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THE DEATH OF A TIMUGON MURUT

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THE DEATH OF SIANU

It is nearing dawn now. As the sun rises above the misty hills its first faint rays penetrate the slits of a bamboo wall revealing a group of people huddled together in the large front room of a house. They have not slept all night. In the middle of the floor old grandmother Sianu is lying on her sleeping mat, dying. Her wasted body is scarcely bigger than that of a child, and her chest is heaving heavily as her eyes scan the people gathered around her. There is Simon, her eldest, her only son, looking very grave and strained after the sleepless night. Sujana, one of her three daughters, is squatting right next to her, holding her hand and talking to her in a quiet, reassuring voice. Then there are all the grandchildren, from the grown-up boys to little Stella, who is fast asleep on her mother's lap.

For a moment Sianu's vision is blurred again, but she manages to come round one more time. This time her eyes focus on her son-in-law who has stood up as if to do something. She watches him walk to the big brass gong hung from the rafters, and as the light goes out of her eyes, the last sound that she hears with her dying senses is that of the slow, monotonous beating of the gong. It is the sound of the death beat and it is sounding for her, and now she must die . . .

The women start to wail in loud, high-pitched voices, embracing the dead body of old grandmother Sianu, while the men sit and watch silently, faces strained with emotion.

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As the beat of the gong echoes monotonously across the fields, the people are getting up from their sleeping mats or raising their heads from their morning chores, all with the same question in their minds: "Where does the sound come from? Which village? Who has died?"

With the first messengers sent from the mourning house, the word quickly gets around. The people are spreading the word as they meet on the roads and in the fields. Soon it is known by all the villages around the area that time has run out for old Sianu. She has left the land of the living and is now on her way to Nabalun, to the afterworld of the spirits. Her death was the kind that most of her kinsmen would covet for themselves. She died peacefully of old age, in her own house, surrounded by relatives and friends. What more can one ask at the hour of death!

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe the complexity of customs and some of the beliefs of the Timugon Muruts¹ concerning death.

The data was obtained in different ways: first of all, by personal observation while attending funeral wakes, burials and memorial feasts in the Tenom area while doing field work from 1983 to 1985. Secondly, I questioned various people, both young and old, about their customs concerning death. Often these questions arose from my own lack of understanding of some observed ritual or behaviour. Sometimes I asked comparative questions like: "The Tagal Muruts have this practice, do the Timugon also follow it, or how do you go about it?" This method yielded a lot of valuable information. Thirdly, I asked some of my informants to write in their own words what happens when a person dies, and then I compared their stories with my own notes.

Excerpts from the observed death, wake, and funeral of an old Timugon lady, who died in December 1984, illustrate some of the points of discussion. The names used in connection with this are fictional in order not to offend the Timugon people concerning their taboos about mentioning the names of people, especially the deceased.

BASIC CONCEPTS

The concept of a person

The Timugon concept of a person consists of a body and two souls. The body (inan) has a limited life span. The first soul (ambiluo) is the spirit of the dead person. This is the soul that goes on living in the afterworld after a person's death. The person's other soul (saliguor) is the soul of the living person. This concept includes the thoughts, words, and deeds of the person. When someone is gossiping about another person, people may say to him: *Pai pangasau ra saliguor nano*, 'Don't disturb his spirit.' They are afraid that the person's saliguor will hear and take revenge on the offender.

Concept of death

"From ashes to ashes and from dust to dust. . ." These are the words that people in the West are used to hearing in recognising the mortality of man, but how do the Timugon understand death? Why do they think a man must die? Their concept of death is found in an old story, passed on from generation to generation, and as it has been recounted numerous times, so it lives on today, telling how the Timugon people came to be.

There was a great flood in which everyone drowned except one young man, who climbed up a very tall coconut tree. After the waters began to recede, he went down to look for survivors. An angel from heaven (masundu) came to tell him that there were no other survivors and that he should marry her. She came in the form of a woman who had a skin disease, something like ringworm, and the young man did not want to marry her. Instead he went off to look for prettier girls. The angel got very angry and in his absence made a clay figure that looked much like herself, except that it did not have the markings of the ringworm. Then she made the figure into a living being by spitting red