

Keramili

Mortuary Exchange and the Valuation of Interpersonal Relationships Amongst the Tiwi (North Australia)

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1. Introduction

The Tiwi Aborigines from Bathurst and Melville Islands in northern Australia are known for their elaborate death rites.¹ Currently, about 2,500 Tiwi live in modern townships in the two tropical islands north off the Australian coast. In spite of dramatic socio-economic change over the past century, they continue to perform their traditional mortuary rituals (called *pukamani*). Ritual workers carry out the tasks that close relatives of the deceased are not allowed to do due to mourning taboos (also called *pukamani*). They handle the corpse, make the coffin, dig and close the grave, prepare the ceremonial grounds, and sculpture and paint tree trunks to be erected around the grave at the conclusion of the postfuneral rites (*iloti*). Furthermore, the workers do away with the personal belongings of the deceased, mark tabooed places, conduct purification rituals, and keep the spirits of the dead at bay. The workers get paid for their ritual services in Australian dollars.

The commodification of death, however, is not a new phenomenon in Tiwi society: before the introduction of money in the second half of the twentieth century, the workers used to be paid with artifacts and ritual paraphernalia.² The English terms ‘workers’ and ‘boss’, for the leader of the ceremonies, equate the ritual roles with work relations at the former mission and government settlements. The difference is that on other occasions when the mortuary rituals need to be performed the roles might be reversed. The post-funeral rites, in addition, nowadays take place in the weekends, and not during working days, in adjustment to the rhythm of contemporary life. On the basis of his long-term fieldwork in the late 1920s, Steve Hart stressed ‘the bookkeeping mentality’ of

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² E. VENBRUX: ‘Commodification of death’ in C.D. BRYANT & D.L. PECK (eds.): *Encyclopedia of death and the human experience* 1 (Los Angeles 2009) 211-213.

the Tiwi.³ This mentality seems to have prevailed when later on the Tiwi accommodated to a money economy, especially in payments for ritual services.

These and other exchanges amongst the Tiwi are guided by the concept of *keramili*. *Keramili* (a Malay loanword) refers to the moral requirement to strike a balance in exchanges, that is, to make things level. If there were only single-stranded relationships between the actors, like in trade or in hiring an undertaker, this type of reciprocity would terminate the relationship. The ritual exchange relations between the workers and their employers, however, are linked with the exchange of marriage partners between exogamous matriclans. Hart writes that the debts in death rituals ‘were carried on the same mental ledgers as other debts, such as marriage debts’.⁴ Both modes of exchange follow the same lines and are even more closely linked. It is namely a conventional feature of the performative role of the ritual worker to stress (in one’s lyrics) existing marriage debts, one way or another. Sometimes people refused to perform as ritual workers when there had been no marriage deal effected between the respective groups or when the score was even. Also, during my anthropological fieldwork in the islands – in 1988-1989 and subsequent short return visits in the following two decades – it happened time and again that people expected to come for the final rites did not turn up. It gradually dawned upon me that rather than an aberration the no show of some people was quite common, almost as if it was part of the ritual. This prompted me to try to understand what was actually going on in the mortuary exchanges.

Monetary exchange and gift exchange are often seen in opposition to each other.⁵ What does it mean that money became an important medium in the mortuary exchanges of the Tiwi? Has the market economy penetrated their death rites? What kind of transactions do actually take place in the monetary payments of the ritual workers?

Bloch and Parry note that there exists ‘a deeply entrenched notion about the transformative potential of money such that its presence becomes an index of a “modern” society, with the corollary that in a “traditional” one it can only be of peripheral significance’.⁶ In Aboriginal Australia, according to Peterson and Taylor, there are few indications of the beginnings of a change in this direction, mainly in those instances where households manage to accumulate money rather than sharing it with others outside the household. The modernization, in their view, is hampered by the cultural imperative of sharing outside the house-

³ C.W.M. HART & A.R. PILLING: *The Tiwi of North Australia* (New York 1960) 92.

⁴ HART & PILLING: *The Tiwi of North Australia* 91-92.

⁵ J. DUFFY & D. PUZZELLO: ‘Gift exchange versus monetary exchange. Theory and evidence’, in *American economic review* 104/6 (2014) 1735-1776; W. KEANE: ‘Money is no object. Materiality, desire and modernity in an Indonesian society’, in F.R. MYERS (ed.): *The empire of things. Regimes of value and material culture* (Santa Fe 2001) 65-90, p. 67.

⁶ M. BLOCH & J. PARRY: ‘Introduction. Money and the morality of the exchange’, in IDEM (eds): *Money and the morality of exchange* (Cambridge 1989) 1-32, p. 7.

hold.⁷ The ritual expenditure in cash to the workers by the Tiwi, following this line of reasoning, does not necessarily imply an erosion of their customary ways. Yet, the general assumption, as Bloch and Parry make clear, is that ‘money acts as an incredibly powerful agent of profound social and cultural transformations’.⁸

With regard to remote Aboriginal communities in northern Australia, Altman developed his model of the ‘hybrid economy’, including besides the market and state (or private and public) sectors also the customary sector.⁹ Altman looks at the intersections between these sectors, but admits that Aboriginal people themselves consider them discrete spheres and that this needs to be further examined.¹⁰ I take up here the suggestion by Keane that the boundary is set by ‘the work of ritualization’.¹¹ The payments to the ritual workers, I want to argue, have to be understood in the ritual context that allows for a valuation of interpersonal relationships. This is in accordance with Mauss’s insight concerning gift exchange, as Carrier puts it, ‘that transactions reflect and help define the relationship between transactors’.¹² In other words, in the hybrid economy of the Tiwi the payments to the ritual workers are not a mere economical transaction, but one related to the (re)production of social relationships.

2. The ritual context

The aim of the cycle of mortuary rites is to guide the spirit of the deceased from the world of the living to the world of the dead. It comprises of a funeral, a series of intermediary rites, and post-funeral rites.¹³ The accomplishment of the death rites can take a few months, and in exceptional cases even up to some ten months. The Tiwi put a great deal of their time, effort and resources in them, although the execution of the death rites varies in elaboration from case to case: sometimes the cycle is abbreviated and at other times it are full-scale, prestigious occasions. Mortuary rituals and marriage politics were and are both avenues by which individual Tiwi people can acquire influence and prestige. This accounts for the organizers as well as the ritual workers.¹⁴ Due to a high

⁷ N. PETERSON & J. TAYLOR: ‘The modernizing of the indigenous domestic moral economy’, in *The Asia Pacific journal of anthropology* 4/1-2 (2003) 105–122.

⁸ BLOCH & PARRY: ‘Introduction’ 3.

⁹ J.C. ALTMAN: ‘The hybrid economy and anthropological engagements with policy discourse’, in *The Australian journal of anthropology* 20 (2009) 318–329.

¹⁰ ALTMAN: ‘The hybrid economy’ 324.

¹¹ KEANE: ‘Money is no object’ 78.

¹² J.G. CARRIER: ‘Exchange’, in C. TILLEY, et al. (eds.): *Handbook of material culture* (London 2006) 373–383, p. 376.

¹³ For a detailed description, I refer to E. VENBRUX: *A death in the Tiwi Islands. Conflict, ritual and social life in an Australian Aboriginal community* (Cambridge 1995).

¹⁴ See HART & PILLING: *The Tiwi of North Australia*.

mortality rate, Tiwi and other Aborigines in North and Central Australia are frequently confronted with death.¹⁵ During my fieldwork, for instance, I observed no less than 70 mortuary rituals. Since the late 1980s, Tiwi society had also to deal with a wave of suicides among youths. Allegedly, they have the highest suicide rate in the world.¹⁶ The centrality of death rites in Tiwi culture has thus been exacerbated by the frequent occurrence of death. Modern means of communication and transport, in addition, facilitate a greater number of people to attend funerals elsewhere in the islands than was possible before.

It is not uncommon for Australian Aborigines to refer to their ceremonies as 'business'. This is certainly apt in the case of the Tiwi. Tiwi, however, also speak of 'trouble' in relation to ritual. Indeed the rituals are occasions to deal with troubles in exchange relations and for evening the scores. A script inherited from the mythological ancestors has to be followed, but the participants link the conventional ritual events with their own stories and personal experiences put in metaphorical language and action. That is, the 'narrators' express themselves in ritual performances by means of lyrics, dance, gestures, bodily art and the plastic arts. In their lyrics performers frequently remind others of their indebtedness. Mortuary exchanges are not confined to ritual services and monetary payments. Manifold claims and counter-claims are the subject of mourning songs and other ceremonial performances (or even non-attendance) and part of an ongoing social discourse.

The consanguines of the deceased are dependent on members of other clans, with whom they also exchange marriage partners, for the performance of ritual services. As mentioned, taboos prevent the close relatives from undertaking these tasks – such as handling the corpse, preparing the ceremonial grounds, and sculpturing grave posts – themselves. They are expected, however, to act as ritual workers when the roles are reversed, and there is a death in the other group.

Besides this reciprocal relationship with in-laws, the close relatives of the deceased enact ritual roles according to their specific category of relationship to the dead person, such as bereaved patrilineal or matrilineal parents, children, grandparents, siblings or cousins of the deceased. Both actual and classificatory kin are part of the various categories of the bereaved. The dances and songs of each category have the specific relationship as their theme. Their *dreamings* or totemic clan affiliations are the subject of songs and dances, also. In other words, the actors construct a social biography of the deceased in their collective endeavor, defining the social loss and constituting the new spirit of the dead. More often than not, the songs composed for the occasion consist of a dialogue between the performer and the spirit of the deceased. Originality and creativity involves prestige and is highly valued in the Tiwi artistic system.

¹⁵ K. GLASKIN, M. TONKINSON, Y. MUSHARBASH & V. BURBANK (eds.): *Mortality, mourning and mortuary practices in indigenous Australia* (Farnham 2009).

¹⁶ C. SCOTT-CLARK & A. LEVY: 'The land of the dead', in *The Guardian* (24 June 2006) www.theguardian.com/world/2006/jun/24/australia.adrianlevy.

Hence, it is a requirement that Tiwi singers compose entirely new songs for every occasion, and that the makers of carved and painted mortuary posts produce unique works.

Unless obliged by a very close relationship to the deceased, Tiwi perceive of their sorrow, ritual performances and services as gifts. These 'gifts', including dances and songs, are not free. Such gifts and the ritual payments, once made, always have to be reciprocated on future occasions. The web of mutual ritual obligations pulling people in after a death is an important phenomenon on which the whole 'ceremony business' thrives.¹⁷

Although balanced reciprocity or *keramili* serves as a guiding principle in claims and counter-claims being made, the transactors in this kin-based society have many-stranded relations and are far from always in agreement about the value of what is being transacted on the different scores over the course of time. Certainly, a concern in the payment of workers who made the grave posts happened to be their quality and size. At times, this was already pre-negotiated and formalized in the axe-giving rite commissioning the workers: a song about a sharp axe meant they would get paid much, whereas a blunt axe indicated they would get paid less. On their own accord, two workers told me they were to make a particularly big grave post in return for such a post once made for them when they were on the receiving end, no matter it was many years ago. Other concerns than the provision of services played a role too. A senior man, for example, got paid 100 Australian dollars for just being there in the position of potential worker, whereas two other ones, who had actually danced and performed other tasks, received 30 and 50 dollars respectively. The donor felt more (or less willing to be) indebted to the senior man than to the two actual workers.

It is also important to note that like the wrapping of a Christmas gift (a commodity purchased) the gifts of money are presented to the workers in a ritual fashion. It used to be artifacts and ritual paraphernalia, but in the beginning of the twentieth century also trade goods (e.g., red calico and other fabrics and tobacco) came in use, later on to be substituted by money. Money is not mentioned, however, but offered by means of a totemic dance (e.g., from the mouth of the crocodile in the crocodile dance) and song designating it, for example, as spears, whelks or tobacco. These ritual gestures put the monetary transaction in a different frame than an ordinary economic transaction.

Being paid for the services provided as worker, furthermore, does not relinquish the obligation of the donors to return the favor when their services as ritual workers are required. So it is not a one-off transaction, in terms of balanced reciprocity, that ends the relationship. Instead of balanced reciprocity, Graebner proposes to speak of open and closed reciprocity, in which 'the rela-

¹⁷ Cf. R.E. KRANTON: 'Reciprocal exchange. A self-sustaining system', in *American economic review* 86/4 (1996) 830-851.

tion is a matter of degree and not of kind'.¹⁸ The extent to which the reciprocal obligations between the transactors are left open, or eventually closed off, can thus vary. Let us now turn to some of the strategies that are followed in actual practice.¹⁹ Next, I will discuss the terms of attachment that play a pivotal role in the actors' considerations.

3. Stratagems

Following a death the close patrilineal relatives faced the hardship of finding sufficient money and support to fulfill their obligations to the deceased and at the same time to the people to whom they had outstanding debts. Other people, of course, had also contracted debts to them or were close kin unable to refuse, and preferably these people would be mobilized to give their support or would be commissioned as ritual workers. With regard to the burial, the need for help from ritual workers was acute but the number of ritual workers and the amount of money to be paid to them might be limited.

The time between the burial and the final ritual was used to raise and save funds, ensuring people's attendance by attracting debts from them, creating new debts from other people, and rallying kin and, when necessary, ritual leadership support. Tiwi reckoned the time to a forthcoming ritual in the number of 'pay weeks' (the weeks with a fortnightly pay day). Recently bereaved relatives of different deceased frequently supported each other in their sorrow and (if permitted by their respective kin relations) in mutually fulfilling ritual tasks and obligations. In closely following the practices of several skilled participants I learned about stratagems that were employed: arranging a short-cut deal such as allowing an old mortuary pole to be used and thereby lowering the debt that would be created, selectively attending mortuary rituals, following their own interests in making identity claims or suppressing identity, masking a lack of money by pumping it around a few times on a single occasion, pressing people in crying poor and so 'taking' the winnings in card games.

A person's ritual exchange networks could be expanded or relatively limited. I found that people were often careful to make sure that their contributions were returned, restricting their outgoing payments to people in their township on whom they easily could exert pressure to repay them as soon as the occasion arose. The same accounts for helping out bereaved relatives in making their ceremonial payments. To have prestigious and skilled performers was desired. Only a very small percentage of the population was able to compose the ritual songs. These persons tended to be involved more in the ritual exchange networks than others. These people, when not directly obliged themselves, had

¹⁸ D. GRAEBNER: *Toward an anthropology of value* (New York 2009) 220.

¹⁹ I draw here on another publication, VENBRUX: *A death in the Tiwi Islands*.

their price and often sold, so to speak, their ceremonial leadership and performing skills dearly. People commissioned as ritual worker would be directly paid, but the closely-related bereaved would also become indebted to more distantly-related people who had to be asked to enact ritual roles, the bosses in particular.

Kinship relations were not always clear-cut because people could be related to each other in more than one way. These circumstances gave ample room for political maneuvering. An emphasis on the relationship and shared identities with the deceased was expected. Those skilled enough could rhetorically enforce claims that seemed far-fetched at first sight. The tracing of relationships in ritual took place in song language, the selection of dance movements, ritual calls, and wailing. The rhetoric in ritual is mostly taken for granted and remains unchallenged in a direct way. In the mourning songs the voice of the deceased was frequently used as a rhetorical device legitimating the performer's point of view.

In mortuary ritual, a Tiwi person might in dance stress more than one mortuary kinship relation to the deceased, perform with different categories of personnel, and thus enact a double role. Likewise, a performer might make a choice between different relationships to the deceased, acting out only one role. And even then, a person who, for instance, was classified to enact a ritual worker role might be paid informally, 'outside' the ritual. The mortuary rituals encompassed an arena in which people frequently had to make choices with regard to optional kin relationships.

The mortuary rituals provided an opportunity to reflect on the shared experiences and relationships with the deceased (even in the form of a dialogue with the dead person), and to have witnesses to the proclamation of outstanding debts. Although the sums of money given out were held up and carefully accounted by the donors and recipients, suggesting what Hart called Tiwi people's 'bookkeeping mentality', in actual practice the valuation of interpersonal relationships turned out to be an important factor in what had to be reciprocated.

4. Terms of attachment

With limited means and resources Tiwi individuals are constantly forced to make choices; it is simply impossible to make everyone happy. Time after time relationships have to be renegotiated and given substance by sharing company, food, money or whatever. The significance of this mediated affectionate attachment became clear to me when a young Tiwi man told me, 'I give my grandfather always cigarettes so I have something to cry for when he dies.' What matters here is their personal relationship, not the cigarettes. Cherished relationships are characterized by warmth, affection, respect, and the utmost care for the other. To be sustained, these relationships must be continuously fed.

In Tiwi society it is the person who makes the request who decides about the gift (for example, money, goods, services), not the donor.²⁰ Blunt refusal makes the other ashamed (*aliranga*), which has to be prevented at all costs; and refusal can have other repercussions, such as being blamed for harm that befalls the person who made the request. The demands can be numerous and manifold, especially in the contemporary large-scale townships. The increased relational density, the felt pressure of ‘too much relations’ and the townships perceived as being ‘too big’, did give rise to conflict and violence.²¹ Recurring conflict and violence is the seamy side of life. Such conflict demarcates the social and emotional interests in individuals’ involvement in networks with regard to infringements at a certain point of time. Some relationships inevitably gain significance at the cost of others. In handing cigarettes to one particular grandfather (FFFBS) rather than his other patrilineal grandfathers, the young man singled out this relationship. Consequently, when his grandfather died, his contribution and efforts would be relatively larger, corresponding to how he experienced and perceived of the loss.²²

Besides kinship what one could call the terms of attachment thus appeared an important factor in the valuation of interpersonal relationships. For example, two women who had grown up together and had been schoolmates would certainly weigh this special bond when one of them would die. When one had looked after an ill elderly person, this would also be taken into consideration when the person in question was sent off to the world of the dead. In other words, not only kin relationship counted but also the actual bonds nourished by exchanges in everyday life. Geographical proximity and mutual links to a third person, for instance, could increase the emotional attachment. This found expression in the ‘index of indebtedness’ expressed in prestations in mortuary ritual.²³ The principle of making things level (*keramili*) in this ‘emotional community’ applied to the subjective attachments as well.²⁴

Hence, the politics of emotions have to be taken into account in Tiwi mortuary exchange; they are part and parcel of the domestic moral economy. The death rites provide an arena *par excellence* in which interpersonal relationships are publicly evaluated.²⁵ It stresses the gift (performances and payments) as a ‘total

²⁰ N. PETERSON: ‘Demand sharing. Reciprocity and the pressure for generosity among foragers’, in *American anthropologist* 95 (1993) 860-874.

²¹ Also historically, the Tiwi are considered an extreme case among hunter-gatherers, see D.P. FRY & P. SÖDERBERG: ‘Lethal aggression in mobile forager bands and implications for the origins of war’, in *Science* 341 (2013) 270-273.

²² Cf. C. PARKES: *Love and loss. The roots of grief and its complications* (New York 2009).

²³ E.R. LEACH: *Social anthropology* (Glasgow 1982).

²⁴ B.H. ROSENWEIN: *Emotional communities in the early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY 2006).

²⁵ Cf. E. VENBRUX: ‘Les politiques de l’émotion dans le rituel funéraire des Tiwi d’Australie’, in *L’Ethnographie* 89 (1993) 61-77; IDEM: *A death in the Tiwi Islands*; IDEM: ‘Indigenous religion in an intercultural space’, in L. TAMAKOSHI & J. PUTNAM-

social fact',²⁶ still to be seen within the domain of economy in view of 'the allocation of scarce resources among alternative ends'.²⁷ It also underscores that the forms of reciprocity in Sahlins' model indeed do not solely rest on kinship distance.²⁸ Neither are the exchanges in a mortuary ritual (particularly, the final post-funeral ritual, *iloti* or 'for good') discrete events nor can they be understood without considering the ongoing social discourse.

Even distinctive valuations on the intrapersonal level could be acted out in this context. For example, a woman mourned her previous lover who had been stabbed to death. She performed a new dance, taking off her t-shirt in the way the dead man used to do it when they met in secret. But she not only expressed this affectionate relationship for the man's father had speared four of her classificatory fathers (FBs) to death in a retaliatory ambush. So at his corpse she sang, 'His father was a killer, now he has been killed himself.' The story of the four-fold killing had been employed in the previous months to ostracize the new victim of homicide. Now things had finally been made level. Another descendant of the four killed brothers indicated this by sticking an iron rod, substituting for a spear, in the ground next to the corpse. At the funeral, however, he danced in a skirt, replacing his deceased sister who had been married to the new victim, as the widow, calling out for revenge.

The close attachments and embodied social relations make that people inflict harm to themselves in mourning from which they have to be withheld by in-laws (who also act as ritual workers).²⁹ And in line with exchange relations between clans the same would happen to the latter when the roles would be reversed. In terms of Graebner, there was open reciprocity.

5. Concluding remarks

In this article I considered the domestic moral economy of the Tiwi from Bathurst and Melville Islands, Australia, through the angle of their mortuary exchanges. The crux is that these exchanges rest on and express the evaluation

DICKERSON (eds.): *Pulling the right thread. The ethnographic life and legacy of Jane C. Goodale* (Urbana 2008) 168-186.

²⁶ M. MAUSS: *The gift. Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies* (London 1970 [1925]).

²⁷ J. GOWDY: 'Hunter-gatherers and the mythology of the market' in R.B. LEE & R. DALY (eds.): *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers* (Cambridge 1999) 391-398, p. 391.

²⁸ C.A. GREGORY: 'Exchange and reciprocity' in T. INGOLD (ed.): *Companion encyclopedia to anthropology* (London 1994) 911-939, p. 922-925.

²⁹ I agree with Stroebe and Schut that 'self-mutilation becomes more understandable' when the 'cultural belief' that 'the deceased are taken to be loss of part of one's own body' is understood. M. STROEBE & H. SCHUT: 'Culture and grief', in *Bereavement care* 17 (1998) 7-11, p. 9. See also VENBRUX: *A death in the Tiwi Islands*.

of interpersonal relationships at a point in time in which besides formal (optional) kinship relationships also emotional attachments and political concerns play an important role. The 'bookkeeping mentality', observed by Hart in the late 1920s, in the late 1980s and after not only applies to the payments in money but also to other aspects of interpersonal behavior, including measures of attachment. The mortuary rites happen to be an important arena, a market of public valuations, in an ongoing social discourse. The ritual exchanges are entangled with the ones in the course of everyday life, guided by the local concept of *keramili*, but still a form of open reciprocity. The medium of money did not transform the payments to the ritual workers into purely and one-off economic transactions between people who do not maintain a durable relationship. As Bloch succinctly puts it with regard to the Merina of Madagascar:³⁰

It is in European culture that money is far from morally neutral and its moral charge hinders conversion from one sphere of activity to another. By contrast, for the rural Merina, who live in an economic setting much less dominated by the market, money is much more neutral and facilitates all kinds of exchanges.

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³⁰ M. BLOCH: 'The symbolism of money in Imerina', in PARRY & BLOCH (eds.): *Money and the morality of exchange* 165-190, p. 167.