


1994

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Graham, Penelope, "The "Severed Shroud": Local and Imported Textiles in the Mortuary Rites of an Indonesian People" (1994). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 1038.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1038>

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THE 'SEVERED SHROUD': LOCAL AND IMPORTED TEXTILES IN THE MORTUARY RITES OF AN INDONESIAN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the significance of local and imported textiles as these interact forming complex categories in the mortuary rites of the Lamaholot-speaking people of the traditional district Léwoléma in eastern Flores, Indonesia. Within this regional framework, my account draws primarily on field work in the village of Léwotala. There a person's physical demise elicits diverse social and ritual practices, depending on the deceased's achievements during his or her lifetime and the circumstances surrounding the death. As regards the mortuary sequence that commonly occurs, I will argue that various uses of cloth for exchange purposes mark both the severance --consequent on death-- of a specific affinal link and the simultaneous concern for its encompassment in a continuing flow of life between reputedly agnatic local clans and/or subclans.

REAPING THE HARVEST OF THE DECEASED

Local ideas in this regard may be approached through a consideration of the kinds of death that are distinguished and the corresponding treatments of the corpse. Full mortuary rites are performed for most deceased persons, although those who have died untimely and unfortunate deaths are notable exceptions. The latter category of deceased occasions neither the mortuary ceremonies, nor the affinal exchanges that are the focus of this paper. Indeed, the complete sequence of rites and prestations only occur in respect of men who have led productive lives and women who have reproduced and raised offspring. Given, however, that these gender-specific prerequisites are in accordance with the culturally defined aspirations of men and women respectively, most villagers who complete a normal life span do then become a subject of affinal prestations during their mortuary rites.

As I have discussed elsewhere (Graham 1991), in determining whether a mortuary prestation of elephant tusks is required in respect of the deceased, differential criteria apply to the "productivity" expected of men's and women's lives. These criteria relate to the kinds of fertility privileged in local conventional accounts of gendered work, such as stress the salience of agricultural production for men and of reproductive success for women. In all cases, however, the prestation rests on recognition of the "harvest" reaped from a person's lifetime and involves consequent apportioning of a share to the progenitor line which made that life possible. In other words, this affinal aspect of death returns to the "life-giver/wife-giver" (*belaké*, the term I render as "progenitor") a part of that "harvest", which the flow of life emanating from his agnatic line has generated out of the resources of its natal women's fecundity (bestowed on other men) and their sons' labour (on other clans' land). Where a deceased person has led a "productive" life by these criteria, then the relevant progenitor has a right to elephant tusks, as represented by the one on which the head of the corpse is resting prior to burial. In exchange, blessings are provided at the main mortuary ceremony and textiles must be reciprocated in due course.

Colloquially referred to as the "pillow tusks", these mortuary prestations are also known as "the pillow of the one who falls down". In theory at least, the progenitor with rights to a tusk prestation will not give the required permission for a deceased "sister" or "sister's son" to be buried, until he sees an appropriate availability of tusks in the household of the deceased, verifying that the prestation can be made a few days hence at the main mortuary ceremony.

The standard mortuary prestation for a deceased woman is two elephant tusks, each no more than half an arm span in length. The reciprocal cloth is a locally made woman's textile of first or second grade (**kewaté** **mé'an** or **kewaté** **pasan**). For a set of deceased male siblings, the mortuary prestation consists of one to three tusks, depending on their size. The elders who suggested sample prestations to me would expect reciprocal textiles according to the nature of the tusks offered: for a single large tusk they might hope for an Indian *patolu*, as well as a man's cylindrical cloth and belt (**nowin** and **mét**), whereas for other tusk combinations the more usual mortuary reciprocation of a woman's highest grade cylindrical cloth (**kewaté** **mé'an**), together with a **nowin** and a **mét** would suffice.

As these hypothetical examples of appropriate prestations indicate, there is considerable flexibility in practice and negotiations are the significant factor in determining acceptable tusks and textiles for particular mortuary exchanges. Nevertheless, the return prestation for mortuary tusks given on behalf of male dead stands out among instances of textile reciprocations for its inclusion of men's cloths – **nowin** and **mét** – among those offered to the clan of the deceased "sister's sons". In this way, the male subject and his garden labour, which occasions the mortuary exchange, is echoed not only in the "male" tusks which substitute for a share of the deceased's produce, but also in the men's cloths which in this instance form a subset of the categorically "female" counter-prestation of textiles.

GUARDING AND BURYING THE CORPSE

In the village of Léwotala all deceased persons are finally laid to rest with their head aligned towards the mountain, Ilé Bantala, behind the village. In the old days corpses were prepared and laid out in a position termed **seradin dodun**. This was akin to squatting, except the corpse was placed on its back with its hands on its chest and its heels brought up close to its buttocks, so that its knees were bent and raised. To keep the legs in that position, skeins of cotton thread were wound around the raised knees thereby holding the calves in close to the thighs.

The corpse was wrapped in a shroud of cloth – whatever was available or had been put aside in anticipation, which might mean anything from plain cotton to an Indian *patolu* textile. One Léwotala elder known to me indicated in no uncertain terms that he hoped to be shrouded in a *patolu* on his death. In his view, entry to the place of the dead in such attire would leave those already there in no doubt as to the importance the newly deceased had been accorded by his contemporaries during his lifetime.

After the shroud, corpses were usually wrapped in a mat which was then secured by means of cotton skeins in three places. Nowadays, corpses are generally laid out flat and buried, not in mats, but in wooden coffins made as required by householders with the help of village carpenters. In recent times, following encouragement from the Catholic Church and insistence by officials of the government of the Republic of Indonesia, all

corpses have been buried in the village cemetery. Earlier this century, some corpses were buried in the houseyard, while those of especially esteemed persons might be placed on an individual exposed platform constructed some distance from the quarters of the living.

Prior to burial of the deceased, the corpse is washed and dressed then laid out in the house. Just as a mother hen shelters (**gurun**) her chicks and a woman cloisters her new-born baby between its physical birth and its clan affiliation through a bathing rite some four days thereafter, so a deceased person must be "cloistered" until their soul principle moves on to the place of the dead. In this account of mortuary rites, I refer to someone who is designated to **gurun** a dead person as an "official mourner" in that particular case.

The full mortuary sequence in Léwotala involves not only cloistering the deceased and perhaps gathering to say Christian prayers for the soul. It also entails "lighting the fire" (**porit apé**) by presenting an animal, which will provision the mortuary rites once it has been "speared" for the purpose (**robak berobak**); setting food out for the deceased (**pokok durok**) aspects of whose soul principle (**tuber manger**) linger before entering the place of the dead; conducting the main mortuary ceremony "**nebo four**" (**nebo pat**), when four days have elapsed (i.e. on the fifth day) after the death; holding the subsidiary mortuary ceremony "**nebo eight**" (**nebo buto**), when eight days have passed (i.e. on the ninth day) since the death; and ritually retrieving the vegetable matter consumed by the deceased during his or her lifetime (**hodé wulun koli**).

While the corpse is guarded in the house during the night immediately following the death and into the next day, people come and go constantly. Apart from the male official mourner, men usually sit and talk in groups outside in the yard, whereas women gather around the corpse inside the house. Especially if the deceased is female, women representing the historically precedent "first-born" wife-takers (**opu weruin**) and/or younger women who have married men of the same clan as the deceased's husband and are therefore regarded as her junior siblings (**adé'**), will grate a coconut and make as if to wash the hair of the corpse using water infused with these coconut gratings. The deceased is thus readied for an imminent transition. Later, at the time of burial, the husk and scraps from this coconut must be taken to the graveyard and left there to rot.

While watching over the corpse, some women take turns to wail and sing, improvising on couplets of parallel speech. These women are said to be **opu biné'** of the deceased--those who have married out of the bereaved household (i.e. the sisters of a deceased man or the husband's sisters of a deceased woman)-- but actually any women who know sufficient ritual language may perform a dirge regardless of their relationship to the dead person. In these dirges, which usually reiterate a few key phrases, the women express their grief and complain that the deceased has left them too soon. The singers may also allude to episodes in the life of the deceased or recount their own ties with the dead person. Others present may request the deceased, through the singer, to carry various messages to loved ones already in the place of the dead.

One common refrain bemoans the deceased's "sudden departure". This refrain actually carries an implicit apology, that the woman expressing her sorrow has not had time to weave a cloth in which to dress the corpse. Strictly speaking, at least the children of the deceased and the women who have married out of the bereaved household should lay by an unused, good quality men's or women's cloth (**nowin** or **kewaté** respectively) to add to the shroud of the dead person. Using such textiles, sons of the deceased are said to dress the corpse from the head down, whereas the daughters of the deceased and other women who are of **opu** status are supposed to dress the corpse from the feet up.

Furthermore, most people who enter to see the deceased a last time are likely to bring a textile of some kind, nowadays often a modern manufactured cylindrical wrap (**lipa**) or a few metres of commercial cotton cloth, and place this over the corpse lying in state. All these textiles added to the shroud must be torn slightly first, so they will appear whole and intact to the eyes of the dead, when they receive the newly deceased among them.

SEVERING THE SHROUD OF DEATH

Before the corpse is "wrapped", the actual shroud must be torn (**siat**) right through into roughly two-thirds and one-third parts. The larger piece is used for covering the corpse. Although merely part of a textile, this two-thirds segment is said to appear whole to the eyes of the dead, when the deceased enters the place of the dead wearing it. Even Indian *patola*, reputed to have formed the shrouds of well-respected persons in the past, are said to have been severed in this way. In fact nowadays, an intact *patolu* is often touched against the corpse, as a token dressing of the deceased in this prestigious cloth, after which it is hung up above the bamboo couch for the duration of the mortuary rites.

The one-third section of the cloth is referred to as "that which is severed" (**seniat**). It is set aside – tossed over a horizontal pole above the bamboo couch on which the corpse lies in state – until the subsidiary mortuary ceremony (**nebo buto**), when it is taken home by the "first-born" wife-takers who have serviced the sequence of rites. As numerous other textiles of various kinds are placed atop the shrouded corpse prior to burial, three or four of these are selected to be included in the category **seniat**. These additional items of cloth are placed alongside the separated segment of the severed shroud to be collected with it eight days later.

Another aspect of the composition of the "severed shroud" testifies to the reckoning of generations in handling deceased persons in Léwotala. Beside the items of cloth taken from a particular corpse, there is always a high grade women's cloth displayed for the "first-born" wife-takers to see, hanging above the bamboo couch. In most cases, this cloth is stored away again on completion of the mortuary rites. When, however, the deceased person represents the last of a genealogical level of clansmen and their wives, the local textile forms part of the "severed shroud". It is taken home by the wife-taking line, who have by then serviced the mortuary rites of an entire generation of their **belaké** clan. As such this textile marks a point of completion, but, since cloth prestations usually token a vouchsafing of fecundity (Graham 1994), I suggest it simultaneously articulates the continuity of affinal ties flowing over the categorical distinction of genealogical levels.

As the corpse laid out in state is readied for burial and the "first-born" wife-takers select cloths to constitute the severed shroud, the official mourner and a clansman of his own genealogical level prepare to give a saliva blessing (**nilu'**) to their "sisters" and "sisters' husbands" (**opu**) generally. At this stage, the children of the deceased pass the bowl of water, which was by the right side of the head of the corpse, around among themselves and each drink a little of it. Sliced betel-nut ready for chewing is given to the corpse a final time, then some candle-nut is similarly placed in the mouth of the deceased. Of the two clansmen performing the blessing, one holds the plaited tray of betel ingredients and candle-nut, while the other prepares to administer the blessing by chewing some candle-nut and spitting the resultant saliva into his own left hand. He then dips a finger of his right hand into the mouth of the corpse, so as to extract a little saliva from the deceased and add it to that for use in the blessing, giving this **nilu'** its particular

significance. The saliva of the dead person is thereby passed on to the "daughters". This, I was told, confers on them a cool benign atmosphere bequeathed by the person who has passed away.

The first and last recipients of this burial-day blessing must be women who are wives of men of the wife-taking line servicing the mortuary rites. Since the severed shroud is later divided between these two women, they should not be actual daughters of the deceased nor natal clanswomen of the daughters. Those "daughters" will take their places elsewhere in the queue for the blessing. This sequence is to prevent the severed shroud textiles going straight back into the hands of a woman whose natal clan is that of the official mourner from the household of the deceased. The women who receive the first and final blessings, which are considered the strongest, are usually the wives of the two wife-takers nominated by their clan leader to contribute a chicken (on behalf of the clan) to each of the coming mortuary ceremonies (**nebo pat** and **nebo buto**). During the rites, these women also hand over to their **belaké**, in the person of the official mourner, two pairs of earrings. At the conclusion of this burial-day blessing, one pair is put in the plaited tray as the usual reciprocation for **nilu'**. The other pair is placed in the same tray, again held by the official mourner, as the wife-takers servicing the rites take down the cloths forming the "severed shroud" during the subsidiary mortuary ceremony (**nebo buto**).

Once this burial day blessing is completed, the deceased's daughters (and any of their natal clanswomen of the same genealogical level who happen to be present) each have a piece of white cotton thread, taken from a skein placed on top of the corpse, tied around their left wrist. In Léwotala, this is said to be a sign of mutual remembrance and longing between these women and the deceased; in the neighbouring community Rian Kotek, I was told that it is to prevent the soul principle of these women following the deceased to the place of the dead, for if that happened, the women concerned would pass away too. The remainder of the skein of cotton is buried with the corpse: the cotton's whiteness is understood to illuminate the feet of the deceased, as the skein forms a bridge over the waterway to the place of the dead.

This cotton thread tied around the left wrist of each of the deceased's daughters is reminiscent of the cotton strands tied on the wrists and other joints of a new-born baby during the final phase of its birthing rite. In the latter instance, the ties were said to prevent the mother's breast milk flowing out of the baby and were related to the differentiation and securing of life within the infant. Their application to the left wrist in the mortuary instance echoes the children who hold a sprig of **lupan** in their left hand, so as to "forget" the deceased whose corpse is being prepared for burial. Use of the left hand in this and other mortuary contexts facilitates separation and "letting go". The cotton ties on the daughters' left wrists, then, may be interpreted as facilitating dissociation from the deceased and securing the separate life within each of those women who are most clearly indebted to the deceased for their own vitality and its transmission to another clan. More specifically, like the first of the mother's milk, so the last of the corpse's saliva is fixed in these "sisters" following the blessing just conferred on them by their "brother" using the saliva of the deceased.

Providing the representative of the deceased's **belaké** has inspected the corpse, sighted and approved the pillow tusk headrest, if any, then burial can proceed. At this stage, one of the three lay Catholics trained to officiate at funerals in Léwotala nowadays might be summoned to lead communal Christian prayers. If so, prayers are recited as the corpse is placed in the coffin and may be continued while the coffin is carried to the graveyard and lowered into the freshly dug grave. Once the grave is covered in, household utensils most likely comprising a cooking pot, a plate and a coconut-shell

spoon, all of which are broken or damaged, are usually laid on top of the grave as grave goods. These items, said to be for the deceased's use in the place of the dead, are damaged here so as to appear intact there. The wife of a "first-born" wife-taker should bring a mortar, pestle and winnowing tray to the graveyard, where ideally she husks and winnows a little rice using only her left hand. This uncooked rice is then strewn near the grave for the deceased to take in due course.

CONFIRMING THE FLOW OF LIFE

Saliva blessing occurs at least twice during mortuary rites. As I described above, just before the burial a son of the deceased and a clansman of his own genealogical level administer such a blessing. One of them takes a little saliva from the mouth of the corpse and adds it to his own spittal from masticated candle-nut. He then blesses his clan sisters and "sisters' husbands", as well as any other men present whom he calls **opu** and their wives. This blessing, featuring the saliva of the corpse, orients that life conferred by the deceased on the living, at the same time as it affirms continuity in the transmission of life from the clansmen of the deceased's household overall to their "sisters' children" generally. Furthermore, this blessing must be understood in the light of the obligations of **opu** and the services they perform in association with the death of a **belaké**. The blessing may, indeed, strengthen them to undertake these tasks without ill effects. In any case, it seems clear that the reproductive vigour of the "sister" is passed on in the mortuary saliva blessing conferred primarily on her female offspring and their spouses.

The other prominent instance of **nilu'** as part of mortuary rites is that which precedes the collection of the pillow tusks. Whenever the representatives of the progenitor line come to collect a tusk mortuary prestation, they must bestow a saliva blessing on their "sisters' children". Indeed, only after the performance of this blessing are these representatives free to pick up the pillow tusks owed to them and depart. During the ceremony (**nebo pat**), held when four days have elapsed after the death, representatives of those lines who are **belaké** to the clan of the deceased's sons are each served a rice-mountain meal with its characteristic whole chicken condiment. The elders, who perform ritual chants, then call on Divinity as well as the ancestors in the place of the dead to join their saliva to that of the primary male ritual officer from each of these **belaké** lines for the blessing of their **opu** and these **opu**'s wives.

For the blessing, the anointer daubs the recipients on the forehead, the chest and the back of the neck, using saliva imbued with masticated candle-nut, some of which he and any others jointly bestowing the blessing have chewed and spat out into the palm of his hand. Such blessings are conferred in many different situations: in affinal contexts from **belaké** to **opu** and in community contexts from those who are "lord of the land" to their client clans. In general, such blessing is understood to have a cooling effect for the recipients and to signal benefaction from those involved in its conferral. Affinal bestowal of saliva blessing, which articulates and reinforces the flow of life between **belaké** and **opu**, is reciprocated with a pair of earrings. These earrings, otherwise referred to as the "stem and cord" of bridewealth tusks, foreshadow additional prestations of elephant tusks in the context of a relationship of affinal alliance. As I understand it, affinal saliva blessing invigorates the fecundity of women set as it is against these tusks in a balanced asymmetric exchange idealized as in perpetuity between two allied lines.

The blessing is actually performed by a representative of the **belaké** line having the right to collect the pillow tusks. In association with a clansman who stands beside him holding a tray of candle-nut and betel-nut ingredients, this man confers the blessing of the assembled **belaké**, together with Divinity and the ancestors, on all those who are

eligible and come forward to receive it. The first and last people to do so are usually the wives of the two men who administered the burial day *nilu*'. The woman who receives the final anointing is given the shell of the candle-nut used in the blessing and in return hands over two pairs of earrings. One of these is the usual "payment for the saliva", which always reciprocates *nilu*', but the other is specific to this mortuary context. The additional pair of earrings is referred to as "the eyeball, the fallen mouth" by means of which the "brother", who provided the "sister", symbolically regains those parts of the deceased. After the blessing is completed, the "brother" who performed it may depart with the earrings and the pillow tusk prestation. In so doing he recoups, in metaphorical terms, certain parts of the dead person and acquires in the form of social capital a share of the productivity of the deceased. He could not, however, appropriate either of these aspects of the deceased without having blessed the "sister's offspring", thereby presaging their continued reproductive vigour.

In abrogating parts of the deceased to himself, then, the "brother" withdraws something of the "sister" from this specific instantiation of the affinal alliance between his line and that of his sister's children. At the same time, the "brother" concludes a series of affinal exchanges, that series which marked the flow of life evinced in the fecundity of the "sister" and the person of her sons. As a prerequisite to receiving the mortuary prestation, however, the "brother" must bless the "sister's offspring", vouchsafing that despite his imminent disengagement from this particular set of exchanges, the flow of life between the two lines remains manifest in other series already underway and will continue with additional re-engagements in the future. Thus, although death generates closure in a specific instance, it does so within the overarching context of a reaffirmation of the flow of life between the affinal lines concerned.

CONCLUSION

The impact of imported cloths, particularly Indian double-ikat silks and mordant-painted cottons, on the textile traditions of outer-island Indonesia is often attested in their influence on the design format and technical features characterizing the repertoire of local craftswomen. By contrast, this paper focused on the interaction of imported and locally made cloths among the Lamaholot of eastern Flores, as these combine to form complex categories in exchange transactions.

In particular, I dealt with the concept of the 'severed shroud', ideally a *patolu* torn into one- and two-third sections before the corpse is wrapped in the larger segment for burial. At some deaths, defined as those marking the passing of a generation, a high-grade locally made textile is also classed as part of the remaining 'severed' section of the shroud.

This notion of a 'severed shroud' shows that imported sumptuous textiles were not only items marking individual status and/or clan wealth, but also found a place in indigenous categories of social organization and ritual process. In tracing the significance of this category, I argued that it articulates social relationships specifically severed by the death and yet encapsulated in encompassing links of marital alliance.

Finally, the introduction of manufactured cylindrical wraps and lengths of commercial cloth, as well as the reservation of *patola* to represent the ideal rather than the actual shroud, indicate that Lamaholot categories of exchange featuring textiles are no more sealed off from contemporary developments in regional commerce than they were impervious to earlier patterns of Asian and European trade.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research on which this paper is based was conducted under the auspices of the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (LIPI) in Jakarta and with the sponsorship of the University of Nusa Cendana (UNDANA) in Kupang. My field work in Flores, 1986-1988, was financed by the Australian National University. I am grateful to these institutions for their support. My thanks also goes to the women whose textile work I observed in Léwoléma, especially those gathered around Sabu Aran in Rian Kotek, Muda Sogén and Ubu Hokor in Léwotala.

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Severed shroud (**seniat**) and saliva blessing (**nilu'**)

With his back against the cloths set aside as the severed shroud, a man of a progenitor line confers a saliva blessing on his deceased sister's children during the Lamaholot main mortuary ceremony in eastern Flores, Indonesia.