

RITUAL

POWER, HEALING, AND COMMUNITY



MALIDOMA PATRICE SOMÉ

Author of *Of Water and the Spirit*

"The greatest and most detailed book about ritual that I have read." —Robert Bly

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Power, Healing, and Community
by Malidoma Patrice Somé



The African Teachings of the Dagara

PENGUIN COMPASS

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These writings, though based on fact, do contain some dialogue and story line that have been modified to better illustrate the purpose of the book or to honor the need of secrecy in the Dagara tradition.

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be the reason that nothing is definite, final, and yet everything is fast-moving. I still remember the first time I took one of my elders into the city of Ouagadougou and he beheld a multistoried building. The poor man was so shocked that he was speechless for a while. When he finally spoke, he said, "Whoever did this has some serious problems." Obviously the old man had never seen power displayed in public before.

Wherever there is technology, there is a general degeneration of the spiritual. This is because the Machine is the specter of the Spirit, and in such a state, it does not serve because it can't serve. It needs servants. It is like having an elephant in your home as a pet. Would the energy spent to find 200 pounds of food every day compensate for what you get out of it? Anyone whose genius is wrapped up in this kind of effort must devote his life to it.

The Structure of Ritual



To be attracted to an ancient way of life is to initiate one's personal spiritual emancipation. No ritual can be repeated the same way twice (in my village there are seasonal rituals that are repeated — but never exactly). There are structures, however, that stay the same. Even in our drumming music we never have two people doing the same thing. I come into the drumming circle with my rhythm, with my talk. Somebody else creates a rhythm, and that person will then carry the rhythm. He has the burden to keep the rhythm going. What I do on the drum is my response to what I hear. So I talk back. I drum my feelings. That's my opinion. When somebody else comes in with another drumbeat, that is his own opinion. So, we end up with a whole brouhaha of opinions that an outsider might find extremely synchronic and rhythmical or chaotic and noisy. To drum is to hear.

This means that when someone cannot drum, that person has, among other things, a hearing problem. It is hard to create a rhythmical space with this kind of person. In the same way, it is hard to create a ritual space without calling the spirits. Invocation, as I mentioned earlier, is a call placed upon a spirit. When you invoke the spirit world you initiate a different context or condition by bringing in witnesses that are non-



human. This is why the space in question is sacred. Sacred means where the spirit occurs. We can't make sacredness. The sacred is made by the spirits themselves. Here are some elements:

1. Invocational. Humans call on non-humans for a specific purpose. To meet as a group without invoking the spirits means that you are on your own.

2. Dialogical. We enter into a kind of solemn dialogue with the spirit and with ourselves. When we call in somebody who doesn't have a physical form, then we are giving a different contour to the place we are sharing with other people.

3. Repetitive. The actions (structures) in ritual are the same. When you pour a libation, the pouring stays the same.

4. Opening and closure. The ritual space is opened whenever the spirit is invoked. The ritual space is closed when the spirit is sent away. The spirit is sent away symbolically, not dismissed. And this happens when we tell the spirit that what we embarked upon is over and we are ready to resume normal life. We don't call people and then just leave them as if we had forgotten them. They will invent a way to remind us of their being there. Not closing a ritual space usually happens as an accident, or an incident, depending on how big the deal was in the opening of the ritual, and on what kind of spirit was called into the ritual space. Temperamental spirits such as the ancestors would likely trigger a major accident involving destruction. Nature spirits would rather cause a conflict. When they do, it takes a long time to get along with each other again. In ritual, *openings and closures are very important*. Whatever happens between these two extremes must be coming from the "pit of your belly," as village people say. This spirit structure is what is basic to indigenous ritual. At the end of a ritual the dimensional being who is called must be thanked and sent away.

A Ritual Sampler: The Funeral and the Language of Grief



It was late in the afternoon when I first heard the sound. It was a shrieking guttural wail that shot out of several throats almost at the same time. It was echoed by other sounds in the near distance. The quiet of the village was lost in a matter of seconds. The voices were so sharp anyone would think they come from spirits lost in the human realm. I knew that something was wrong, but I could not tell what. A nearly three-year-old child wonders about everything associated with death. Grandfather would surely know about this. The last time this happened, it was because someone had seen something terrible.

"Grandfather, Grandfather," I called, breathless from my swift run to his hut. "There are spirits singing in the village. Something is going to happen. What is it?"

"Those are not spirits, Brother Malidoma. Those are the women of the village who are mourning your stepbrother's death. They are announcing to the rest of the village to prepare themselves for the grief ritual."

"How come you aren't making that sound, Grandfather?"

He smiled with a grin that betrayed his wisdom. "Only the women show such grief at this time. I must make ready for the



ritual. And you must go, for I have much to do. The sacred space must be prepared. Your stepbrother must be sent to the place of the ancestors and we must help him. Now go with your questions. Your father will bring you to the sacred space later. You can watch and learn. I will answer your questions later. Go now."

I pretended to head back to my father's house, but instead hid behind a wall where I could see inside Grandfather's quarters. Whenever Grandfather had to be alone I knew something magical was about to happen. It wasn't very long before I saw him gather some of his things, among them the pouch that usually contained ashes. He quietly left, and I knew I had to follow. Grandfather has eyes in the back of his head. So I knew that he must be in deep thought not to see me following behind him. I tiptoed from house to house until I saw Grandfather arrive at what is called the ritual lodge. Other elders of the village were arriving also. They sat in a circle with Grandfather. Guisso, the special one Grandfather infrequently spoke of, also joined the circle. He was a little younger than Grandfather. They were quiet for a very long time.

I began to turn a beetle over with my toe, watching with childlike curiosity how it was able to right itself. After the third overturning my game was interrupted by a strange chant coming from the lodge. The elders had their arms raised up as if inviting guests in from the sky. With strained ears I could make out names of different spirits that they were asking to come and help. As the sound grew louder I grew more uneasy. The air around me felt alive, as if invisible fingers were gently coaxing me to go. And go I did. There was a time to be curious and a time to be smart. This was a time not to be too curious. I was to find out later that this was the beginning ceremony of the invocation of the spirits.

"Father, why is Grandfather in the ritual lodge?"

Father said nothing. He seemed caught up in thought himself. Or was it grief? He seemed upset with himself, as if he might be responsible for my stepbrother's death. How curious



all of this was. The whole village was transforming before my very eyes. The wailing of the women could now be heard everywhere. It gave me goose bumps.

Several elders entered our house at that moment, saying not a word. Father grabbed me, pulling me out of the way. They marched like silent warriors. "Grandfather!" I called out. But not even his eyes moved. They all tromped into the room where my stepbrother had died. I wiggled, trying to get free, but Father would not let go. Straining to see the action in the sleeping room, I watched Grandfather throwing white ash into the air. The chanting continued. This time every word was loud and clear enough to start goose bumps again. Every conceivable good spirit was being called.

"One of the living just drew his last breath, his soul just left. Come, come to help us. Come, come to show my grandson the way to the realm of the ancestors." White ash was filling the air in the room. The chanting continued with its weaving and echoing of the sound of men. Outside, the wailing was coming closer, and the sound, all the sound began to flood the house of death.

I looked through the door to see Guisso slowly circling the house. He was carefully laying down ash, the same kind of ash that Grandfather had been throwing in the air. With only his eyes moving, Guisso gave me a curious look. I raised my hand in greeting. He said nothing, but I could see his lips pursing back a grin.

"Father, why are they putting ash around our house?" He bent down and whispered in my ear, "It is to keep any more evil from coming upon us. Vulture spirits sometimes are attracted to deaths like this and try to see if they can cause even more trouble." Vulture spirits? I had never seen one. I wanted to run to Guisso and ask him if he had ever seen a vulture spirit.

Emotion was taking the village hostage. Emotion was transforming even the air with its sound, its sights, ash and chant, wailing and waving of arms and the invoking of



spirits. Never will I forget this first encounter with the mystery of grief.

A non-Westerner arriving in this country for the first time is struck by how little attention is given to human emotion in general. People appear to pride themselves for not showing how they feel about anything. A husband might lose his job yet deploy tremendous effort to show some modicum of indifference. A couple has a crisis in relationship, yet unless seen together, it is impossible to tell what turmoil they hide inside. And the worst case of all is witnessed when someone dies. It took me the longest time to figure out that a long line of cars with headlights on in the middle of the day meant someone had died. As attractive as the modern world is with its material abundance, it is repulsive with its spiritual and emotional poverty.

What overflows in the West is barren in the indigenous world, and vice versa. Among the things that the indigenous world can share from its abundance with the modern world are spirit and emotion.

There are countless ways of expressing emotion because countless ways are needed. No one is supposed to repress emotion. If death disturbs the living, it offers a unique opportunity to unleash one of the strongest emotional powers humans have: the power to grieve. Yet, anyone who has had an opportunity to participate in a grief ritual in another culture would be shocked by the effort deployed by people in this culture to prevent themselves from feeling anything when someone dies. It is as if death had intruded into forbidden territory of the heart trying to steal away with some kind of emotion against people's wills.

People die in newspapers, in television reports. People die on bulletin boards. But they are rarely shown dead. To an indigenous person, showing a picture of a person alive and saying that this person is dead is anachronistic. Why hide death?



People who do not know how to weep together are people who cannot laugh together. People who know not the power of shedding their tears together are like a time bomb, dangerous to themselves and to the world around them. The Dagara understand the expression of emotion as a process of self-rekindling or calming, which not only helps in handling death but also resets or repairs the feelings within the person. This is needed because death, and the sudden separation around it, puts the living in a state of emotional debt, loss and disorientation. The unresolved energy produced by the death of a loved one translates itself emotionally as grief. And grief is in fact owed to the dead as the only ingredient that can help complete the death process. Grief delivers to the dead that which they need to travel to the realm of the dead — a release of emotional energy that also provides a sense of completion or endedness, closure. This sense of closure is also needed by the griever who has to let go of the person who has died. We have to grieve. It is a duty like any other duty in life.

For the Dagara, grief is seen as food for the psyche. Just as the body needs food, the psyche needs grief to maintain its own healthy balance. As a result, one of the most sophisticated rituals designed by the Dagara for its own people is the funeral ritual. The Dagara feel this ritual, which involves everybody both living and dead, is owed to the dead, whether they die young or old. This ritual gives our people the opportunity to grieve individually and communally. I would like by way of example to express, to describe the process of this communal expression of grief as it is experienced among the Dagara of Burkina Faso. I would also like to describe grief and its expression within a ritual context.

Grief is an aspect of the Dagara social life. And death is where it is chiefly expressed. Death is not seen as an ending but rather as an opportunity for a person to take off these ragged clothes we call a body, and walk naked. Even though this is a view commonly held by the Dagara, death still produces a kind of sudden vacuum and loss of attachment that



requires grief in order to heal. Without grief, the separation between the living and the dead never actually shifts into that stage in which the living accept the fact that a loved one has become a spirit. The departed loved one consequently never arrives where death commands him or her to go and, therefore, becomes angry with the living.

If there is no expression of grief, it will affect the dead and the living detrimentally. The dead cannot then go free from their earthly consciousness. As the deceased takes on spirit essence, he or she may get snagged into thinking of himself or herself still as a person. Thus, the deceased may begin to intrude into the business of the living in a way that can constitute a serious nuisance.

I remember once looking for an apartment in town where I was a student. The rental-office lady took me to a nice-looking efficiency apartment on the second floor of a building. As soon as we entered the place, I was frozen by a dismal sight. There at the kitchen sink stood a girl in her twenties with a kitchen knife two-thirds into her chest. She was bleeding profusely with her white robe soaked in blood down to her feet. It took me a second to realize that she was the ghost of a person who had been dead for quite a while. My reaction startled the housing person who was showing me the place. Of course she saw nothing. She asked if there was something I did not like about the place. I said yes. She asked what. I could not tell her what I saw. I said it was a vague feeling that I should look somewhere else. This is what happens when a dead person is not grieved. It takes a living person to shed tears on behalf of a dead person for this kind of thing not to happen. Humans must feel grief and be able to express it sincerely in order to free the dead spirit.

In the village there is an opportunity to grieve daily because there is death almost every day. And funeral rituals last long enough to produce a continual opportunity for the expression of grief. It takes a great deal of involvement within a community for grief to be expressed freely. It is the presence of the community that validates the expression of grief. This



means that a singular expression of grief is an incomplete expression of grief. A communal expression of grief has the power to send the deceased to the realm of the ancestors and to heal the hurt produced in the psyches of the living by the death of a loved one.

The ghost I saw in that apartment was perhaps grieved for only a few hours, maybe less, and by a few people only. Those who came to support the family in grief were probably trying their best to make sure that the members of the family did not shed too many tears. They were preventing grief from happening rather than encouraging it. They themselves were without tears, and so the poor deceased girl never went away. Tears carry the dead home. Communal grief therefore provides the opportunity to reach that important cathartic peak that grief must logically lead to, as well as serve as an energy that transports the dead home.

Grief is an energy that works at mellowing the mind, heart and body. An agitated or prolonged expression of grief exhausts the body to the point where rest is needed. One notices that a baby sometimes cries heavily before going to sleep. Grief takes us to the top of the hill and then lets us walk back down slowly, peacefully. It helps relieve the person who is in sorrow and leads him or her toward acceptance of the phenomenon of death, separation and love.

Funeral rites in a Dagara village usually start shortly after the death. The first people to cry out loud are the women. By wailing, they are not ritually involved, but are merely sending the news to the nearby villages about what has happened. While women are wailing, men are performing the invocational ritual that will make it possible for the funeral to proceed out into the open air for the next two or three days — depending on who dies. To hear women cry means that someone just died. The reason that men don't cry is because they must create the ritual space for the funeral to begin. Their ritual sets the space for the communal expression of grief. The elders gather in the ritual lodge to tell the ancestors that one of the living just departed, that he will soon be on his way to their



ancestral realm and that the villagers will need all their help to make that happen.

Every conceivable good spirit must be evoked to make certain that the deceased properly journey to the realm of the ancestors. No one wants to be responsible for having the deceased not reach the realm of the dead. For the responsible person may die to join with the one who cannot find his way.

Twelve years ago, I lost one of my best friends this way. His departed father, who had died in his hands but a few weeks earlier, had come back to get my friend because his mother would not allow the rite of the dead to be performed. She was Catholic. The priest had told her the rite was Satanism. Her son died suddenly in the city, hit by a car that disappeared before anyone could read the license plate. Back in the village, the diviner found out that the father of the newly deceased son had been sitting at the gate of the realm of the ancestors for a long time, waiting for the final ritual that would have thrown the gate open. In total despair, he had come seeking the most spectacular way to alert the family to the difficulty he was facing. A spirit who cannot find his way to the realm of the dead is dangerous to the living.

Invocation and the Funeral Ritual

The invocation itself looks very simple, involving the throwing of white ash by a priest called the ash thrower. The house where the death occurred is circled with a ring of that ash to prevent evil spirits from penetrating the room where the invocation is taking place. Like vultures, evil spirits are usually attracted to a ritual such as this. The spirits are invoked mainly so that they can come to help the deceased in the journey ahead by squeezing enough emotion out of the hearts of the grievers.

There are three elements in the funeral ritual that are in constant interaction: the musicians, the mourners and containers, and the assembled villagers. This interaction is



needed to maintain the power and the energy that steers the grieving. The music group consists typically of two large xylophones, one single drummer and two singers. These singers are improvisers whose function is to recreate and reproduce, through their singing, the history of the family up to the death that resulted in the separation. The singing theme combines the deeds and the sorrows of the family. Words stir the grief when they concentrate on the absurdity of the cycle of life and death with love in between. But words carried by music have an even greater impact on the display of grief. The xylophones weep the tune, the drum dramatizes the circumstances, and the singers verbalize the event. Everybody else then becomes free to express his or her own emotional response whichever way it comes to him or her. I call these singers cantors because their chants are worded spontaneously around the life of the person who died, in order to focus and steer the communal grief.

The dead person is seated a few yards away from the weeping crowd on a wooden stool freshly built from a special tree. The same tree is used to build a shrine around the dead. The dead person is dressed up in full ceremonial regalia. The shrine is decorated with colorful fabrics and with the sacred objects that belonged to the person now dead. The shrine represents the place from where the dead reaches out to the great beyond. Two women elders are consecrated to take care of the corpse. They each sit on one side of the corpse with fresh leaves in their hands representing the new life that has started for the dead person. They also use these leaves to chase flies away from the dead body. These women elders, although they weep discreetly, must be inattentive to what is happening outside the space in which they sit. This is because they are accompanying the dead person, collecting all the grief poured into the space and loading it on the soul of the dead one as it readies itself for the grand departure.

Between the shrine and the people there is an empty space that represents turmoil. It is the place of chaos and turbulence. It is the place where disorder must be acted out. It is the



sacred space. In it every form of emotion is permitted, encouraged and expected. People are free to get angry and to shout out loud to God and to any spirit. People are free to make any absurd comment they have as long as it pertains to the phenomenon of death and translates how they feel about it all. They can dance their emotions, run around in response to a strong urge or just weep their guts out.

Behind the singers and the musicians stands the crowd of people who have come to join in the ritual after hearing the initial wailing of the women. In fact, every person in the village is obligated to join in the expression of grief that follows death. Any stranger who happens to pass by the ritual space during the grieving must also stop, pay respect and either join in or walk to the place where the deceased is seated. There he can pay respect before continuing on with his business. This means that death stops every activity pertaining to life and disrupts the continuity of human feeling and relationship.

Death is chaos visiting the quiet of human life. Consequently, it is criminal to pursue business as usual knowing that someone in the village has died. Such behavior would indicate that one is used to death — which is impossible. For no one can get used to the idea of death, and to villagers, no one is supposed to get used to it. Not to participate in the ritual means one is evading what one owes the dead (and this is criminal since it traps the dead between here and beyond). Not to participate can also pollute one's life because the living cannot live peacefully until the dead are really dead, gone to the realm of the ancestors. Death requires the suspension of normal activities.

The people who gather for the funeral ritual are grouped in specific ways. On one side of the musicians are the male villagers, the female villagers on the other. These two groups constitute a formation capable of functioning rhythmically and harmoniously with the actions of the instrumentalists and singers. Within these gendered groups are two other groups, consisting of the mourners and the containers. The mourners



grieve. The containers make sure the mourners do not go beyond the ritual space nor do anything that is harmful to themselves or to the villagers as a whole. Mourners are usually close relatives of the deceased. They feel the separation more acutely than the rest of the village. Their feelings, a combination of the desire to join their loved one in the great beyond and a deep frustration with life's vicissitudes, make them prone to a lot of violent displays. They are insane in a way.

Keeping their insanity bearable requires a trail of people who are not as upset as the mourners. These containers typically are relatives who come from afar. Next to them are those who are just villagers, friends or friends of friends. They are there to keep the sacred space alive, to contain the chaos within it by assisting the mourners. Thus, the whole village attends the funeral in order to help the family and relatives express their grief. The villagers also take this opportunity to bring their own unfinished business with their own dead relatives. In the largest sense, the ritual is not only about this one dead person but a ritualized process that encompasses all the dead of the village up until then.

One can recognize those arriving at the funeral ritual for the first time by their check-in ceremony. Any person who enters the ritual space must first walk three times past the dead in a straight line. At the fourth passing the newcomer must walk toward the dead twice and make an offering as a presentation from himself and his own dead relatives and parents before joining the gathering. Offerings, or give-aways, are usually in the form of cowrie shells or domestic animals. Cowrie shell offerings are thrown into the shrine circle because no one can enter it except the two women elders in charge of the body. Participants throw in anything of substance or otherwise that will help the soul go away on its journey to the Great Beyond. Other offerings are directly presented to the primary mourners through an intermediary. The intermediary must be a distant relative.



Everyone must do the check-in ceremony. This is why people notice when you don't go to a funeral ritual. Sooner or later a death will occur in your own family, and you'll find that the relatives of those people at whose funeral you didn't go will hesitate before they come to yours. If they come, they come to make a statement about your declining sense of community, and they will do that in a singing fashion. In their song they will describe how the person was not at their relative's funeral. They will emotionally harangue you on social ethics pertaining to death and the responsibility that weighs on everybody who learns about the death of anybody. Consequently, a person's social failures are brought out in the course of funeral ritual, and as a result create an occasion for a special kind of grief. Death reminds the person who is not paying his or her social dues to the community that he or she must repent and grieve for past failures.

In the funeral ritual, the xylophones are always the instruments that set the primary melodic influence. Their role is to produce a musical space so that the wailing that accompanies grief can happen in melody. They are divided into what we call the male xylophone and female xylophone. The male xylophone follows the mood of the singers while the female xylophone accompanies the male xylophone by creating a set of notes repeated over and over. After a while the drummer enters, creating a rhythmical space within which this chanted verbal dialogue can happen. When the male singers enter they lead the rest of the group into a chanting expression of grief. Cantors speak to each other as if no one else is there. One cantor will come forth, with a very incisive statement about humans being trapped in a world in which they are not in control because of the mighty power of death. They will go on to sing that the family whose relative has died has been chosen in order to have everyone remember that our death may be next. Another cantor will respond very quickly with a short sentence sung at a high pitch, and as he sings, all the men will initiate a chanting pattern that will then be taken



up by the group of women, finally involving the whole group of family members, relatives and villagers. Meanwhile, the cantors continue to speak to each other about death and the dead. The pattern is repeated endlessly, and the dialogue between the cantors is extremely diversified.

In between the cantors' dialogue there are individual or sub-group expressions of grief. While the group is involved in chanting its sorrow, individuals may get in touch with areas inside of themselves that require specific grief attention. These are moments when individuals separate from one of the groups and allow themselves to be carried away by the energy surging in them. People feeling this deep grief wail in the direction of the shrine and within the space of chaos in an attitude of despair. As they near the shrine, the sacred place representing the great beyond, other people (usually containers who had been walking discretely behind) will touch them on the shoulder. The touch is a reminder that they must throw their grief into the sacred space of the shrine and return to the village to gather more grief. They must not walk into the sacred space of the shrine, for this would mean their death. To walk into the sacred space of the dead without being consecrated is to join with the soul of the dead as it gathers the fuel of grief to march into eternity. This is why mourners should never be left alone in expressing their grief. The vulnerable state of a mourner predicates him or her to sudden death, grief being an expression of the pull toward death and eternity. My father lost his first wife this way. As the funeral of her daughter was progressing, the poor woman had a "grief seizure." She ran wildly toward the shrine. A female container on her heels touched her as they both neared the sacred space. She ignored it and leapt into the space. People were bewildered by the sight of her in a place like that. But nothing happened until the next morning when she did not wake up. By noon, the bodies of a daughter and a mother were sitting together in the same sacred space.

The more one grieves, the more one gives to the dead and



the more one moves closer to being with the dead. The container's task is to ensure that the mourner knows well how to distinguish between a grief that helps the dead soul go home and a grief that kills. Such a person is never left alone. The container is a caretaker who comes out of the crowd to join in support of the grief-stricken person. He or she operates as a space provider on the one hand and, on the other, as a lifesaver who brings back home someone who would otherwise mourn himself or herself into eternity. Such a person will duplicate every action channeling grief that the mourner expresses and will do so almost synchronously, but while doing this, he will keep a keen eye on the other who may go out of bounds anytime. Containers do not trust mourners. It is assumed that any individual expression of grief increases the danger of breaking the ritual space. Consequently the assistance from a person who does not feel the urge to express his grief in this particular way is like having the extra eye that knows where the boundaries are.

Among the participants, the members of the immediate family of the dead are tagged with a rope on their wrists for identification purposes. These are called *kotuosob*, which means the-center-of-the-heat people or primary mourners. These people are at a high risk of grieving themselves to death and are therefore more likely to go out of bounds and break the pattern and order of the ritual. They are tagged for everybody to recognize. The more intensely the cantors sing in reference to them, the wilder their expression of grief. There are people assigned to look after these tagged ones for the duration of the ritual. These caretakers will mimic exactly what the tagged relatives do. For example, if a relative begins to run off, they will follow until a certain point at which it becomes necessary to remind the relative that he or she is moving out of the ritual space. Most of the time relatives get so caught up in the grief that they will dash out of the group and run wildly in any direction. The caretakers have to keep pace with them. Caretakers are always at least two feet behind these griever,



and do exactly what they do. Most of the time these actions end in the form of a rhythmical dance that consists of pounding the ground with the feet and in jumping up and down in cadence of the drum.

Non-relatives who are not tagged with a *kotuosob* express their individual feelings in a less risky way. It is assumed that in the grief ritual space all will be moved to express themselves. Sometimes, a large group of fifteen to twenty people will come out to join a primary relative battling with his sorrow. The whole group will end up as a line of dancers dancing exactly what the relative is doing in the front of the line. It is understood in the ritual that the feeling of the person in front of the line will be transmitted to every person as they dance together in one line.

This sharing of personal feeling is a form of silent and physical support to the person grieving. The dancers will move back into the surrounding groups when the person in the front stops dancing, turns around and starts walking toward the chanting crowd. At that moment, one after the other, the dancers will do as the grieving relative does.

Within a grief ritual space, expression of grief is gender-specific. No woman will try to assist a man in grief, and no man will help a woman to express her grief. It takes a man to provide an outlet to the emotions of another man. Similarly, it takes a woman to echo the grief of another woman. But while all that is happening, the drummers are drumming, the xylophones are playing, the singers are singing and even those dancing continue to partake in the communal chanting. And this goes on for at least three days and three nights if the departed one is an adult. Children's funerals last one day. Adolescents' funerals last two days and one night.

There is yet another category of people whose role it is to downplay the emotional intensity of the relatives' grief. In contrast to those who assist the members of the primary family stirring their grief, this other group acts out the whole ritual as if it were a joke. They call this group *lahuoro*, or the joking



partners. Their function is to act like a thermostat. They keep the inner space of the ritual under control because the Dagara believe that grief can kill when it is carried up beyond a human level of intensity. These joking partners are needed to balance the energy of grief to an appropriate human level. Joking partners will always leap at a primary member who goes wild and will ask for cowrie shells, for instance, or remind the person of the fact that he brings food to someone (the dead) in the compound who is not hungry. They can also be seen at the shrine talking to the body of the dead. It is not surprising to hear them say to the dead, "Now let me see you do as you used to do if you're a real man," or "I've always asked you to be quiet, and you have never listened. Now you are still and quiet without my asking, and I am the one making all the noise. How about that?"

Although these reminders appear to have no connection with what is going on, they are very effective in grounding an individual at the extreme end of expressing grief. No one escapes the emotional energy triggered by such a ritual. Everybody gets the opportunity to shed some tears, and regardless of the purpose for which the tears are shed, the dead will have plenty of tears to swim in on the way home to the other world. Of course, the burial ceremony itself is not as important as the expression of grief because burial occurs after the general grief catharsis has been achieved. If this catharsis does not occur properly, the spirit of the dead will not be able to leave the village and, in time, will have to kill more people in order to have companions to be with around the village. Or the funeral of the latter will collect enough tears to carry both to the other world. What is certain is that a village in turmoil is a village that has some unfinished business with its dead. Any premature death is caused by an imbalance of energy between the living and the dead. This is why, when death occurs, the thing to think about is not burial, but funeral, tears, grief.



The Re-enactment

Besides the xylophone, drumming and singing to stimulate the grief catharsis, there is another important part to the funeral ritual. The life of an adult who dies must be reenacted by the surviving members of his initiation group. All the males who were initiated at the same time as the departed one will, in the second or the third day, re-enact that person's life. That portion of the ritual is called *xanu*. It means dream, as if the dead were dreaming his life. The spirit of the dead must live its life once more in an accelerated fashion before departing to the realm of the ancestors. A number of token activities about the person such as farming, weaving, carving, hunting, drinking or divining are quickly acted out by his friends. In a way, this is a ritual of their separation from the dead. It is believed that doing what was once done frees the living from the dead and vice versa, thus allowing the dead to reach the realm of the ancestors. Going to the ancestors is also getting the permission to come back eventually. But it is important for the dead that the living do what they are supposed to do to allow the dead to be able to come back. In a community, the death of one person is the affair of everybody. Therefore, it takes everybody to send the dead to the realm of the ancestors. Any isolated, individual effort to perform ritual that requires community effort will only result in having the departed one come back as a ghost. The ghost will try to tell the family what must be done for the dead person to get the chance to register with the ancestors. This in turn makes it possible for the person to return to this life at a later time.

This re-enactment of the life of the deceased is done in the following manner. Individuals who have a personal relationship with the dead are chosen to represent the deceased. This role of representation will shift from person to person because no one can play the role of his dead friend for a long time without going crazy. Changing roles prevents one from staying in it long enough to reach this apex of feeling.



Speeches and the Pyre

There is yet another aspect of the funeral, one that regroups the participants around the funeral pyre and takes the form of speeches. The friends of the deceased express their friendship one last time. Each person narrates the genesis of his friendship with the deceased and makes an offering to the dead to take along with him on his journey to the realm of the ancestors. An immediate relative of the deceased accepts the offering so as to continue the life of friendship and love that the giver had with the deceased person. Acceptance of the present is an acknowledgment of the transfer of relationship. Friends who had a strong relationship with the deceased now have this same relationship with the person to whom they gave the present. Through this ritual of transfer, the dead one never really goes away because it is through this person that his invisibility is transcended. The living person who accepts the present is now in fact the dead person for everyone in the village. The sincerity with which the villagers then interact with the person will attest to that role.

In the case of the death of one's parents, the surviving children are not concerned with this transfer ritual. You don't replace a mother or a father because you never lose your father or your mother. The sisters of your mother will be hurt if at your mother's death something happens that suggests replacement. The same is true with the brothers of your father. What is important in ritual transfer is that it concerns itself solely with friendship ties born out of shared experiences such as initiation, hunting, farming and the like. The ritual transfer of friendship therefore concerns those who feel they must continue the friendly tie with someone in the family of their deceased friend. Elders say nothing can destroy a true relationship, not even death. To grieve a dead friend does not erase the friendship with him or her. Such an attachment can become dangerous if left without an outlet, that is, if it is not transferred on to a living person. When love exists, it must



continue, or it will turn dangerous for the person who loves. Human feelings are an energy that can turn dangerous, negative, if not honored. So when a loved one dies, those who survive must reconnect the "plugs" from the dead person to people who are still alive. They do that partly because of the sense of loss that any death produces and partly out of the desire to give a certain continuity to emotional relationships.

Every person, male or female, who dies a normal death is given a full range of funeral ceremonies. If the dead are not given these ceremonies the dead are stranded between worlds. An unweaned baby who dies does not get this kind of ceremony. An uninitiated person gets to be mourned but does not benefit from these internal rituals because he is an outcast with respect to his age group. Consequently, to evade initiation is to deny yourself a proper death.

Modernity and Death

With the sweeping transformations changing indigenous way of life, elders are more concerned about dying properly and having proper funerals than ever before. They want to be sure they will have a normal funeral ritual performed on their behalf. But they also interpret people's refusal to get initiated as the first sign that death is being evaded. Being seduced by Western modernity, villages are being told initiations and funeral ceremonies are both wrong and unimportant, that they are uncivilized and primitive. This is because modernity sees death as an end while the traditional world sees death as a transition.

Some conservative families in the villages try to figure out alternative ways of taking care of this problem by asking each other to be responsible for the initiation of their children. The first consequence of westernization has been to make initiation private. In the old days, initiation was a village matter that mobilized the energies of every person. Today, a negligible



energy is invested in it, and it is done by those who still cling desperately to tradition. These people still believe that a person cannot mature without initiation. Anatomic maturation is insufficient for manhood or womanhood. The experience of breaking down fundamental perceptions of the world brought about by the initiation ritual permits another self to grow and to be born. Without this other birth, there can be no meaningful death.

Initiation and death are linked together in an intimate way. There is some sense in which one can say that death ends the initiation process. But this ending must be accomplished by the living in the form of an energy released through ritual grief. The loss of initiation in the traditional culture opens a psychic spiritual hole that is rapidly destroying the soul of my people. It shows that when the modern and the traditional collide something happens that inevitably sets the deterioration of the traditional into motion. The indigenous purity of life is also its vulnerability. When touched by something less than pure, it takes on the impurity of the other and loses its identity in the process. Likewise, the loss of initiation also inspires the loss of one's ability to grieve regularly in a community context and creates a condition that traps the person in a meaningless and wayward life pattern.

In conclusion, the components for the maintenance of grief energy begin with the ritual done by the elders at the Nature Shrine shortly after death has occurred. Ash throwing, the ritual that opens the space for the funeral ceremony, is designed to avail a working space devoid of any perturbing forces so that the throwing of oneself into grief can be strong enough to propel the dead to the realm of the ancestors, where life continues. This ritual opens the space within which grief can be expressed in a productive and practical manner. When death occurs, no male utters the sound of grief until a ritual space is created. Because funeral ceremonies enable the dead to begin life with the ancestors, grief is the major process for release from this life and movement into the next.



Women can wail so as to signal people in the nearby compounds that a grief ritual is about to start. But they cannot participate in ritual grieving until they've heard a male voice. There is a specific way in which the male announces the news by using his voice. What the male voice says in a condensed way is "Yes, we have a death, but also the ritual space has been created. We can now mourn. We can now grieve."

The second part is actually the musical space constructed by a xylophone, a drummer and a couple of singers. There is a close relationship between music and grief, and so, when the space is created, music must go on all the time for grief to express itself. So the musical space is an important part of the maintenance of this force field that is created. It permits people to grieve.

The third part is the contained expression of grief and the re-enactment of the life of the dead person. The people who normally take care of this are self-selected. They are people recognizable by their ability to act. They are called the communicators or the mineral people. They act (whenever they are among a group), tell stories, recite genealogies and know nearly everything that has happened in the village. But to be in the funeral they must be people from the same initiation group as the dead one. The final parting ceremony takes place around the body of the dead, which is sat up and dressed in special ceremonial attire. This is the last ritual time to express unformulated grief. It's usually the most powerful moment because this is where the physical separation happens and people have to let go, usually holding back some of their grief until that time when they finally realize that they have to let go. While they grieve, the gravediggers come and take the corpse away. Nobody follows the gravediggers to the burial site in the cemetery.

The dead are laid sideways on the grave facing east (west for men), next to items that are important for their journey. These items could be a medicine pouch, a divination item or the whole medicine bag if it is determined that this is what the



spirit of the dead wants in its journey to the realm of the ancestors. This must be done right, or the dead will not let the burier — who must descend into the grave to arrange all these things into proper order — leave the grave.

The act of burying a person is a sophisticated process that requires people who are trained to do it and who possess this particular kind of medicine or knowledge.

The grave is shaped like an egg, with a tiny opening in the middle big enough for the body to go through. It usually takes two people to put the person in the grave. There is one person inside the grave to receive the body and to lay it the right way, and another outside the grave who hands the body in and who must stay to assist the person working inside the grave. The task of proper burial is basically the responsibility of the person inside the grave. This person must lay the body in its ritual posture with the clothes and the accompanying items properly arranged. If he does it right, he will leave the grave without being touched by the body. If something is not done exactly right, he will know it when he begins to exit the grave because the spirit of the dead will use the hands of the body to grab the legs of the exiting person. If this happens, he will then have to get back into the grave and redo everything he did before and try another exit.

Sometimes it happens that the dead will play a game with the person inside the grave. Although this is very rare, it usually happens with witches and powerful medicine men who, for one reason or another, always find something wrong in the way they are being laid in the grave or in the way their things are arranged. It takes a witch to bury a witch. When everything has been done properly, the inside burier uses magic to escape. The person waiting outside closes the exit of the grave and heads back to the village, where he will find his companion who used magic to escape waiting for him.

Using magic is the only way one can escape when the dead one doesn't want the burier to go. So there is a kind of magical element in the disposal of the body that is not



explicable, because it belongs to the secret society of those who bury people. Children are allowed to take a look at the grave before they bring the dead into it because the children are the symbol of the possibility that the dead will be remembered. The physical structure of graves is such that they blend into the natural surroundings after a few years. But not everybody is buried in nature. Elders are usually buried in the middle of the family compound. Their graves are shrines where all kinds of rituals are performed. An elder, being a person who has completed his mission here on earth, is expected to spend a lot of time as a counselor helping the living from the other side. For a while he or she will appear in leaders' dreams in his or her earthly body. But after a long time has passed, the leader, as an ancestor, chooses to appear in visions as an animal or a tree. Ancestors often cast off the idea of appearing to the living as humans. They return to nature and to forms of earthly configurations such as mountains, rocks and rivers. The spirit of the elder is family-centered and very specific in the kind of direction he wants the family to follow. This is why elders are not buried in nature but at home. It is the highest honor given to a person in the village. To be buried in the family compound is the reason everybody looks forward to being an elder.