

1960

Death in Africa

Margot Astrov

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Astrov, Margot. "Death in Africa." *New Mexico Quarterly* 30, 2 (1960). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol30/iss2/3>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Quarterly by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

DEATH is the supreme frustration of man. The certainty of mortality seems forever to be thwarting his most basic expectation, life unending.

Each frustration is a challenge; and each challenge demands answer, if not combat. Death is an ever-present threat which must be undone for survival's sake.

As cultures differ from group to group, so differ the patterns by which men have tried, and still do try, to answer death. With some groups, mere verbalization of fear or of grief seems to provide the necessary curative response; with others death is answered by making it subservient to life through the tool, the lasting word, the monument of art; and again with others death is tried to be undone by integrating it closely into the social and economic organization of the living.

The history of the cultural achievements of man, viewed from the angle of the expectation of death, is an impressive spectacle indeed. For the deadly sting of death has often become the mere shock that precedes birth rather than the finality of death.

Death in Africa

MARGOT ASTROV

In no culture has death ever been attempted to be overcome by one single "formula." Patterns of response and defense intermingle; strategies of combat seem to be fluid. And yet, one or two themes of response usually stand out, determining in tone, color and emphasis all other themes.

Variegated as the many cultures of Africa may be, from the Sahel to the Cape, from Coast to Coast, and from the jungle of the Congo to the rolling plains of the Veldt, we shall recognize easily the recurring echoes of the dominating leitmotif that seem to run through all the culture. Practical-minded as are all the people we may encounter the length and the width of the continent, they all seem to have harnessed death and transformed its rod into a practical instrument, useful to the living. They have made a tool out of death without which the hunter could not quarry his game or the farmer till his acres or the husbandman tend to his cattle. Without death, to most of these groups, the social organization of the community would fall apart,

law would lose its binding power, business would slump and deity collapse.

Death, in other words, is the fertilizing and organizing principle that, in many ways, controls and directs life. The living live and toil to serve the dead so that the dead, in turn, may serve the living. This is the dominating theme that runs through most of the African cultures, regardless of tribal and linguistic differences.

Physiologists have defined life as the totality of functions that resist death. This definition has been criticized by those who consider it misleading to define life in relation to death. But we think it to be justified to go even a step further and to circumscribe life as all those processes which aim at integrating death and at making it a very function of life.

The aborigine of Africa, according to Junod, has no verbal expression that would clearly define the concept of infinity. To the Thonga it is merely that "which does not reach the point where it ends."¹

With most of the Bantu-speaking tribes it is believed that as soon as a person dies the departed will become a god, for he has entered the realm of the infinite. And the "infinite" is all around us; consequently the dead are all around us always. For those who have met death, there is no longer such a thing as distance, impenetrability or limitation of space. The infinite is also the unknown. And since the unknown looms in the life of the natives in frightful proportions, the living could not exist without the constant guidance of the dead who are familiar with all the roads and trails that lead through the jungle of the unknown.

The native of Africa conceives of the power of death as a diffused form of energy that permeates every material thing, that floats around hut and corral, that hums in bush and tree, that gives meaning to shadow, reflection and dream.

These ubiquitous energies, made up of all the souls of the dead, are also thought of as being concentrated in the supreme deity.

The highest god of the Bushongo (Bantu) is but the sum of all the spirit, so is Bumba of the Bambala.²

Death does not discontinue but rather upholds continuity. The supreme deity, as the native of Africa experiences it, is but a center of energy in which all the streams of souls are gathered up and transformed. They vaguely personalize these centers and call them Mulungu or Bamba or Leza. We may call it Mneme.

It is one of the tenets of biology that the human being, as well as all living organisms, may exist only by receiving, transforming, and releasing the energy of the cosmos, that is, the energy embedded in our entire past. And what is our past but the experiences of the dead who form an endless file back to the beginning of all things? The law of the conservation of energy is a living law, and the phenomenon of metabolism seems to be reflected in the attitude of many peoples toward death. Destructive processes have to join constructive forces, and vice versa, to provide the energy for the activities of growth and renewal.

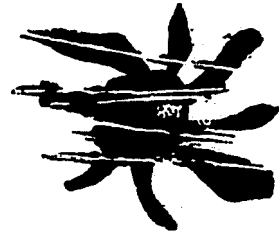
The belief that the dead are very much alive and indispensable to the promotion of life is shared by almost all tribes inhabiting the continent.

The Pygmies, hunters of the Congo, have played another variation upon the theme of death and life. They scorn the idea of any form of personal immortality. They accept death as the irrevocable end. Unlike the surrounding Bantu tribes, with whom they live in an economic symbiosis, they have not developed a ritualized relationship with the individual ancestor. But their faith in the indestructability of life as such is firm and ever present. Man passes never to return. After the night, the day; after the tree, another tree; after one cloud, another cloud; after one man, another man—he will say and shrug his shoulder.

Death is inevitable, but life never dies. This is the underlying idea of all the dances and mimetic rituals of the Pygmies. Trilles, the French ethnologist, made an interesting study of the Bambuti Pygmies, and he gave us a vivid description of one of these dramatic performances. In its course, the natives of the jungles enact with great skill, Trilles³ says, the endless succession of decay and renewal. While a dancer mimics the dying of an animal, or the falling of a tree, or the coming of the night, the chorus chants:

O Sun, O Sun!
 Death comes, the end is near,
 The tree falls and dies.
 O Sun, O Sun!
 The child is born in the womb of his mother,
 The dead lives,
 Man lives,
 The Sun lives.

Contradiction is a sign of life, Thibon once said. And so is paradox. If life cannot be reduced to a clear-cut formula, so death cannot be explained without leaving room for ambivalence. As life never will be quite understood, so will death always remain a mystery of separation—and the supreme frustration. In faith, in ritual and in symbol, we may have accepted death as the ultimate maker of life. Yet there may be sorrow and pain unbearable at the time of actual death. Verbalization is an ancient means of overcoming pain and sorrow. The keening, the formal lament, the dirge are verbal means—if highly patterned ones—to localize and to remove the pain of separation.



Among many of the African tribes we find poetic masterpieces of the mourning-song, verbal classics, and it is difficult to understand why the African dirge is so little known abroad and has not yet found its way into the great anthologies of poetry.

There is no return; there is no resurrection. Once death has struck, the individual will sink back into the dark night, even though the strength that was his life will not perish. It is for this reason that the mourning of the African native can be so passionate, his despair so profound, his lament so desperate. The wailing melodies of the dirge never cease to ring across veldt and steppe in shrill cries of desolation, to rise above jungle and forest in dismal voices of violent protest.

The Ewe, a Negro people of the West Coast, hunters and farmers, and outstanding in the arts of carving, basketry, weaving, and pottery-making, entertain the belief that the souls of the departed warriors live on in the sun. They also share the belief of other tribes living in that area that the life-essence of a deceased person can be captured in his stool. But the concept of personal immortality has no appeal to them. Their pessimistic, and yet stoic, disposition found a moving expression in one of their dirges⁴:

The realm of the dead is a large city.
 Kings traveled there,
 And they never returned.
 Stop crying, O mother of an only child!
 Mother of an only child, cease crying.
 Never yet an only child
 Has been born to be immortal.
 The world of the dead is a large city;
 Kings traveled there,
 And they never returned,
 Therefore, stop weeping, O mother . . .

It appears to be part of the instinctual endowment of man to expand himself not only into the future, beyond death, but also back into the past, where death was not yet. This may be perhaps the reason we find so often the contemplation of death linked to the contemplation of the beginning, to creation.

Thus the Fang, a tribe living in the jungle of the Congo, in narrating the myth of creation, punctuate the story of the beginning with Songs of Mourning, heartrending outcries of sheer despair:

Cold and death, death and cold,
 I would close my ears,
 Cold and death, death and cold,
 Misery, O my mother, misery.

And another outbreak:

The star above,
 The fire below,
 The embers on the hearth,
 The soul in the eye,
 Cloud, smoke, and death.

The body—Gnoul—is bound to die and to perish. But the soul, Nsissim, will live on in the fire of the funeral pyre, from which the people will take brands home and kindle anew their hearth fires. And in the glow of the hearth the soul of the departed will live on, a blessing to the living. Fire, with the Fang, is, as with other tribes, the symbol of life undying. And in another dirge⁵ the thought of death creating life in its smoking trail reaches an almost abstract level, for fire is conceived as the seat of life, but also as a purifying agency.

Fire, fire, fire,
From the hearth below,
From the hearth on high,
Light that shines in the moon,
Light that shines in the sun,
Star that gleams at night . . .
Spirit of the thunder . . .
Fire of the sun,
I call thee for expiation, fire, o, fire!
Fire that passes,
And all things die behind thy track . . .
The trees are burned, ashes upon ashes,
The grass grows, the plants bring forth fruits,
Fire, I call upon thee;
Fire of expiation.

Life and death are mutually in need of each other. The fire passes, and death follows its smouldering trail. The fire passes again, and out of the ashes the green grass grows, and new roots strike into the fertile ground of destruction.

As the Fang, so are the Mountain Dama—a vanishing tribe of Southwest Africa—convinced of constantly being surrounded by the invisible armies of the dead. Like clouds, the souls of the departed are hovering about them, and they feel their guiding or retarding presences wherever their hunting and agricultural activities lead them. The Dama, likewise, consider the fire as the source and the preserver of all life; it is their altar, their place of sacrifice; it also represents their conscience, for it is the voices of the departed that become audible in the crackling of the burning wood.

This mountain tribe believed in an after-life and in a "Paradise," where death was unknown. Gamamb, the creator, was believed to preside over the realms both of the dead and of the living. He was considered very powerful but not all-benign, because he created not only life and good medicine, but also bad medicine and death.

The mourning ceremonies of the Dama were elaborate, and the funeral song with them was a highly developed art which showed a tendency toward drama. Vedder, in his classic on the Mountain Dama, has provided us with a fine description of one of their death-rituals.

The precentor, says Vedder, opens the mourning ceremony by heartrend-

ing wails, followed by brief exclamations of sorrow and despair, uttered in a high monotone pitch. Whereupon the chorus of mourners responds by relating the biography of the deceased. And by describing the past life in such exuberant colors the mourners endeavor to entice the dead to arise and to return to this life so beautiful. Seeing their hopes thwarted, the grief-stricken relatives and friends change the tenor of their chant. From the tone of gentle persuasion, they lift their voices up to a violent clamor of self-accusations, urging the scorpion, the snake, and all the dead of the past, to fall upon the living and make an end with them all, for life is no more worth living.

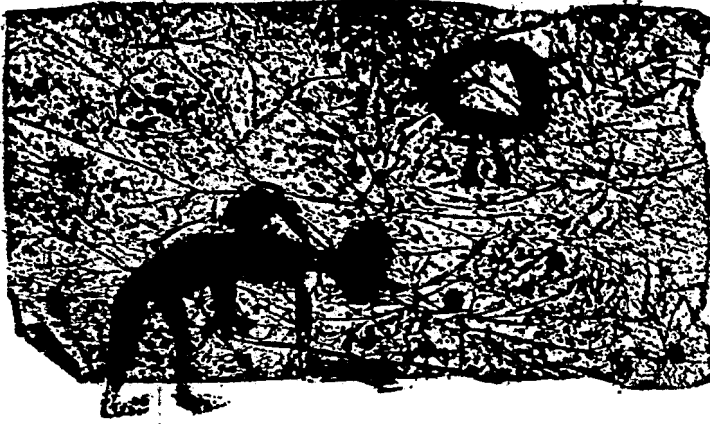
The following dirge⁶ may stand as one example for the highly patterned mourning songs of the Dama:

The desperate wife addresses her departed husband:

Listen, hunter, elephants passed by the wharf!
 You, who never missed an arrow-shot,
 Don't you see the men take up their bows?
 Do you wish to stay back alone?
 Arise, my husband, arise
 And follow the hunters . . .
 And carry home the game,
 That the fire of the hearth may burn again!
 But, alas! you do not hear my words!
 Death may take me, for I wish to die . . .
 A weeping woman am I.

After having invoked the snake to kill her, she once more implores her husband to return and to rekindle the dying embers of the hearth:

Many roads you walked,
 And you always returned.
 But on walking this one road
 You became silent
 You are slumbering upon extinguished embers.
 Man, arise! and kindle the fire
 That the child may drink
 While the fire lightens the hut
 Come,
 And tell me of those things
 You beheld in the darkness.



The biographical moment is even more conspicuous in other funeral songs of the Dama as well as of other African tribes. To relate an event that has happened means to rise above time and death. The transient has become permanent through the word. The word will never perish. And not only that. It is by the word that man often has taken the sting out of death. Or at least the hurt out of the sting. And thus it is that the dirge not only expresses sorrow or despair but heals sorrow and despair. As all high literature should.

The center of gravity around which the social organizations of the Dahomeans (West Coast) revolve is the cult of their ancestors.⁷ The continuance of life in general, and of family and sib in particular, is warranted only when the dead are ceremonially remembered at the proper time and the proper place. And the dead are thought of not only in strictly patterned rite and dirge but in all the activities of everyday life. The architectural set-up of the Dahomean village is another expression of the native's attitude toward the dead. No compound is complete without a temple-like structure where the ancestral spirits are believed to abide and where they are worshipped and cared for. And death has been made the cornerstone among these people not because they are enamored with death, but for reasons of security and because they love life and the very real joys of this earth.

The climax of the ceremonial year is reached by the performance of the ancestral dances from March until early May. During these rites the ancestors are believed to be reincarnated in the dancers. To the "primitive" mind nothing is simple, but everything is ambivalent and complex. One and the same ceremony may serve two purposes. It may be staged, on the one side, to speed the deceased on his journey and to separate him safely from the living; and on the other side, to keep him in a beneficial relationship with the community of the living.

A sequence of songs, chanted by the priest in charge of the great annual ceremony for the dead, reveals plainly this twofold relationship of the quick to the dead. In these songs which terminate the last section of the rite, the priest imparts his injunctions to the spirits, who are about to return to the place where the souls abide. In the first song, the chief chanter explains that it is the duty of the dead to aid the living in the difficult task of being alive. But in the next song, the priest asks the departed to visit the compound only if summoned. Furthermore, they are reminded to take along only what is rightfully theirs, "to take away with them the songs, but not the voices of the singers; to take the drum-rhythms, but not the hands of the drummers." In the final song, Dombada Hwedo, the deity which is made up of the souls of all the unknown dead, is implored to increase the power of the priest favorably.

The Dahomean ceremony of the ancestral dances, as observed and described by Melville J. Herskovits, clearly is designed to balance the power radiated by the dead. And since all power may be good medicine and at the same time bad medicine, it has to be directed and to be dosed carefully by way of ceremonial.

Furthermore, these rites are meant to "establish" not only the dead but also the living. The dead have to get adjusted to their new environment and their new tasks; the living, having been in contact with death, have to be purified and balanced back into life. To achieve this, the "power," released by death, has to be put under control and distributed appropriately. But the soul, and all that goes with it—the unknown, the dark, the invisible—is as complex and dangerous as the jungle. It needs elaborate attention, proper treatment and even ritual compulsion and guidance. But even control must be controlled. Thus, the ceremony of mourning provides the stricken community with the necessary emotional outlet by way of the dirge.

Among the people of Dahomey the "friend" occupies a socially important position, in fact, the art of friendship, within this culture, has developed almost into an institution. It is the friend who laments the death of the friend.⁷

And the friend sings:

My friend is dead.
Would that my friend were still in life,
Would that something might be found
To bring my friend back to life.

The group of mourners responds:

Behold what death has done!
What death has done to a family.
Friend and friend were united,
The death of one leaves the other in grief.

The friend and all the other mourners sing together:

I went to drink with my friend,
And I did not find him.
O death! thou killest without trial

The friend, while covering the body of the dead with a piece of cloth, sings:

Death, thou spoilest the good things
A great thing has all at once become small.

The sting of death does sting. And as in anger and defiance, the priest rises during the final ceremonies, admonishing the people to forget about the bitterness of death and to enjoy life as long as they may. Eat while you can eat, drink while you can drink:

I see it,
There is no enjoying beyond death,
And I say to you all, I say,
That which your senses taste of life
Goes with you.

I say to you, say,
The pipes you smoke,
The quiet they bring,
Goes with you.

I say to you, say,
The wives you have,
The love you know of them,
Goes with you.

Come then,
Dance,
For a lover of pleasure,
Now dead.

After the burial has taken place, the mourners, we are told, are permitted to abandon all restraint. At the rim of the grave tales are told of frank sexual innuendo. And while the sorrowful strains of the dirges still seem to echo through the forests, the challenging tunes of erotic songs flare up and mingle with those of mourning and despair.

The Dahomeans stand not alone in their practice of linking ceremonies of mourning with rites of procreation. Junod encountered this custom among the Ba-Ronga, and it also has been observed among the Ila-speaking people of Northern Rhodesia.

E. W. Smith, in speaking of the Ba-ila, advances the theory that, while in normal times the abnormal is tabu, in abnormal times—that is when the secret and nocturnal forces are powerfully in evidence—the “abnormal” things are done to restore the normal conditions. This appears to be a very plausible interpretation.

But are rites of fertility, performed in the face of death, really abnormal? These rites might be considered crude, but interpreted in the terms of the culture in which they are observed, they are not. The observance of procreational rites at the rim of a grave seems to present but one of the many variations rung on this world-wide theme of death the maker of life renewed.

Similarly, the Afahye ceremony held by the Ashanti of the West Coast in connection with the solemn eating of the first new yams, is closely linked up with the veneration of the dead. It is a distinct New Year's celebration, performed toward the end of October. The ceremony is inaugurated by a

libation offered to the Stools which are believed to be the receptacles of the ancestral spirits. And after the Stools have been taken to the river, the following prayer is addressed to the dead⁸:

Life to me;
Life to the chief . . .
Life to the bearers of children;
Life to the hunters.
May they be able to kill meat;
May the men beget children;
Do not let any bad sickness come.
We are giving you new yams
That you may eat.

The intimate symbiosis of processes pertaining to death with those of growth and general fecundity is the very soil out of which many of the African concepts of the supreme being have developed. To give but one example: Leza, the high god of the Ila-speaking people, once came to the conclusion, myth has it, that he, as the creator of death, ought to be subject to death himself. Thus, he surrendered to the powers of death each year once. When the rains begin to fall he will die. He will descend with the clouds, for he is the rain himself. And, in dying, he will fructify the earth. But with the unfolding verdure, the god will be reborn, and he will ascend—a new creation—up to the celestial precincts of his remote domain: death the maker of life.

1. Henri A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe*. London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1927.
2. Alice Werner, *The Natives of British Central Africa*. London: 1906, p. 55.
3. R. P. Trilles, *Les Pygmées de la Forêt Equatoriale*. Paris: Anthropos, Tom. 111, 4. Fasc. 1932, p. 110.
4. J. Spieth, *Die Religion der Ewer in Süd-Togo*. Göttingen: 1911, p. 110.
5. Blaise Cendrars: *L'Anthologie Nègre*. New York, p. 32.
6. Trans. from H. Vedder, *Die Bergdama*. Hamburg: 1923, Vol. 11, p. 6ff.
7. Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey, An Ancient West African Kingdom*. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1938.
8. R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. Oxford: 1927, p. 268.