

The Question of Death Among the Ngambay People: Some Background

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores culture change regarding the question of death among the Ngambay people of Africa. Two questions are explored: 1) When is a person supposed to die?; and 2) What are the ways of dying prematurely? An ethnographic example of a Christian funeral in a southern town considered as the heart of the Ngambay land is also described.

The Ngambay people live in the southern part of Chad. The language Ngambay is classified under Sara in Nilo-Saharan, the Chari-Nile Central Sudanic branch. The current estimation of the group is about 750,000 in Chad. There are also a significant number of Ngambay in Nigeria, Cameroon and Central African Republic. There used to be a village called “*dondo*” which is a place where the Ngambay living in Garoua (Northern Cameroon) went to farm. This village is no longer there as the city spread out and took over the area. There are other villages close to the border of Chad-Cameroon across the Logone River, which are still there. I have been in “*dondo*” and Beladjia (not to be confused with Beladjia in southern Chad). I noticed how conservative they are in their belief and their way of dealing with sickness and death.

For the Ngambay, there are five major phases in life:

1. Birth
2. Initiation
3. Marriage
4. Death
5. After death

In this paper, I am more concerned with the question of death among the Ngambay. I am aware of the changes in this area and I compare what is going on now with what I heard from people of my grandparents and parents' ages.

A person comes to the world of the living not as a new human being, but it is believed that he comes from an existing place. If, for some reason, two people of the same lineage do not get along with each other, people may make a remark suggesting this belief. They may say to the one who seems not to like the other: “Did you ask him to watch over your house before you came”? In other words, there must be a reason beyond explanation why someone is not getting along with another person though there is no any obvious reason. It must be from another life. It is interesting that we do not know exactly what this life after death is like. The Ngambay people believe in reincarnation. If a baby dies and another baby is born and looks like the first one, people say that the same infant came back. Or a child is born and is so much like a relative who is already dead; they may say that person is back. To prevent somebody who has bad behavior or a man who never got married before his death from coming back again, they would put a thorn in his foot before burying him. The *uman*, which is the spirit of the ancestor, talks through living people. Those people are part of the initiators who will carry the message only at night.

Everyone who comes to this life is supposed to grow up, get married and have children to replace him. The two other major steps are birth, education (rite of initiation) and marriage. Initiation rites exist for both boys and girls. Short after getting through the rites, they get married, raise children, and hope very much to see their grandchildren. They say *ngokai goto ndaà doi udu* which can be translated as “if you do not have a grandchild, your head ends”. In other words, your line dies out. Nothing of this nature is said about great grandchildren. If someone lives to see them, this is a blessing. People talk about those as having lived their lives long and well.

Death is the next important phase. It is not considered as the end of one's existence. The Ngambay people believe in a life after death. When someone dies he is believed to join his ancestor in a place called '*njábàw*'. A ghost is then called *njábàw deò* or *ndil deou*, a shadow person. *Ndil* means shadow and also spirit. Every one's "shadow", spirit, joins his ancestors according to his lineage that goes through the father. For example, a woman can get married and live in another village. When she dies, the husband and his family make it a point of honor to take her body back to her village to be buried there. This is to ensure that her spirit goes to the right place. The non-observance of this rule is seen as a very serious matter; it can disturb greatly the in-law relationship of the two families concerned. The man's family has to give a good and acceptable explanation. Otherwise, they will be accused of being behind her death. Today, those who live in the cities (Christians and non Christians) practiced another version of this tradition. For example, if a woman dies in the hospital, her body will be taken to her husband's house, then transferred to his father's house, or to a the house of the closest relative to the father (if the father is not living in that city and they cannot transfer her to the village). The funeral will take place both in the husband's house, in her relative's house and in her village.

An interesting cultural misunderstanding happened during the civil war in Chad (1979-1982). A schoolteacher was sent as a single person to an area outside of the Ngambay land. He married a wife from another tribe. They went to live in his town. The wife died. He and some members of his family did everything they could to take the body back to her parents. Because of the civil war and because it was the rainy season on top of everything else, they could not reach the woman's village on time, though was less than 200 km away. By the time they arrived, the body was decomposed. The in-laws could not figure out why they brought not only a dead woman, but a decomposed body to them. They nearly hit the husband and his relatives as they perceived it as a provocation. In their culture, it is the husband's duty to bury his wife. The man and his relatives could not understand why their in-laws were so unhappy; the husband was just making sure that his wife's spirit goes to the right place. Those who know the Ngambay explained to the others the honor this man is giving them going thru all the hardship of traveling in difficult conditions. The explanation they gave was that in the Ngambay culture, a husband has no right whatsoever to bury his wife; this is true, but there is much more to it.

When is a Person Supposed to Die?

Death is expected as the saying goes: 'when a mushroom comes out of the ground, it cannot avoid getting rotten' meaning, once you are born, you will eventually die some day. The question is then when is dying acceptable?

1. Very old people whose grand-children are all grown up and even have great grandchildren and beyond, are said to go to *njábàw* walking. Their death is almost a celebration. It is an occasion for all the descendants to eat food, especially meat. People don't really mourn; they observe respect for the deceased by not acting as though everything is normal. Relatives will still come from other villages to pay a visit for the occasion, but it is considered a happy ending to his life.
2. People who are probably in their sixties. They have some grandchildren. They are said to die their own death. They are considered as *deou ge èr*. The word *er* means "cooked" or "ready" (as sorghum is ready for harvest). In this case, the word "ready" expresses better the idea of a mature person. They are the ones who can take a stand for others in their society. Women and children will mourn, expressing their big loss by way of citing what that person has given them or done for them. If the deceased is a woman, she is lost to her in-laws because she is still needed as a support for her children in various areas of their lives. For her family, mostly brothers and male cousins, their children lost a paternal aunt who is supposed to make important decisions for them. There will be a lot of grieving, but, basically, those of this range of age have fulfilled their duties in this world. This is true especially for their children who are all grown up. Even if some are not married yet, they are said to be "children of heritage" and not orphans.

3. Young people who disobey the rules of the society or who commit a despicable act according to the culture, especially rules related to the rites of initiation. For example, they break the rule of secrecy. An example would be giving the meaning of the initiation language to a non-initiated man or to a woman. In this specific case, there is court like discussion, among the initiated even from several villages, which takes place to decide his fate.
4. A person who gets a sickness called *yoo ndag* that can be translated as a “long death”. He or she is very ill and is in bed almost all the time for a long period. Typically, people tried every treatment they know of and the person did not get better. His death is expected.
5. Babies and very young children’s deaths pose a different type of problem. They are too young to cause any trouble, so when they die, it is often because of somebody else’s act through witchcraft. But, if they die during *mein koso*, which is an outbreak of disease such as smallpox, there is no much question about it. They know this disease is killing babies.

If a baby dies a few days after he was born, they consider him as an explorer who just came to see what the world looks like. He will be buried right away. In fact, most of the people will find out only later that the family lost a baby. The mother is expected to cry some, but not grieve too much. Grieving too much may prevent the explorer from coming back. The next baby born to the woman, if of the same sex, may get the name *Néte!* “the thing came back”. There are other names, but this one is a direct expression of that belief.

Other than those cases, the death of a person should have an explanation, especially if the person is unmarried. Young adults to people up to their early fifties are more likely to die from a harmful act or thought. If a person dies from a very well known disease, even if the hospital gives the reason, an explanation beyond the physical cause is sought. There is always a mystery behind it. The death of an unmarried young man or young woman, with no history of misbehavior, is always considered a tragedy that needs explanation. Usually, in a village, elders in the community will meet while the corpse is not buried yet to discuss the matter.

Village elders will examine the life of the deceased, such as his behavior, the possibility of his having enemies, or enemies of his parents (including non-immediate parents and grandparents). They look for any disagreement he had with anyone. It could be that he was innocent, but he is paying the price of somebody else’s mistake, past or present. For a young woman, beside all of the above, they will examine carefully the question of marriage; has she turned down some suitors, if so who are they? Young men and women are the future of their society; they have nobody to replace them yet, so for them to die is abnormal. For this reason, the phrase *a koo bbei*, “you will see” is a serious offense; it is seen as an intention to kill somebody, either the person himself or someone in his family. People can get into an argument, but they should not get to the point of saying that. Anyone who does should expect trouble when the other person dies. He will definitely be among the suspects.

What are the Ways of Dying Prematurely?

In this society, living a good life means that a person keeps up with the basic rules set for everyone according to age, sex, and status in relation to the different rites such as initiation or membership in some secret groups. Paying respect according to one’s place is very important. Any deviance from this can lead to punishment of various forms. I will give some examples of manners of punishing those who act differently.

1. *Ndol*, saying bad things about a person, can cause harm to him. If someone experiences misfortune, it can be the fact that *ndol* was on him. A person who is criticized because of his behavior carries the *ndol*, if he dies, it could be that he died from *ta deouje* “people’s mouth” saying too many bad things about him.
2. *Mann*, “curse” is another thing, which can cause harm or misfortune; particularly, it can prevent somebody from succeeding in life. The difference is that *ndol* can be said by anyone, where *mann* can only be said by family members. Grandparents, parents, older siblings and cross

cousins can “*mann*” someone, except one’s biological mother. The reason she cannot do it is that she has eaten the *murú ndô*, food especially prepared for her while she was observing the month long period after giving birth. No man should eat this food. Only small boys who cannot even be considered to have reached the pre-initiation stage would share this meal with their mother. Paternal aunts are feared for *mann*. They hold a power over their nieces and nephews more than the father does. It is believed that even if they have a bad thought about these children, it would bring them bad luck. And not being able to live a good life is equated with death. For this very reason, a paternal aunt should also watch herself in order not to lead people to think that she is the reason why a niece or a nephew is experiencing some hardship in life. This is the case especially if the bride wealth given for her was given for his brother’s wife. In case of death, she would be asked if she was not offended in any way.

The only way to remove the *mann* is to ask for forgiveness from the person offended and have him pronounce a formal speech to pardon the offender. If the person who pronounced the *mann* is already dead, they will take the condemned to the gravesite where he has to take a handful of dirt, put it in water and drink it. There will be some form of speech spoken by an older person appointed by the family. That person becomes a spokesperson of the deceased and will give a blessing to remove the curse.

3. *Kob* is something extraordinary or abnormal. It can also express the idea of everything has an exception as we say *Né lal kobee el* “there is an exception to everything.” But it expresses also something that should not be done. *Kob* is not taken lightly at all. An example would be getting married to someone you should not marry. One of the consequences is that children born to this couple will die, and even one of the spouses may die. In case of incest, the death penalty is the sentence. It comes by way of sickness. It will not be a surprise to anyone. Everybody expects the *kob* to kill a person who committed such an act. This is to keep everybody in line. Some people just leave to go as far as neighboring countries to escape the sentence.

4. *Bùmà* (or *Gàmà*) is a type of vow someone pronounces when he is very angry, and cannot control himself. People will say that the person had pronounced a vow, *pà bùmà*. Immediate effort to have him “reverse his voice” will be undertaken. It means saying the contrary of what was said or doing the very thing that persons vowed not to do. Usually, it is something like “I will never set my foot in this place again” or “I will not eat this food again”. Children are taught from an early age to avoid saying “never again”, especially about food or going to someone’s place.

For the reversal to be effective, women should not wait more than four days. Men have three days. It is even better to do it the same day before a new day comes, which is the next morning. At this stage, the person simply accomplishes the action like eating or going to the place. But, if the time has passed, it calls for a ritual that involves preparing special oil with a special onion called *duja bùmà*. The person will be given that medicine to drink, and then he will perform the act. It has to be done very early in the morning. Everybody knows about it in the village. Ngambay in the cities continue to practice it, in which case only some family members know about it. In case none of these steps is taken, the person is expected to die from a specific disease. They then say *buma tuga* “buma cut him”. The word *tuga* is use to mean cutting as with an axe. This disease is described as having neck and lower back pains; the person is not able to walk.

5. *Nàji* can be translated as justice or oath. When somebody is accused of something, he may have to take an oath to prove his innocence. If he dies within the year, he is considered guilty; the *nàji* got hold of him. The oath can be taken in the name of rain (lightening), lion, river, or manatee. But anyone who took an oath can die of anything else. It will still be considered a result of that oath if the time is not over yet. The sentence should happen within a year. If the person survives through one rainy season, he is considered to be innocent.

An example of a Christian funeral in a southern town considered as the heart of the Ngambay land.

A man, well known in the city and an elder in his church, died suddenly. While the body was kept in the hospital mortuary, the family members and the elders of his church discussed which day would be the best day for the burial. They chose to do it on Sunday afternoon. This would be four days after he died. Part the reason to wait that long was that his son was studying in another country and needed time to make it home. The day of the burial, the deceased was brought to the church courtyard in the morning. The coffin was put on a stand. Immediate after the coffin was put on a kind of a stage, female members of his family sat on the mats around the coffin. The male members were given benches beside the women. Everyone else sat around either on mats or benches. From that time on, they held a ceremony that lasted until about 3 pm. And, it was time to go to the burial site. In his case, they dug the tomb in his garden outside of the town.

The service consisted of songs interspersed with preaching by several leaders of different churches. Several groups of women, known under the name of “women of charity”, came from several churches and took turns to sing. A number of people spoke during the program they wrote out. They were seven of them who took turns to speak.

A representative of the health department came and pronounced an obituary, which basically goes from the year of the birth to schooling and time served within the government system. There is a pattern that is set and is followed. A representative of the local Red Cross: gave a more elaborate speech about his accomplishment as a trainer. A representative of an association of people who are living with HIV expressed his gratitude to him for helping him deal with his situation. A representative of an Association he was a member of described his role and action in that particular group for the advancement of his village. A representative of his family on his father side spoke. A representative of his family on his mother side also spoke. An elder from his church talked about his conversion, baptism and numerous activities he was a part of within the church. And the last person to speak was the pastor. I should note that all of them were men.

Then, it was time to go to the garden. The procession consisted of cars, motorcycles and bicycles. Those who could not go to the garden stayed until the mourners came back. After that, the rest of the funeral activities took place in his home for three days. Early morning on the third day, the oldest person with paternal authority spoke. It is known as “throwing away the firewood”.

Then, everyone was given a chance to take a look at the body before the coffin was sealed. Several groups followed one another to go around the coffin. Several groups deposited artificial flowers. The last group to make the visit was the close family. This procedure lasted a long time; many people came to pay him respect.

This typical setting can be seen during funerals. There are some variations, along the line of the number of people who took turns speaking at the ceremony. In this case, the man was a well-known person in the city. Therefore, there were more than the three traditional speeches. Normally, a relative from the father’s side, one from the mother’s side and someone from the in-law’s family will make some sort of statement. All of them will be men.

From the day this man died, there was an accusation that he was killed. He was in his late fifties, but his death was not accepted as a natural death. In fact, while people were conducting the service, there was a group who were arguing this issue. This group stayed outside of the circle at that time. Somebody remembered that the deceased had had an argument with a man some time ago. Surely, that man had killed him.

The three others approached. Each one was questioned about the cause of the death: representatives of the family insisted on the fact that they did not show anybody responsible for the death of their member. The Pastor mentioned that the late one had enemies; he had contentions with people; but he died only because his time came.

There is no doubt that there are many changes from the traditional way of burying in this setting. Some of changes are major ones, such as the time and the number of people who can speak. The body

did not undergo the traditional ritual as some modern means were used in the hospital. Some other elements, such as the coffin, the artificial flowers, and the white cloth changed the way of paying respect toward the deceased. But, the reason of death by way of a harmful act remained an issue without a proper way of sorting it out. Even among the Christians, it is not clear how they should handle the situation. In fact, this question remains an issue that everybody tries to avoid. Sometimes, the non-Christians members of the family could be very upset about the issue and express it vocally. But, usually, Christians just down played it.

In this particular case, the question of the cause of death was brought up with no one in charge to lead the discussion and propose a solution. The body was kept longer than in a traditional setting in the village would allow. There the body preparations differed completely from this one. It used to be that they have a way of waiting two or three days until people came from different villages. But, today, if the person dies somewhere from the night to the early morning, it is more likely that the body will be buried in the afternoon. If he dies when the sun is high in the sky, the burial will take place the next day.

Traditionally, the representatives of each side of a family have a say. A representative of his family-in-law could be expected, but it did not happen in this case. For a married woman, this part cannot be skipped. I would think that people handle the woman's case very carefully as a woman is "somebody else's child". She is living temporarily with her husband's family; there is an end to this. The best ending being her death; the worse and shameful ending is a divorce. An absence of a statement from the in-laws is always considered as an offense.

The father's representative is more concerned with the children. He will also make a statement about debts. He will say, "if the deceased owes anyone something or someone owes him something, they should come and see us". This is to make sure his spirit goes away free of any debt. In the case I described, the man clearly stated that his relative had left behind "children of heritage and not orphans". This was to make people understand his death was not unacceptable. He had fulfilled at least his duty as a normal man in his society.

The mother's representative is the one who is expected to talk about the reason for the death of the person. If the deceased is younger, especially if he is not married then, this uncle is the one who can ask for an explanation before accepting the burial. Among the Christians, things are being done differently. They may suggest the idea and talk about forgiveness. They may say something like "if somebody killed him, we forgive him".

The representative of the church was the pastor himself. Now, this role did not exist traditionally. It is called a new way of looking at the death of a person. The question here is what would be appropriate for him to say in case of an accusation of somebody having killed the deceased by spiritual means. Most of the time, pastors do not address the issue. They preach their sermon reminding people of their own preparation to be ready for their turn. In this case, the sudden death triggered so many rumors that he was compelled to make a point. He started out agreeing that the deceased had enemies who would like to see him dead, but he did not die when it was not God's time.

Who is Gabriel?

A man was accused of stealing a basket of millet. He took the oath *Nàji* of the rain, which meant he should be stricken and killed by lightening if he were guilty. His brother knew he was guilty, so he waited until it was getting ready to rain and went to his compound. He took the basket of millet, put it outside and started talking to Gabriel. Every time there was lightening, he asked Gabriel to hear him out. "What kind of man does not listen to others? Here is the stolen millet" was the sentences repeated several time by the person who told the story. Who was Gabriel? This man was talking about the angel from the story of Jesus' birth. It would be interesting to know what he was really thinking. The point of this story is the fact that, he integrated his own cultural way of dealing with guilt into his new belief. Gabriel was sent by God to announce the coming of an unusual baby; he must be close to Him, a kind of spokesman. And he must be the one God would send to carry out this death sentence. He figured out

that if he confessed the fact to him, his brother would be saved. His brother did not die. What might the Ngambay think about this story?

The Ngambay express this kind of integration in many areas of their life. Much of what I described, in the case of a man dying a sudden death, is present in the mind of a Ngambay who acted or reacted accordingly. Today, the system of sorting things is lost. People do not follow this way of discussing the issue anymore; the question "who killed him" is asked as usual and the common answer is *tolee ge tol* which can be translated as "he was killed". This usually will go around and die out by itself with no specific answers given. Even those with no authority on the issue, even very young ones, give their opinion causing only confusion. Others traditions are being observed without any question. For example, the funeral lasts four days for women, and three days for men. There is no easy way out, but to discuss the matter and come up with guidelines to avoid unnecessary confusion and hardship.

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