The three dimensions of mourning

The term “mourning” designates the totality of social practices and psychological processes elicited by a person’s death. These practices and processes last a certain amount of time. According to traditional interpretation, this is attributable to a gradual attenuation of grief and of the initial impression produced by the loss of a beloved object.

However, a number of sociologists (following Hertz [1907] 1928) and psychologists (following Freud [1915] 1959) have demonstrated that separation from a beloved person does not happen in a single stroke and requires time, because it is the result—and in no sense a guaranteed one—of a specific “labor” on the part of the subject and the collectivity which demands the expenditure of a certain amount of energy (cf. Lagache 1938).

Freud has explained the psychological mechanism of this labor: the beloved object is connected to the libido through countless images. In order to accept the loss of the object, the subject has to relive each of the ties that united him or her to the deceased. When this process concludes, death comes to be accepted: the libido has been separated from the deceased “piece by piece,” and can be now re-invested in other objects. The sign of the end of psychological mourning is therefore the transition from indifference to external reality to a renewed interest in it. Freud’s theory was later enriched and complicated, especially with respect to survivors’ ambivalent feelings toward the dead (cf. Abraham [1924] 1927; Klein 1950; Bowlby 1960, 1961). Nevertheless, it remains the basis for an explanation of the individual psychology of mourning.

When we turn our attention to the collective dimensions of mourning, however, a rather different picture from the one con-
structured by Freud emerges: manifestations of grief depend on the respective social positions of the deceased and the bereaved, on the degree of their relationship, and so on. Not only is mourning regulated, but even emotions themselves seem to have been learned and have social, not libidinal, motives.

The manifestations of mourning in ancient Chinese society are particularly telling in this respect. Marcel Granet ([1922] 1953: 233) has defined them as “a ritual syntax”: “a true language whose rules and correctness are established by the grammarians, i.e., the ritualists, a language moreover in which philosophical analysis is able to rediscover a logic that accords with the intelligible order of the universe” (ibid.: 223–24).

The mourner’s clothing, for example, signals the “class” of his or her mourning and the nature of his or her obligations. From the number of threads in the warp of the fabric one can learn whether the mourner is only allowed to answer yes or no through gestures, or if he or she can answer orally but not speak first, or can speak but must avoid taking part in a discussion, or, lastly, can take part in it, but not to the point of taking pleasure in it (ibid.: 227).

It is forbidden to a Chinese person to express grief without the aid of a symbolic apparatus that is codified, prescribed, and consecrated. Mourning gestures constitute a “system of signs” (ibid.: 242) that is superimposed on natural feelings. Spontaneous expression of such feelings is considered “barbarous”; the civilized person follows the dictates of a rite that prescribes, moderates, and regulates emotions.

Conventional and mandatory displays of mourning have as their goal a “therapeutics of social invention” (ibid: 238); they generate a catharsis of grief and are opposed to the passive behavior that is characteristic of a state of mournful torpor.

Confronted with this, as with countless other examples of the codification of feelings and their expression, one is tempted to harden an opposition between the “sincerity” of feelings spontaneously expressed, and the “hypocrisy” of exterior manifestations of mourning. Thus formulated, the opposition is a false one. Sincerity is compatible with both convention and obligation (cf. Mauss [1921] 1969: 275); in order to be expressed, a feeling must be communicated, and must therefore be transformed into a message, an impossible task without a system of conventions. The more developed the code, the more numerous the shades of feelings it allows one to express.
The opposition between individual spontaneity and collective convention does not exist by default: it is indeed meaningless in most societies.

In fact, the social aspect of mourning is not simple support for the individual work of grief (as, for example, Ernesto de Martino claims [1958] 1975). Death is the occasion for a reunion of a vast number of people: relatives, neighbors, friends, and clients gather around the deceased. No group can form and endure on a given occasion without the observance of certain rules and conventions: in a gathering of people that is often quite vast, particular forms of behavior, language, ornamentation, dress, and nourishment must signify different categories of mourners, in such a way as to dictate appropriate behaviors. The conventions of mourning also play this communicative function and cannot be simplistically reduced to a cathartic function, to dramatizations, or to spontaneous projections of the “labor of mourning” as described by Freud. One need only think of the often notable duration of funerary rites (thirty-three days and thirty-two nights among the Ngaju Dayak of Kalimantan [cf. Scharer 1966: 15–25]), the enormous amount of labor and riches they require, the wide-spread custom of performing two funerals for the dead—sometimes several years apart from each other (Hertz [1907] 1928)—or the fact that death raises problems concerning succession to titles and to political and religious offices, and makes necessary the transmission and the division of the deceased’s property, to realize that the psychological process of mourning is encompassed by other processes that cannot be merely reduced to it.

A study of mourning, therefore, requires that, together with the psychological one, at least the sociological dimension be taken into account. Neither should one neglect a specifically cognitive dimension, for death also poses conceptual problems.

It is erroneous to aspire to give mourning a fictitious unity, reducing all of its dimensions to a single one. Each dimension has its own rules, which may be in contrast with the rules of others.

This article, however, will address only the homologies between the various dimensions or “levels” of mourning. Indeed, the main task of a theory of mourning is to explain how these dimensions can coexist and reinforce one another, articulating ideas, emotions, and social roles.
The coordination of dimensions

In all three dimensions considered here (psychological, sociological, and cognitive) there appears the same basic procedure. In its first stage, the experience of loss is accompanied by denial. Death is, in the end, accepted, however this requires a symbolic substitution: something takes the place of that which was lost and reconstitutes it at another level.

In its psychological dimension, this process corresponds to the “labor of mourning,” grounded in the paradox that acceptance of loss is possible through a process that requires its initial denial. In order to convince him or herself of the loss of the object, the subject must re-live all the object’s aspects that connected it to his or her own libido. Thus, the beloved object becomes present as never before: one could even say that, for the subject, the object has never been so alive. However, the mental reproduction of every aspect of the deceased cannot but reveal its concrete absence to the libidinal call: whence come, presumably, the frustration (that is, grief) and then separation, which finally gets the upper hand, albeit with limits. In fact, a certain continuity of the object is probably a condition for the subject’s very continuity: the object lost must persist in some way, by means of an image, a relic, etc., or must be recuperated into a new object that can function as a metaphor for the old one.

An analogous mechanism is found in the sociological dimension of mourning: the loss is, at first, negated. For example, it is quite common to prohibit the use of the deceased’s property for long periods of time (six to twelve months in the Micronesian island of Yap [Labby 1976: 67–68]) as the dead may still be using it. Yet, the state of abandonment of the dead’s orchards and fields only makes more evident the ultimate necessity of inheritance—of the creation, that is, of a substitute for the deceased in the system of social relations. The ultimate acceptance, on the part of society, of the loss of one of its members coincides therefore with the creation of a substitute, which allows the resumption of the relationships interrupted by death. Even in this case the substitution carries a certain degree of symbolism, at once metaphoric and metonymic. The living become in fact the image of the dead whom they substitute for and, reciprocally, the dead become the model for the living (metaphoric relations). Heirs can enjoy their rights thanks to their possession of the dead’s relics (which function as regalia), or because—as in Fiji and Yap—their homes are built on the
same stone platforms where their ancestors reside (metonymic relations).

Finally, the same paradoxical process of affirmation and negation is in force in the more properly conceptual dimension of mourning. The non-sense of death, at first denied, is consequently accepted, but as non-sense only with respect to the referential system of existence in which the survivors continue to live. The transcendence, void of sense, into which the deceased was thrown by death, becomes a superior sense, precisely because it transcends and therefore encompasses the “sense” perceived in existence. An example of this overturning is provided by the funerary rite of the Sa’dan Toraja of Sulawesi (Indonesia), its different phases corresponding to movements of the deceased along the horizon (i.e., the threshold between visible and invisible).

The first phase of the funerary rite is connected with the south-west (aluk rampe matampu, “rituals of the direction where the sun sets”), which is associated with death and all that which is negative: the color black, darkness, impurity, and so on. In the final phase the position of the dead undergoes a complete reversal, and moves from south-west to north-east. This latter direction is associated with light, the color white, life, and, above all, with ritual practices linked to the cultivation of rice, the main source of subsistence for the Toraja.

A crucial stage in the transformation is the rite of mangrara pare—“covering rice with blood”—which involves the sacrifice in the rice field of numerous pigs that belonged to the deceased: the shedding of their blood signifies a definitive change in property (Koubi 1975: 119). The dead person is transformed into an entity called deata, who guarantees the productivity of the rice for his or her successors (Veen 1965; 1966).

The rite is particularly interesting as the three dimensions of mourning are here perfectly integrated: the end of mourning coincides with the transferal of the dead’s property, with the definitive acceptance of his death, and with his assumption of a transcendent existence.

In sum, the three dimensions considered here have in common a final compromise that combines the acceptance of death with its negation: the loss is recognized, but its reality is transformed. The lost object is resuscitated at another level of existence and meaning, which encompasses and transcends others.
Together with the fundamental correspondence between the processes that take place at the three levels of mourning, it is possible to find other, more specific correspondences at the level of “funerary technique,” so to speak. A striking parallelism exists between a specifically psychological aspect of the work of mourning (the reliving of everything that motivated an attachment to the deceased) and an important component of funerary rites: the laments. The latter consist, in fact, of lists, of enumerations of the qualities of the dead and of what death has taken away. An even more significant fact is that this enumeration is based on the presupposition that death did not occur. In other words, just as Freud claims, the representation of the dead during the work of mourning entails as a condition the provisional negation of death.

It is necessary, at this point, to introduce two examples to illustrate these correspondences.

The first example is offered by a funeral lament for a Hawaiian chief, collected by the missionary William Ellis in his *Polynesian researches* ([1839] 1842: 178–179):

Alas, alas dead is my chief,
Dead is my lord and my friend;
My friend in the season of famine,
My friend in the time of drought,
My friend in my poverty,
My friend in the rain and the wind,
My friend in the heat and the sun,
My friend in the cold from the mountain,
My friend in the storm,
My friend in the calm,
My friend in the eight seas;¹
Alas, alas, gone is my friend,
And no more will return.

¹. A figurative term for the channels between the different islands of the group. [Footnote from Ellis, interpolated in brackets into the lament by Valeri in his quotation of the text — Ed.]
Here, the act of listing extinguishes, one by one, the ties with the deceased: the final stage is necessarily a point of no return. The efficacy of the lament lies in its suggesting and constantly repeating the process of separation, until this actually takes place. One finds here an example of the dialectic between the psychological and the sociological. At first glance, the fact that the lamentations consist of enumerations suggests that the psychological level functions as the cause of the sociological one. In reality, the motivation is transcended and modified by what it motivates: the linguistic structure of the lament, by articulating the work of mourning, also makes it possible. The efficacy of the formula derives therefore from its ability to organize and socialize that which pre-exists it and motivates it. The relation between the two levels is obviously dialectical, not causal.

A second example allows us to deepen the theme of efficacy in the social articulation of the work of mourning. Among the LoDagaa of Ghana there is, in lament as in other aspects of funerary rites, a split or even an opposition in behaviors vis-à-vis the dead. Whereas members of the deceased’s lineage sing his praises by enumerating his virtues, members of other lineages sing songs in which they insult him and list his defects. In both cases, the singers pretend that the deceased is not dead (Goody 1962: 100-1).

The scission between the singers and between the content of their songs is a form—more complex than the Hawaiian one—of the social organization of the work of mourning: not only are lamenters multiplied and represent to each other the loss of the object (enabling in this way its apprehension and consequent catharsis), but they also have their counterweight in another group of singers who express the mourners’ aggressive feelings toward the dead (the relationship with the dead is ambivalent [cf. Freud [1912-13] 1952: 51]), which they themselves cannot show.

In this way, the individual work of mourning is extended and transcended in a kind of theater where the subject’s ambivalent feelings are represented and objectified. There is thus a true and proper social division of mourning labor, a division that makes all the more efficacious. Indeed, the efficacy of the rite consists in its ability to coordinate the various systems and levels where the subjects’ experience develops. The more levels coordinated, the easier it becomes for the subjects to recover their unity. Enhancing the coordination of levels and persons in the funerary rite is indeed the answer to a crisis that
makes the subject more vulnerable to the contradictions between the different dimensions in which his or her existence unfolds.

**Mimetic and sacrificial rites**
The critical moment in the process of mourning takes place when the attempt to restore the object is overturned, producing an emotional withdrawal that is the prelude to a new investment in an object (Bowlby 1961). It is as if, after having denied the actuality of death, after having pretended that the deceased “was sleeping” (as the Toraja say, often for several months following the death), the survivors suddenly inflict on the dead person the only death that is acceptable in their eyes: death in their affections, in their thoughts. Thus we are faced with a new paradox: natural death is negated, but only in order to inflict a psychological and cultural death (cf. de Martino 1975: 213).

A culturally inflicted death is often represented in a sacrifice where the victim is identified with the dead person. We can indeed say that the entire funerary rite oscillates between two poles. During moments where denial prevails, mimetic rites of lamentation are predominant; when the reality of death strikes, sacrificial rites become prevalent. In the first case there is an attempt to reconstitute the deceased in the visible world, an attempt that, through its failure, opens the way for the recognition of the inevitability of death; in the second case, acknowledgement of the killing of the deceased in the visible world has the inverse meaning: it makes possible the belief in his or her invisible life.

A few examples illustrate the two poles of funerary rites. The first phase of mourning and, in general, the entire first exequies of death (where double exequies are performed), are characterized by the paradox that Neckel has called *lebende Leiche*, “living corpse” (cf. ibid.: 211). A man’s death is not seen immediately. Our experience of the deceased does not change enough from our experience of him or her as a living person, and the familiar features of his or her appearance automatically trigger the usual reactions. In this instance we realize how a body is a system of signs or even, following Charles S. Peirce’s definition, that “man is an external sign.” Still physically intact, this sign begins to lie: it continues to proclaim life when the decay of death has already imposed its worms. We need, therefore, to be persuaded of this death, which is still invisible, or just barely perceptible through the absence of habitual signs. In the end, this persuasion will be made
possible by the physical modifications of the corpse. The decomposing matter and the skeleton are the great persuaders of death. For this reason, they are also the aspects of death most carefully suppressed or neutralized by means of taboos and ritual practices. But other means contribute to quicken the awareness of death. Principal among these is language. The deceased has the bearing of a living person, but he does not answer; his sleep is very deep. The lament, when directed to the dead, betrays the impossibility of communicating with them. It is impossible to communicate with the deceased: the limitation of the word that receives no answer is the reality of death. We do not see death, we only see the deceptive signs of life. The word is an interrogation reduced to a soliloquy; death, the void emptiness that comes to surround discourse.

A homologous mechanism is found in mimetic rites, particularly elaborate among the LoDagaa. In certain sequences of the funeral, the community mimes the activities the deceased has engaged in: hunting, war, agriculture, and so on. These are celebrations of the qualities of the deceased (as are, after all, the enumerations contained in the laments), but at the same time they are also symbolic devices that highlight the absence of the dead person within the group in which he used to perform the activities mimed. Death appears literally as a void that is produced in the midst of the group; the invisible that makes itself visible by contrast. The deceased disappears in this way from the horizon of the living; indeed, LoDagaa state that the purpose of mimetic rites is to “prevent themselves from dreaming about the deceased” (Goody 1962: 107–8, 129–30).

These and other figurative rites are performed by a “funerary group” that consists of distant agnates and/or affines of the bereaved. These are positioned between “proximity” and “distance,” between “us” and “the others.” As such, they are able to represent the transition of the dead from the inside to the outside of his or her group, from identity to alterity.

A similar function pertains to the buffooneries and jokes performed during the funeral by relatives with whom the dead had a joking relationship (ibid.: 69).

In the joke, in the witticism, and in the buffoonery the oscillations of meaning between opposites, or simply between manifest and latent content, correspond to the oscillations of the dead between visible and invisible, between life and death, between integrity and destruction, between identity with the living and alterity.
When the “oscillatory” phase of the lament, the mimetic rite, the masquerade, and the joke is over, when the violent contrasts between acceptance and negation of loss, between laughter and tears come to an end, the deceased has become definitively an other, and may therefore be conceived of either as animal or stranger (among the LoDagaa the corpse is dressed as a stranger [cf. ibid.: 69–70]; in Melanesia, the dead are believed to transform into animals such as the shark or the frigate bird, hostile animals from whom it is necessary to maintain a distance [cf. Codrington 1891: 179–80]).

The identification of the dead with a domestic animal such as the buffalo, which is simultaneously “other” (as it is an animal) and “proximate” (as it is domesticated), explains why sacrifice may be an efficacious symbol of separation. Immolation puts an end to the ambiguity of the beast, iconic of the ambiguity of the deceased: it will become either consumable meat, or a corpse to be thrown away, far from society. In both cases, it will definitely be “other.”

The comment of a LoDagaa informant at the moment of the mortuary sacrifice of a cow is revealing regarding this point: “Now they [the bereaved] really know he [the deceased] is dead. He’s no longer a human being, but has changed to meat” (Goody 1962: 175; cf. 200–1). Of the first buffalo whose sacrifice enables conceiving the deceased no longer as “sick” but truly dead, the Toraja say it is “fatally wounded at the same time as the man [the deceased].” This equation of the deceased with the buffalo makes comprehensible the prohibition imposed on the dead man’s family against eating the meat of the sacrificial animal, which is instead consumed by all others present at the rite (Koubi 1975: 109). The same prohibition exists among the LoDagaa, who explain that the afflicted should not eat “their own dirt” (Goody 1962: 179). The deceased is in fact identified with that which must be separated from the living but is however theirs: dirt.

In the same way, Merina (of Madagascar) call the meat of the victim of the sacrificial rite hena ratsy, “bad meat,” and prohibit the deceased’s family from eating it (Molet 1956: 95).

These prohibitions signify both the kinship between the dead and the bereaved (who cannot “eat themselves”) and their separation, achieved through sacrifice.

Among the Ngaju Dayak, the victim of the separatory sacrifice is a man, a stranger. This man is in fact a slave, generally a prisoner of war or a man whose head is “hunted” and is thereafter brought into the
village, where it is symbolically “sacrificed” (Hertz [1907] 1928: 61, n. 2).

Sometimes the slave is sent out of the village on a pretext. There, a warrior who has followed him cuts off his head and carries it back, victorious, to the village. When the Dutch colonial government prohibited human sacrifice, the Dayak began to sacrifice buffaloes, which they believe to be men’s affines, because both descend from the same ancestor. The identification of the deceased with a “foreign” victim, whose putting to death will “take him away,” is very clear. For example, before being sacrificed, the man is dressed in the ordinary clothes of the dead (Grabowsky 1892: 109), the victim’s head can be laid over the bones of the deceased (ibid.: 194), and so on.

But the funerary sacrifice of the Ngaju Dayak also involves identification of the victim with the bereaved. This double identification is the condition for complete separation between living and dead, a separation that is represented by the cutting of the victim’s head. The head’s blood is the sign of the achieved separation, and it is spread on the living to liberate them from mourning. Indeed, Tiwah, the rite’s name, means precisely this: “liberation” or “purification” (Hardeland 1859: 608).

The only reason why both the bereaved and the deceased can identify with the victim is because they are already identified with one another in the first place. Indeed, the bereaved are not only identified with the dead by being made impure through their contact with the corpse (which needs to be washed, anointed, dressed, and so on; sometimes, as among the Dayak of the Kapuas River [cf. Hertz (1907) 1928: 9], the relatives must also eat, during the whole period of mourning, its decomposing matter, mixed with rice). Additionally, the very fact that they do not want to detach themselves from the deceased and accept his or her death assimilates them to this death. Both psychologically and socially, they identify with the dead and run the risk of following him to his grave. Their situation is ultimately an intermediary, ambiguous, and still undecided one, like that of the slowly putrefying corpse, like that of the sacrificial victim who, a stranger brought into the village, a domesticated animal, is at the boundary between outside and inside, between strangers and relatives.

However, putting the deceased to death does not result in a total loss: through the sacrifice he or she assumes a new form of existence. While the corpse is destroyed by the process of decomposition, its image survives in memory. One could argue that the corpse is quickly
concealed from view so that its image may not be contaminated by the experience of the loss of form. Conversely, concealment of the corpse contrasts with later unearthing of the bones, which becomes the occasion for the second exequies and which makes possible the transformation and definitive establishment of the image of the dead. Indeed, as Trobrianders say, “the relic (kayvaluba) brings the departed back to our mind and makes our inside tender” (Malinowski 1962: 133).

Bones are thus of crucial importance in funerary representations: on the one hand, they are the symbol of the definitive character of death—their contrast with the complete remembered image of the deceased has a persuasive force lacking in any other experience. Yet, on the other hand, because bones are the permanent and stable remains of the dead, they also make him perpetually accessible. Thus, bones and other relics lend their empirical stability to the fleeting memory of the integral image of the dead. This image is reconstituted with the colors of life around the white bones, and the deceased continues to live.

In the famadihana funerary rites of Merina of Madagascar, this dialectic assumes an incomparable strength and vividness. The bones of the deceased are exhumed, covered with precious and colorful silk (lamba mena, literally “red fabric”), and laid down in a large family grave (Bloch 1971: 145). These are the second exequies of the dead, celebrated no earlier than two years after death. What distinguishes the famadihana from other classic examples of second exequies, however, is the habit of using this event as an occasion to unearth and cover with new clothes the bones of those dead who, also buried in the tomb, have not yet been forgotten.

These rites are characterized by well-defined transformations of the emotions of the bereaved, especially in those who see the bones of their dear ones for the first time. The contrast between the remembered image and the skeleton triggers a violent emotion, to the point that relatives have to be forced to approach the tomb, to view and touch the remains of the dead. In this moment, the emotions of mourning are repeated with great intensity: the reality of death is recognized as never before. This phase is followed, however, by one where the skeletons are wrapped in a great quantity of lamba mena, whose bright colors undoubtedly represent life and whose name (red) probably alludes to blood. “A body” is thus reconstituted on the existing skeleton. The body, produced by the affection of the living, hides
bones from sight and serves as a scaffolding for the intact image of the deceased.

The efficacy of the idea of the dead’s reconstitution is demonstrated by the drastic emotional change of the bereaved once the remains are wrapped in fabrics. The women who had held the remains of the deceased in their laps in a state of depression now take them in their arms and begin to dance almost like Bacchae; relatives who had a “joking relationship” with the deceased pretend to prevent them from going back to their graves (Bloch 1971: 159).

In the form of relics or images—purely mental or material—such as statues, shadows, or ancestors, the dead continue to live in the memory of the living; and as long as this memory endures, the dead will continue to be an integral part of society, to receive offerings and sacrifices, to inflict punishments and to grant rewards. Positioned at the boundary between visible and invisible, they mediate between society and the forces that transcend it. However, the dead can continue to exist socially only because, as happens for example in the Trobriands (cf. Weiner 1976: 84), survivors perpetuate around their remains the exchanges and relations that made them exist socially when they were alive. Consciousness realizes in this way that the condition for social existence is no different for living and dead, that one lives and continues to live at the intersection of relations and exchanges that are more lasting than the individuals and the objects that actualize them.

It is also as permanent lessons of this social law that the dead emerge as the incarnation and custodians of society.