noted, Keo and Nage describe themselves as originating in and ‘descending’ from the houses of their mother’s brother, MMB, MMB, and more distant relatives in this line – a representation that does not apply to direct wife-givers such as the FMB and FFMB.

In a sense, continuity of relations in the maternal line of origin is assured simply by genealogical ramification. In contrast, the relation of direct wife-givers and wife-takers ideally requires repeated marriage with the same other groups for its perpetuation. Nevertheless, Keo deem it desirable that affinal ties of both sorts should endure beyond single marriages. Wife-takers and wife-givers are thus admonished ‘not to allow palm wine to cease flowing, nor let the fowls disappear’ (tua ma’e pota, manu ma’e ‘ila), an expression drawing on the idiom denoting mortuary payments made to a man’s wife’s brother or a married woman’s brother. Keo commentators interpret the phrases as referring both to the material assistance that wife-takers are expected to provide to wife-givers and to the value on taking women in marriage from established wife-givers. This material assistance, it is worth emphasizing, is owed not just to immediate wife-givers (e.g. the wife’s brother) but also to the heirs of a man’s FMB, FFMB, and so on, as well as to houses in the maternal line (those of the mother’s brother, MMB, and MMB). So long as wife-takers keep honouring their material obligations, Keo say, two groups can continue to consider themselves affines even in the absence of further marriages between them. Keo men, therefore, can be said to inherit their father’s maternal line of origin as well as continuing to recognize wife-givers in their own maternal line.

Since the value on perpetuating established affinal alliances (through either further marriages or material exchange) is quite unequivocal, the Keo evaluation of mortuary payments not as preserving but, on the contrary, as severing the relationship between donor and recipient seems perfectly contradictory. Considering the names of the various payments, this evaluation might appear to refer, especially or exclusively, to the wife’s brother’s portion (the ‘broken knife, split palm wine container’). Yet it in fact
applies to payments owed to both the mother’s brother and wife’s brother without
distinction. Keo express the purpose of all mortuary payments as ‘breaking the con-
nection’ (an idea commonly expressed with the Indonesian national language phrase
putus hubungan). In other words, while death causes ‘the palm-tapping knife to break
and the palm wine container to split’, the palm wine is nevertheless supposed still to
keep flowing – something it in fact usually does as, after the funeral, the same affinally
related groups normally continue to engage in affinal exchange.

Analysis
According to a long-standing anthropological assumption, seeming inconsistencies in
a people’s ideas and practice should disappear once their entire culture and social
system have been sufficiently investigated and analysed. In the present case, several
implicit distinctions may suggest themselves as potentially resolving the dialectic of
separation and connection (or continuity and discontinuity) expressed in divergent
evaluations of affinal exchange. Mortuary payments are said to ‘break the connection’
between the deceased’s group and certain wife-giving affines. Yet this breach follows
from the death of a particular person, so it may be supposed that the notion of a general
affinal disconnection is an over-generalization, and that what mortuary payments
specifically sever is the relationship between the deceased and particular life-giving
affines.

There are several problems with this. Apart from the fact that Keo and Nage them-
selves do not distinguish groups from individuals in this context, it raises the question
of how a dead man’s offspring could inherit the connection between their father and
his mother’s brother – the father’s maternal line of origin – if this connection had been
severed following his death. Ironically, moreover, it is when mortuary payments are not
discharged that affinal ties are considered broken. As noted, the deceased’s marriage
then ceases to be recognized, and children become subsumed in their mother’s natal
group (that of a deceased’s man’s wife’s brother). Similarly, failure to discharge mor-
tuary debts to the deceased’s mother’s brother (and MMB among Nage) results in a
shameful disattachment of surviving children, and siblings as well, from what is con-
sidered their house of ‘origin’ (pu’u), a condition tantamount to birth outside of a
recognized marriage and thus an absence of affinity.

Underlining the apparent impossibility of mortuary payments completely discon-
necting wife-givers from wife-takers is a Keo procedure which, on first inspection,
might seem even more clearly to separate a dead man’s heirs from wife-giving affines.
Very occasionally a wealthy man (never a woman) will complete his own mortuary
payments, thereby ‘making clear his back (or background, genealogy)’ (logo sia). By
discharging all debts, the man, who is also called logo sia, severs all connection with his
wife-givers even while still alive. He thus frees himself of all material obligations to
them, and when he dies they are not even invited to the funeral. A logo sia also need no
longer observe restrictions to which wife-takers as a class are subject, nor other prohi-
bitions, such as his own clan taboos. In this case severance of ties with wife-givers is
furthermore marked with special rites. A representative of the group of the man’s
mother’s brother sprinkles him with foxtail millet and ash from a punctured coconut
shell, a procedure otherwise employed to formalize banishment. A logo sia may further
undergo a ritual in which his head is shaven and he remains naked in a confined space
for four nights – the even total in this case expressing a symbolic completion. Keo
explained these acts as effecting a sort of rebirth or return to a state of infancy, and thus a reversion to a premarital condition.

Some Keo claim that men who thus sever relations with wife-givers should forbid their sons from reviving the alliance by marrying a mother’s brother’s daughter. Although not everyone I spoke to agreed with this, so insistent was its principal proponent that it can be understood at least as a possible entailment of the practice. The idea is certainly consistent with the theme of concluding affinal relations. Since a logo sia in effect usurps the place of surviving relatives, most notably his sons, by discharging material obligations to wife-giving affines himself, he precludes agnatic survivors from affirming alliances by themselves making the payments. Yet even in this case a dead man’s sons retain a connection with their own mother’s brother (the deceased’s wife’s brother) simply by virtue of being born to his sister. For both Keo and Nage, this tie is constituted of blood transferred through the woman to her children (Forth 2001: 133-7, 143-4); hence it is necessarily realized before her death and before her formal severance from her own natal house effected by the mortuary payment given to her brother or his heirs.

As an unusual procedure, logo sia may be viewed as an exception that proves the rule. For it suggests that, normally, surviving kin, by discharging mortuary payments, affirm or re-establish affinal ties potentially dissolved by death. Consistent with this, Keo do not fully approve of the practice, seeing it as motivated by excessive pride and an arrogant individualism, as well as a possible distrust of survivors to provide adequately after one’s death. Such misapprobation implies that the custom is contrary to local values concerning affinal alliance and ideas of maternal derivation. Yet this of course only underlines the initial problem. Alliance involves continuity and an enduring recognition of origins. In contrast, Keo statements about mortuary payments emphasize ideas of severance, completion, and discontinuity.

There is, however, another way in which one might construe affinal separation consequent to a wife-taker’s death. Payment of bridewealth – of which the mortuary prestations can be considered the final instalment – secures the separation of a woman from her natal group. Yet it also entails the separation of the husband and, eventually, their children from the wife-giver’s house. At the same time, this separation is qualified since, as noted previously, wife-takers – the woman, children, and in a sense the husband also – remain ‘encompassed’ by this house (cf. McKinnon 1991, who describes a comparable conception of affinity in the Tanimbar Islands). Earlier it was shown how payments made to the MB and MMB can be conceived as objects given in exchange for the body of the deceased (and possibly, insofar as these are at this point distinguished, the soul in regard to the Nage portion for the MB). One might therefore suppose that it is especially this separation, of a man from his wife-givers and a woman from her natal group, which people refer to when they interpret mortuary payments as severing ties of affinity. Nevertheless, if marriage payments separate the body from wife-givers as it were prior to burial, any severance they bring about evidently constitutes no more than a temporary transformation of alliance relations. That is, while the interpretation of mortuary payments appears to negate the value attached to affinal alliance, this value is eventually restored, just as an initially negative conception of the deceased, as an extraneous malevolent spirit, is ultimately replaced by a more positive, and dominant, view of the dead as ancestors with whom living descendants remain indefinitely connected in an enduring reciprocity comparable to the relationship of affinal alliance. This reciprocity, it should be noted, also involves material values: ‘cooked things’ (ta’a
boto), or food offerings made by the living, are exchanged for ‘raw things’ (ta’a ngeta), an allusion to fertility that ensures the productivity of cultivated fields.

On the other hand, the ultimate incorporation of the dead into a community of deceased spirits can be seen to parallel a subsumption by wife-givers of dead wife-takers, represented by the mortuary payments the latter owe to the former. Supporting this interpretation is an implicit identification of wife-givers (called moi ga’e, ‘lord and master’) with deceased spirits in the sense of ancestors, and furthermore with the Divinity (Ga’e Dèwa, comprising ga’e, ‘lord, master’, and dèwa, ‘divinity’; Forth 1998: 195-204). Nage and Keo consider all of these as sources (pu’u) of human life, and credit all with powers of life and death. While these ideas have been ethnographically substantiated elsewhere (see Forth 1993; 1998; 2001: 121), it may be additionally noted that the term for parents, me ame, can designate both ancestors (or the beneficent dead) and wife-givers – and wife-givers most notably in the context of general mortuary exchange (i.e. the previously described provision of ‘oko). Since wife-takers are in a sense designated as ‘children’ (see ana weta, understood as ‘children of sisters’), the two sorts of affines are therefore associated with higher and lower generations (cf. Barraud 1990: 218-20). Only in this light can one understand terms applied to textiles (’oko ta’a meku) that wife-givers bring to funerals. Suspended above the deceased’s head in the house prior to burial, these are called ‘spittle’ (ae lua) and are conceived as constituting a ‘blessing’ (berkat, an Indonesian gloss of Nage tefa nizo, meaning ‘to apply spittle’). Relevant here is the general practice whereby occupants of a superior status place spittle on inferiors in order to secure their well-being and protection (Forth 1996: 84-5).

Usages implicating separation of wife-takers from wife-givers and the subsumption, or encompassment, of wife-takers by wife-givers might therefore appear to relate to two major phases or aspects of the mortuary process, one in which the dead is represented as a malevolent spirit and a second in which the dead, and especially the soul (mae), becomes assimilated to a community of ancestral spirits. Implicit in this distinction is a further identification, during the mortuary period, not only of wife-givers (particularly those in the maternal line of origin) with life-giving ancestors but also of wife-takers – the deceased’s own group – with the alienated, potentially harmful dead. Yet crucial to this interpretation are distinctions which local commentators do not explain, least of all when they simply describe mortuary payments as severing connections between the two sorts of affines. While significantly illuminated, therefore, the initial problem remains.

Conclusions
Writing on another eastern Indonesian people, the Tanimbar Islanders, Susan McKinnon refers to a continuing ‘tension’ between separation and encompassment as two aspects of the affinal relationship. In one place she even refers to these as ‘contradictory impulses’ (1991: 190, emphasis supplied). As should be clear, this assessment could equally apply to affinal alliance in central Flores. In the present case, moreover, the fact that contradictory tendencies are inherent in social relationships in general goes some way towards accounting for the inconsistency between representations of affinal exchange pertaining to different social contexts. However, among Nage and Keo, separation or severance of affinal relationship, to the manifest exclusion of continuity and encompassment, is specific to their evaluation of mortuary exchange, so the question is why this should be.
One possible recourse might be a Dumontian approach, turning on a notion of ‘hierarchical opposition’ involving an ‘encompassment of the contrary’ (Dumont 1979). Applied to Indonesian mortuary exchange, such an approach is exemplified by Barraud and her colleagues (Barraud 1990; Barraud et al. 1994). Dumontian analysis recognizes contradiction or inconsistency in cultural representations as a regular feature of social life. Attributing this to a postulated difference of ‘levels of reality or experience’ associated with different ‘values’ manifest in change or inversion of the significance attached to acts or objects in different contexts (see, e.g., Barraud et al. 1994: 110, 113), such contrariety is, however, accommodated, even elevated to a principle of social order (at least for some societies), without itself ever being explained. In the present case, one might simply say that affinal relations take on a different ‘value’ in the context of death, or do so where death, rather than life, figures as the higher, or encompassing, ‘level’.

At the same time, in its focus on systematic opposition and inversion, Dumontian analysis resembles recent cognitivist approaches that highlight the counterintuitive or non-rational quality of religious representations. In considering the relevance of such approaches for the case at hand, attention must first be given to a question foreshadowed earlier, namely whether the exceptional interpretation of Nage and Keo mortuary payments (as exclusively effecting affinal severance) is a conventional representation widely accepted as authoritative, or a ‘spontaneous exegetical reflection’ (Whitehouse 2004) informed by direct experience of death. As Whitehouse has argued, even where authoritative (or ‘doctrinal’) meanings are available, especially intense ritual experiences such as those affecting people involved in life-cycle rites can produce cognitively simpler interpretations that override the former (2004: 161-3). For central Florenese villagers, death is a regular event providing immediate experience of dead persons and their grieving kin. Regardless of how closely related participants are to the deceased, it produces intense emotion, experienced either directly or as it were by contagion. Interpretations of mortuary practice might therefore be thought to tend towards the spontaneous, even to the extent of contradicting ideological glosses that are more authoritative (in the sense of enjoying a wide, general acceptance, if not actually promoted by specialized religious authorities) or ‘theologically correct’ (Barrett 2004; Whitehouse 2004: 128-30).

On the other hand, the evaluation of mortuary payments as effecting separation is one Nage and Keo express outside of the immediate context of funerals. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in informants’ accounts of the affinal severance entailed by the rare and unusual practice of logo sia, a fact that underlines the significance of this institution for the present discussion. Even in an ethnographic context that does not include written records, therefore, the exceptional interpretation can indeed be called widespread and authoritative. This suggests, then, that it is not spontaneous or directly motivated by experiences of death. Rather, the interpretation is ‘ritualized’, constituting a ‘non-intentional’ verbal act (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994) that is discrepant in relation to the actions – transfers of material objects – to which it seemingly refers (cf. Keane 1994). Put another way, the interpretation can only be understood as a ‘symbolic’ statement (sensu Sperber 1975), one that cannot be taken as a rational account of its apparent referent – acts of exchange – which it neither motivates nor properly interprets. As such, it exemplifies the disparity of action and local exegesis which, in addition to the counterintuitive character of religious representations, Boyer (2001) sees as characteristic of religious ritual, and Sperber as the hallmark of ‘symbolism in general’ (the original French title of his 1975 book).
But what is to account for this disparity? It is conceivable that the exceptional exegesis of mortuary exchange is one Nage and Keo find arresting and that, as a curious idea, it holds their attention and so continues to be replicated. But while this may explain its durability and persistence, it sheds little light on its exclusive association with mortuary activity.

However spontaneous it may appear to be, there is evidently no ‘theologically correct’ doctrine that the exceptional interpretation of Keo and Nage mortuary payments could challenge. What it does challenge, however, are evaluations of affinal exchange conducted in other social and ritual contexts. By all ethnographic indications, the contradiction which the interpretation implies can only be ascribed to the total ritual context in which mortuary exchange takes place. As demonstrated, this context comprises a series of rites whose overriding theme is separation, serving implicitly or explicitly to separate the deceased’s body from wife-givers in the maternal line of origin, the deceased soul from the living, and, during the period of mourning from burial to the final mortuary ritual, the deceased’s closest relatives from the rest of the community. At the same time, the exceptional interpretation of mortuary payments lends the exchange a special quality, transforming it into a symbolic act comparable to and consistent with other mortuary performances. That is to say, it changes what would otherwise be just another affinal exchange, if not exactly into a rite, then into an act integral to the transformation of a living affine into a deceased spirit.

This is not to argue that the contradiction is generated simply by the ritual ‘frame’ that defines the mortuary period. Rather, it is the pervasive emphasis on separation expressed throughout this period which inclines Keo and Nage to conceive of mortuary exchange as contributing to a series of severances. In other words, the exceptional interpretation – as a symbolic statement itself amounting to a non-intentional ritual act – suggests a product of ‘analogical reasoning’ (Whitehouse 2004: 100-1, 113-15) whereby exegeses illuminating certain actions are constructed with reference to others that are more transparent or better established. Among the latter, one thinks, for example, of the rites for ‘expelling the soul’ and various other acts that involve discarding or casting away objects associated with the dead (Forth 1993; 1998: 250-1), not to mention possibilities of interpretation suggested by names of mortuary payments like ‘broken knife, split container’ and ‘palm wine that ceases to flow’. Probably none of this would work were separation not already an aspect or tendency of the affinal relationship articulated in all acts of affinal exchange. Nevertheless, it is almost certainly the special character of mortuary rites that produces the normative ‘distortion’ whereby separation and discontinuity are foregrounded entirely at the expense of continuity and encompassment.

A cognitive source of this distortion might be found in the sociological counterintuition which Boyer identifies in encounters with dead bodies. These, he argues, produce a ‘dissociation’ similar to that manifest in forms of cognitive impairment (2001: 222-4). Conceivably such dissociation could lead to an overemphasis on severing connections between surviving ritualists and the ritual object (the corpse), particularly in view of the ‘splitting off’ or separation of thoughts and emotions characteristic of dissociated states (Brunet, Holowka & Laurence 2003: 25). And this could especially apply in cultural settings where other factors encourage such disconnection. Cognitivist approaches may not fully explain the contradictory character of Nage and Keo representations of mortuary exchange, but this is to be expected given their analytical focus on pan-human proclivities rather than usages of specific cultures. At the same
time, a purely ethnographic or interpretivist approach cannot get around the fact that the exceptional interpretation of mortuary payments is inconsistent with local representations of other instances of affinal exchange and alliance ideology in general. As in the present instance, ethnographic analysis can afford an understanding of how inconsistent representations make a kind of sense in relation to larger patterns of social relations and cultural values. Yet ethnographic interpretation should not preclude consideration of other perspectives, however partial their contribution might appear. As Nage and Keo statements about mortuary exchange manifestly contradict what they say in other contexts about affinal exchange, the contradictory representation at the very least lends support to cognitivist insight concerning the inconsistent or non-rational character of ideas that pertain to what can broadly be called religion and symbolism.

NOTES

Fieldwork among Keo and Nage was conducted during multiple visits to Flores between 1984 and 2008. Funding was mostly provided by the British Academy and the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada. Research sponsors included the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI), Nusa Cendana and Artha Wacana Universities in Kupang, and St Paul’s Major Seminary in Ledalero, Maumere, Flores. I am grateful to all of these bodies for their support.

1 The variance reflects the possibility of completing rites for expelling the deceased’s soul in one day or two.

2 Although Nage and Keo appear not to recognize any separate meaning of ‘oko, for the Ngadha, their western neighbours, the cognate roko has been glossed as ‘clothing for the dead’ and ‘to wrap up the dead’ (Arndt 1961: 472). These partly coincide with meanings of Nage dhoge, a term I discuss just below.

3 Previously (Forth 1993) I have called them ‘death payments’.

4 Further pointing in this direction is dhoi toko, ‘(what) carries the bones’, the name Keo give to a parang sometimes included in the mortuary payment owed to the deceased’s mother’s brother (Forth 2001: 120, n. 25).

5 It has been reported for another eastern Indonesian society that valuables given to wife-givers at funerals specifically replace the deceased’s blood (Barraud 1990: 225, on the Kei Islands). For comparative purposes, it may be noted that, although Nage and Keo recognize the connection with the mother’s brother as a tie of blood transferred through the mother (Forth 2001: 133-7), they do not speak of blood in the context of mortuary exchange.

6 Some Keo claimed that, to do so effectively, the man should give goods not only to his mother’s brother but to all known wife-givers in the maternal life of origin, thus also the houses of his MMB, MMMB, and so on.

7 It may also be considered that this emphasis on separation could specifically reflect the wife-takers’ perspective, and partly implicate their material and political interests. According to Valeri (1994), in another eastern Indonesian society, the Huaulu of Seram, only wife-takers view bridewealth as fully reciprocating the value of the bride and thus separating her from her natal group. Wife-givers, by contrast, treat her transfer, together with the counter-prestation, as a gift implying a continuing obligation on the part of the husband’s group. But while this analysis also resonates with central Florenese marriage, the interpretation of mortuary payments as effecting a similar severance (of the body from wife-givers in the maternal line or of the deceased’s group from these wife-givers) is not advanced only by wife-takers. It is a general idea not exclusive to either alliance status.

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Séparer les morts : transformation rituelle de l’échange entre affins dans le centre de Florès

Résumé

Les populations du centre de l’île de Florès représentent les échanges obligatoires d’objets lors des funérailles comme le signal de cessation de relations entre des groupes liés par affinité, en contradiction avec un principe local bien établi selon lequel les relations d’affinité survivent aux personnes concernées. Cette opposition est éclairée par un contexte mortuaire comprenant des rites qui mettent l’accent sur la séparation et sur une vision singulièrement négative des morts, excluant la représentation plus positive des liens entre les morts et les vivants qu’exprimeraient l’idéologie religieuse. Une analyse purement ethnographique ne suffit cependant pas à résoudre cette contradiction, et il faut donc recourir à une perspective cognitiviste, et en particulier à des approches axées sur les aspects contre-intuitifs du rituel et sur les représentations religieuses qui contredisent l’entendement habituel des choses.

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