Mortuary rites of the South Fore and kuru

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This paper is part of a wider study to explain the historical spread and changing epidemiological patterns of kuru by analysing factors that affect the transmission of kuru. Part of the study has been to look at the mortuary feasts that were the means of transmission of the kuru agent. This paper shows the complexity of Fore eschatology, and the variations and contradictions of human behaviour in relation to mortuary rites and the transmission of kuru. It also confirms that oral ingestion was the primary route of inoculation though some cases of parenteral inoculation may have occurred. The exclusion of alternative routes of transmission is of importance owing to the dietary exposure of the UK and other populations to bovine spongiform encephalopathy prions.

Keywords: Fore; mortuary rites; kuru

1. INTRODUCTION

Early anthropological studies in the kuru-affected region suggested that the reason for the practice of eating dead kinfolk was primarily gastronomic, and that it had no ritual or spiritual role despite the normative rules about who should or could consume various parts of the body at mortuary feasts (Berndt 1962; Glasse 1963, 1967).

Later works have explained the role of endocannibalism in the epidemiology of kuru and emphasized that the body was eaten out of love as well as for gastronomic appreciation, which was not the intended purpose of the practice but its result. They also pointed out the importance of kinship, gender and age in the participation at mortuary feasts to the transmission and spread of the disease (Alpers 1968; Mathews et al. 1968; Lindenbaum 1979; Klitzman et al. 1984).

More recently, the term transumption has been used to describe the eating of dead kinfolk among the Fore. Transumption has been defined as:

\ldots the mortuary practice of consumption of the dead and incorporation of the body of the dead person into the bodies of living relatives, thus helping to free the spirit of the dead; this practice had deep significance for the Fore people and their neighbours. (Alpers 2007, p. 14)

Early researchers were quick to note that kuru was predominantly a disease of women and children. Though some descriptions of how the body was distributed at feasts were obtained, the information on variations of the mortuary practices throughout the kuru-affected region was limited (Glasse 1963, 1967). Some descriptions of mortuary practices emphasized the belief that brain tissue was purposefully rubbed on the body of the mourners to support the idea that parenteral inoculation was the primary means of transmission of kuru (Gajdusek 1971).

The principal conclusions of this paper are that transumption had deep significance for the Fore people, that for eschatological reasons the body was totally consumed and that intentional rubbing of brain tissue on the mourners’ bodies did not occur.

2. FORE COSMOLOGY

The land is called \textit{bagina} in the Fore language; it is alive and created today’s landscape. Once the \textit{bagina} had finished creating the landscape, it created the \textit{amani}, who are the guardians of the clans; the Fore are the descendants of their clans’ guardians. As the human population increased, the \textit{amani} withdrew to their own lands that became the sacred grounds of each clan, also known as \textit{amani}. A clan’s \textit{amani} consisted of a mountain, lake, pine and palm grove, and a cave that led to \textit{kvelanandamundi}—the land of the dead in the Fore cosmology. After a person’s death, the souls of the person travel across the land bidding farewell to the \textit{bagina} and the clan’s \textit{amani}, before continuing their journey to \textit{kvelanandamundi}, the home of the ancestors.

3. THE FIVE SOULS OF THE FORE

A person has five souls (\textit{auma}, \textit{ama}, \textit{kwela}, \textit{aona} and \textit{yeseq}) that depart from the body on the last breath but only the \textit{auma} departs immediately to the land of the dead. The \textit{auma} is similar to the western concept of a soul and consists of a person’s good qualities. Once the \textit{auma} has been forgiven by a close male affine for any
transgressions committed during the deceased’s life, it travels across the land saying farewell to the bagina. When it reaches the ama, it explains to the clan guardian why it has died and the ama feeds the auma and directs it on the road to kwelanandamundi. Food and water left at the sepulture by the family provide sustenance for the auma on its journey. Eventually it reaches a red river at the entrance to the land of the dead and having crossed this it is welcomed by the ancestors. The auma then has to wait for the ama (bones) and kwela (flesh) to arrive before it can be reborn as an ancestor.

The ama is a simulacrum of the auma, but more powerful, and remains in the land of the living until all the obsequies have been carried out correctly. It assists the family to complete the obsequies and avert the death of the deceased if enemies are held responsible. When the deceased’s body was eaten out of love and grief, the ama would give blessings to those who ate and the blessings increased their aona. After the mortuary rites have been completed, the ama departs to kwelanandamundi, from where it continues to assist the family when requested.

Aona is the deceased person’s abilities and remains with the ama until it is passed on to the favourite child of the deceased, normally at the agona ritual that marks the end of the obsequies. All adults have an aona that consists of a whole range of abilities covered by one term. For example, a person who has an aona that enables him to share food at feasts might also never be short of food. In this case his aona might also make him a good hunter, an exceptional raiser of pigs or a successful gardener.

The kwela is the pollution from the decomposition of the flesh and blood of the body. The kwela travels on the wind as a cloud of pollution in the form of a man and harms the family members if the obsequies are not conducted properly. If a body was placed on a platform or in a basket, it had to be far from human habitation as the kwela would become immensely powerful as the body decomposed. If the body was buried, the kwela was less dangerous as the pollution was contained in the burial pit. If the body was eaten, the kwela remained in the wombs of the female affines, called anagra in Fore, during the period of decomposition to contain its dangerous effects, as it would not harm people with the same blood. It was during the aluana purification rite that the kwela was removed from the bodies of the anagra to the sepulture, which was the fireplace where the body had been cooked, and the kwela finally departed to kwelanandamundi with the ama after the agona rite had been performed.

Yesegi is found on the skin of the living and stays with the kwela until it is passed on to one of the children of the deceased before the kwela departs to kwelanandamundi. Yesegi is a person’s occult power that in the past made him a great warrior and powerful sorcerer.

By performing the obsequies with the right motivation, the family ensures that the souls are recycled within the family or become an ancestor, all of which will assist the living. Although in the past there were different methods of disposing of the body among the Fore, the end purpose was the same in ensuring that the souls went to their respective destinations.

4. METHODS OF DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD AMONG THE FORE

In the Fore region bodies could be disposed of by burial; by placing them in a basket, or on a platform, in a bamboo or yellow sugar cane grove; or by transumption. In the South Fore, transumption was by far the most common method and bodies placed in sepultures were often removed and eaten out of love for the deceased.

The dying person would normally express their wishes as to how their body was to be disposed of; otherwise the family would decide. In the kuru-affected region, all methods of disposal of the body involved being eaten. If the body was buried it was eaten by worms; if it was placed on a platform it was eaten by maggots; the Fore believed it was much better that the body was eaten by people who loved the deceased than by worms and insects. By eating the dead, they were able to show their love and to express their grief. The ritual allowed the aona and yesegi to be recycled within the family and for the loved ones to receive blessings from the ama, which would strengthen their aona. The eating removed doubts about family or community loyalties as the kwela would attack any woman who ate whose family had been involved in the death of the deceased. By the eating of the body, the danger of the kwela during the period of what would have been decomposition was averted as the kwela was confined inside the anagra who ate the body, thus protecting the family. By performing the obsequies correctly, the relatives ensured that the souls of the deceased departed to kwelanandamundi and the deceased was reborn as an ancestor.

5. THE PRACTICE OF TRANSMPTION

After death, the family and relatives mourned over the body of the deceased for 2–3 days and then, if it was to be eaten, it was taken on a stretcher to a bamboo, sugar cane or casuarina grove. These sites were chosen as they provided shade to the mourners and the deceased’s souls, making them happy. Once the body was cut, the land welcomed and comforted the ama and kwela of the deceased.

The body was laid on a bed of edible greens on a tapa cloth placed on banana leaves. This was to ensure that, when the body was cut up, nothing was lost on the ground as this would have been disrespectful to the deceased and the kwela might harm the family members in anger. The body was divided among those anagra who had a right to it and the deceased’s anaso (a woman’s female guardian who lived in the same village as she married into, who would have a right to her body and her husband’s when they died). The anagra would give the head of the deceased to the anatu (female agnates) when requested and sometimes the right arm. The senior anagra was in charge of cutting the body and the other elderly anagra assisted her as, being old, their aona was already waning, so the polluting effect from the body would not pose a danger to them or their elderly husbands. The women debarred the children from being at the place of the event, but the curious ones would hang around on the periphery of the activities in the hope of catching a glimpse of what was happening. Babies were kept
3–4 m away as the kwelea might harm them. As the body was cut up, the pieces of meat were put in piles for each recipient on a breadfruit leaf on a banana leaf and the bones of the corresponding parts placed on top. When the torso was about to be cut open, the older women formed a wall around the body using their bark capes so that the younger women and children did not see the intestines and genitals when they were removed.

Once the body was divided up, the anagra cleaned their hands with banana skins, sugar cane or bamboo shoots. Fibres were used to clean the finger nails and the juice helped remove the blood; finally the women would wipe their hands on their grass skirts or bark capes. The cleaning materials were then burnt on the fire that was used to cook the body. The anagra and anaso took their piles of meat and proceeded to cut them into smaller pieces with the help of their daughters and daughters-in-law. They then shoved the strips of meat with wild ferns into bamboo containers and wiped their hands on wild ferns that were placed in the same bamboo cylinders. The tubes were then cooked on one fire and each anagra emptied half the content of her tubes on to a communal plate made of banana leaves. The meat on this pile was used to feed the ename, who were the women from nearby communities who came to share the grief of the family and affines. These women were fed pieces of meat directly into their mouths on the end of a sharpened stick, so they did not actually touch the meat. This was to protect the women from the kwelea that might harm a woman if her husband had offended the deceased when he was alive. The women would chew wesa leaves on the way home to purify their mouths.

The anagra and anaso would eat their portions with their daughters, daughters-in-law and their children. The anatu (daughters-in-law, daughters and sisters of the deceased) and their children normally ate the head of the deceased (daughters-in-law, daughters and sisters of the deceased) and their children normally ate the head. The bones were placed at the doorway of the hut and as the women left, they passed through the steam, which purified their bodies. The ritual allowed the women to move around in the community so that they could assist with the obsequies.

The following day the women caught rats in their gardens and the men hunted possums. When they had enough animals, the women performed a ritual in the widow’s house called aidu during which the animals were put on the fire so that their fur and fat were burnt. It was believed that the smell would remove the kwelea from the women. Afterwards, the carcases were rubbed on anything that the women who had partaken in the obsequies might have touched, such as doors or bilums, so that any remains of the deceased’s body would be wiped onto the carcases, which were then cooked and eaten by the women. This was done to ensure that the whole body was eaten and the hamlet purified.

From the time the body was eaten, another obsequy started called kavunda, which means ‘eating wild greens’. This lasted for several weeks during which the relatives and friends would come and stay with the family to share their grief and bring them food. As most of the family’s food had been used up to feed the guests, they now ate a poor diet of wild ferns, grasses and other wild plants. Kavunda was also a purification ritual as the wild vegetables were symbolic of the wild land of the dead called kwelanandamundi and informed the kwelea and anatu that they would soon be departing to the wild land of their ancestors. The widow was allowed to assist in collecting food, but had to remain in or at the back of her hut when she returned to the village. When grass started to grow on the sepulture, it symbolized that it was time for kavunda to end.

Aluana marked the end of kavunda and was a feast prepared with wild animals and vegetables. The men hunted possums and wild pigs, and the women and children caught garden rats and grubs. All the women who had eaten part of the body had a right to take part in this feast. During aluana, the kwelea was removed from the wombs of the anagra and sent to the sepulture, which was the fire pit where the body was cooked. Igoghana normally took place after aluana and the timing depended on when the family had enough pigs
and vegetables. This feast was a compensation payment to the women for having eaten something that was not fit for human consumption. The names of men were called for this payment and the women received a share of the food.

The final obsequy was *agona* and this was a substantial payment that could take several years to prepare. Once this payment was made, the *kwela* and *ama* departed to *kwelanandamundi* taking the shadows (simulacrum that existed in the spirit world) of all the foods and goods that had been used in the obsequies. They said goodbye to the *bagina* and the *amani* and on their arrival in *kwelanandamundi* the deceased became a complete ancestor. The *kwela* and *ama* continued to visit the widow and when she accepted a marriage proposal the future husband performed a ritual called *kilanau kasa* that freed the woman from her dead husband’s *ama* and *kwela*. If she did not remarry, her dead husband’s *ama* remained with her until she died.

The brain contained most of the infectious agent and its consumption was largely responsible for the transmission of kuru. The head of the deceased was placed over a fire to burn off the hair and then it was de-fleshed with a bamboo knife. A hole was made in the top of the skull using a stone and the brain was gradually removed by one of the older women whose hand would be wrapped in ferns. The tissue was then mixed with ferns and placed in bamboo tubes, normally two or three, and cooked. The head of a male or married female belonged to the affines but was nearly always given back to the family, and the head of an unmarried female belonged to the family. Children under the age of 3 were never fed any part of the body, but those aged between 3 and 6 were indulged even though they were not meant to eat the brain. It was believed that the brain tissue would stop children from growing properly so the children were not meant to eat it; however, this rule was enforced in some areas but not in others—indeed some participants held the belief that brain was good for the growth of young children. The parents were also worried that if a child squeezed the soft meat, some might fall on the ground and the *kwela* might harm the child for not showing respect to the deceased’s body. The brain was considered a delicacy and the children would demand some from their mothers who naturally indulged them out of love. Males over the age 6 never consumed brain tissue, but females of all ages in the majority of South Fore communities consumed it. Sometimes the *anatu* would share half of the cooked brain with the *ename*. To ensure that the *kwela* departed to *kwelanandamundi* and the deceased became a complete ancestor, the entire body had to be eaten and, for this reason, the women ensured that the brain was all eaten. It was never rubbed on to their bodies, which would have been disrespectful of the dead.

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