Chapter Six

Living Death

At eleven o’clock on a Friday night in April 1993 drums sounded across Nuakata informing people that someone had died.1 A little later a messenger arrived at Gohiya with the news that a boat carrying the body of Eric’s father had arrived at Tutuma, the hamlet of his widow. People were called to Tutuma for the ‘waliwali, the singing until dawn, to comfort and give company to Eric’s father through the long, lonely hours of the night. Hurriedly changing their clothes, they gathered betel nut and tobacco and hunted for torches and batteries that might last the hour-long journey to the Bwauli side of the island. Roger and I had never met the deceased—a man in his early sixties—as he had passed away two weeks earlier during an extended stay with his granddaughter in Port Moresby. He was known to us only as the father of Eric—the island’s land mediator and a local healer. On Nuakata he had lived in his wife’s hamlet, which was some distance from Gohiya. Consequently we had barely met or said “yauwedo” (hello) to most of his kin. They were anonymous to us, people with whom we had no direct connection or responsibility. More than a little excited by our first opportunity to witness mortuary ceremonies and having sought and been granted approval to attend, we were anxious to join the procession of mourners. But still recovering from bouts of malaria, we decided to sleep and make the journey soon after dawn.

Wycliffe revealed that beating drums announce to the wider community that someone has died. Messengers from a paired matrilineage of the deceased take the news to people around the island and to family members living in other places. While messengers spread the news, summoning kin to mourn, women from the deceased’s susu prepare him for bur-
washing, adorning, and then dressing his body in fine clothes, before placing him on a stretcher covered by a newly woven mat. Devastated, distraught, and wounded by loss, the deceased’s *susu* abandon their daily routines and gather together in the house with their loved one, crying out (‘*wo’e*) to him in their grief and pain. In the midst of this desolation and turmoil, clan members from this paired matrilineage act to fill the breach, caring for their distressed relatives as they fulfill their responsibilities to prepare and bury the dead. Their actions restore some strength and wholeness to the wounded *susu* by orchestrating the burial rituals, which facilitate transformation of the deceased from a *susu* member living and staying with them on Nuakata to an ancestral spirit living and staying with clan ancestral spirits in the realm of the dead.²

On hearing news of the death, other people make their way to the deceased’s hamlet to demonstrate sympathy for those left behind. More important, they go to mourn, to offer solace to the deceased through the long, lonely hours of the night. As night falls people congregate in the hamlet singing hymns together until dawn.³ The deceased’s spouse, together with members of his *susu*, keep vigil around the body, wailing, joking, and remonstrating with him. As dawn breaks many of the singers lapse into sleep or stumble home to rest before the burial, which usually takes place later that day or the next. In keeping with other Massim communities little, if any, nonessential work is done by others on the island at this time, for people demonstrate respect for the deceased by their quiet inactivity (see Wagner 1989, 255).

Dawn arrived, and after a hasty breakfast we set out for Tutuma on the northwest side of the island. Two-thirds of the way there, we passed through Eric’s father’s natal hamlet Gamanugini, where the burial would take place later in the day. It was deserted, except for a lone woman who remained in the cemetery tending the garden around the graves. The hamlet was immaculate. The large area of ground in front of the houses was covered by freshly laid crushed coral, and the garden in the adjoining cemetery had been cleared of weeds. We walked quietly through the hamlet, only to learn much later that people show their respect for the deceased by skirting around the perimeter of his matrilineal or *susu* hamlet.

Wycliffe, his father (Noah), and big fathers (Antiya and Yamesi) stated that paths habitually taken by someone, particularly those leading in and
out of his hamlet, should be avoided in the days and weeks immediately
following death. His house—particularly if he was married—should be
closed and abandoned to disintegrate and rot. People should approach
his hamlet quietly, talking and acting with restraint. They should not
climb or throw at fruit trees or coconut and betel nut palms; nor should
they eat fish and shellfish. Most important, people should refrain from
those activities by which the deceased is known and remembered. These
expressions of respect (bubuli) should be observed until the burial feast is
completed. Around this time fish is cooked by the paired matrilineage of
the deceased’s susu, and one member will visibly engage in the activities
previously associated with the deceased. With these signs enacted, “for-
bidden things become unforbidden.”

On Nuakata people spoke of someone’s particular ways, his typical
response to given situations, his relationships with people as paths
(yana’amwaha’amwaha). These ways, these paths habitually taken or
enacted, characterize someone’s living as distinctive. Although possessed,
someone’s “paths”—unlike his body, spirit, or susu relationships—were
not indissociable from him. Rather, like food grown for personal/family
consumption, they were often spoken of as intimate, mutable, semialien-
able possessions, possessions that transform as they are transformed by
whoever owns them, where, when, and for what purpose. Some paths
were spoken of like food grown to give away—they were possessions that
created and maintained connections between people (see Lithgow 1976;
Young 1983, 20–26). Established and transformed by walking them,
doing them, paths traced the territory of someone’s living (see Young
1983, 25). The territory expressed the living as the living expressed the
territory. This territory is grounded at birth in susu relationships, on susu
land, and gradually extended beyond this with lived experience. Paths,
therefore, were the means by which someone’s living was known and
described, and upon death these paths or ways became the means by
which his life was recalled.

From within the Western tradition it is tempting to consider paths a
metaphor; namely, that someone’s “ways” are like (but not equivalent
to) the paths she takes in her daily travels. It is seductive to think of paths
as a metaphor for an inner state or personality. But on Nuakata, people
spoke of paths as, rather than merely representing, someone’s ways (see
chap. 3). When asked, Wycliffe stated that there is no word for personal-
ity in Alina Nu’ata. “We can only describe someone’s ways in a sen-
tence.” For this reason, it would be a mistake to consider paths and per-
sonality as interchangeable terms. Indeed, it would be a mistake to forget that the term *personality* (the state of being a person) is itself a metaphor.5

*Amua’amwaha* was founded on neither the notion of an internal personality nor the abstract category “person.” Although people who have received primary school education know and can employ the term “person” when speaking in English, people rarely utter this word on Nuakata. There is no equivalent generic term in Alina Nu’ata, only a collective noun, *tomowa*, which was used in specific contexts—stories, sermons, conversations, or community meetings—to refer to either human beings in general or a mixed group of people. The same is true elsewhere in the Massim. For example, Battaglia (1990, 55) notes that on Sabarl, where there is no generic term for “the person,” the word *tolomo* is used in certain contexts to denote “mankind.” According to Thune (1989, 174–79), on northeast Normanby the term *tomotai* refers to human beings, dwarfs, elves, witches, and the behai variety of yams. Kuehling (1998, 33–36) also claims that on nearby Dobu Island, the word *tomota* is a generic gender-neutral term denoting person or human being, supernatural being and yams. Person and human being are conflated in her account.

On Nuakata, people or ancestors belonging to the same clan were generally addressed as *boda* or, in the case of ancestors, *bodaowa* (*boda–o–wa*: group of people–plural marker–completed past marker). As previously discussed (see chap. 2), particular human beings or people were referred to, described, and identified in terms of their particularities, be it their relationship to the speaker(s), their age and stage of life, sex/gender, marital status, the hamlet where they live, or their typical ways or activities. The communicative context—who was speaking to whom, when, where, and for what purpose—influenced what “particularities” were highlighted. For example, it was said of someone: ‘iya loheya (himself a young man), or *tenem vahala, ‘ana’amua’amwaha yababana* (that young woman, her ways are bad). Others were described as *tenem tauve ‘ita* (that teacher), or ‘iya tau modi’ini (himself the angry one).

These latter descriptions all utilized the noun stem *tau*, which means both “body” and “one who . . .” The phrase is completed with a particular action, activity, or way of doing things (anger, humility, teaching, leading, joking, etc.) associated with (the) body or “the one who” enacts it. Accordingly, (the) body gives form to activity, embodies or bears activity,6 and the embodiment of this activity becomes a means for
describing, defining, if not identifying, someone in a given context. Bodies were also described in other ways. For example, people referred to one body as either *hi* (they) or *i* (he/she/it). In the Nuakatan counting system, twenty is *loheya ehebo*, where *loheya* denotes a young man in his twenties or early thirties. Twenty is equivalent to the sum of one man’s fingers and toes. A related variation of this idea is encountered in descriptions of the number of people in a group. Take, for example, the expression “the three of you” found in English. Its equivalent, the expression *‘amtautonuga*, comprises the plural form of “you” (*‘am*), followed by *tau* and the number of people, whatever number that may be. It literally means “you, one who is three” or “three bodies are (as) one.” In these contexts, then, (a) body is generally understood as (a) “one” that is both singular and plural; (a) unity based on the sum of its plurality; (a) collective that is also (a) unity.

The masculine inflection given to body in the counting system is by no means coincidental, as it is also embedded in the respectful term of address, *taubada*, for a senior man. The association of man with body was also expressed in the link between men and sorcery, women and witchcraft. Sorcerers were believed to act on or affect body/bodies, whereas witches were believed to act on or affect spirit. In both cases the effects were known through their embodiment in the victim or target. While it was possible for women to be sorcerers and men to be witches, this was highly unusual. But bodies, as such, were not spoken of as masculine or feminine. In conversation, the sex/gender of the body was assumed without being specified. It could only be known or inferred from the context.

Body/bodies were rarely spoken of as abstract or general categories or forms. Unlike some contemporary feminist philosophers, people on Nuakata did not refer to “the body” or “a body,” because those articles do not exist in Alina Nu‘ata. Body or bodies could not be distanced in this way from the people who enacted and possessed them, but were always described as inalienable possessions, whether spoken of in the plural, for example, *taudiwo* (their bodies), or in the singular, for example, *taugu* (my body). This necessarily raises the question of ownership—to whom does someone’s body belong on Nuakata? The answer to this question has implications for issues of morality, agency, and subjectivity. A dead body (*taumwalowoi*), which may be referred to as such only by members of his clan, was both claimed and spoken of as owned and possessed by that *susu* /clan. While someone’s living body certainly belonged
to the one who speaks of it as “mine,” for example, taugu (my body), the one who feels its pain in death as in living, it also belonged to his susu and clan. Although it was recognized that someone’s living was made possible by the combined labors of susu and affine, male and female blood, affinal kin could not claim or possess someone’s body as their own. Only the susu that bore the infant/child and/or adult could make such a claim. And they alone were entitled to bear this body to the grave.

While the abstract concept of the autonomous individual person did not exist on Nuakata, people clearly recognized and affirmed each other’s embodied, enacted individuality or particularity. Singular human beings were understood to be relationally constituted, and their paths/ways, their things, their unique location or position among their susu, clan, affines, and the community at large particularized or individualized them. This notion of particularity or individuality was not equivalent to the Western individual or person, regarded as an autonomous agent or author of one’s own actions. But people did recognize that there were some on Nuakata who acted as if they were autonomous. While older people accused some younger people of this behavior, it was not simply considered a generational phenomenon. Such people were identified as dovą dimdim (like white people), because they acted selfishly, on their own behalf, as if they did not belong and, therefore, have responsibilities to others. Equally, white people who acted with others in mind, as if connected and responsible to and for other people, were identified as dovą Papuan (like Papuans). Singular human beings on Nuakata were, therefore, recognized as capable of (both causing and effecting) autonomous action that was motivated by their own wishes, wants, or desires. But this is not to suggest that an ontological basis for such action or desires was proffered by people on Nuakata. Clearly, M. Strathern’s (1988) and Battaglia’s (1990) contention that in Melanesia relational notions of personhood preclude the understanding of, or belief in, the unique individual cannot simply be discounted in the Nuakatan context, however it cannot be claimed with confidence.

And so, the paths taken by someone on Nuakata, his habitual ways, his relationships with people and things, constituted the territory of his individuality. In the prevailing Western intellectual culture of the “text” it may be tempting to understand someone’s “ways” on Nuakata as inscribed on the landscape—an inscription that upon death is first honored, then erased by living kin. However, this metaphor, like that of personality, implies an imposition upon, rather than interpenetration
between, human beings and land. It construes the land as a surface, a blank slate upon which a life is written, rather than a dynamic, inhabited place. It was this individual habitation which was forsaken when those paths could no longer be walked, enacted, or embodied. And so, the customary practice of avoiding the paths of the deceased, of closing and abandoning his house, respected the particularities of the lived life, acknowledging that the paths established and enacted in life necessarily discontinued and decayed in death.

Passing through Gaimanugini, we rounded the nearby point and met Roger’s senior namesake, his wife, Sinetana, and Antiya coming from Tutuma. Singing and chanting over Eric’s father’s body had ceased with the dawn, and preparations were under way to transport the coffin by boat to Gaimanugini for burial. As a senior member of Eric’s father’s clan and a galiyauna responsible for the burial of the deceased, Antiya was needed at the cemetery. Although he was too old to carry and bury the dead, his fellow galiyauna valued his long experience and advice in these matters. Waligeha told us that he and his wife were making their way to Tutuma to assist with the cooking preparations for the burial feast. Although Waligeha, at least, was from a different clan than his father’s—and therefore not strictly obliged to assist with the cooking preparations—it was clear to us that he did so out of respect for his father (Antiya), the dead man, and their clan. Standing together on the path, musing over the news, the others prepared to go. Disappointed at having missed the activities at Tutuma, we joined their solemn procession back to Gaimanugini.

Waligeha—and later Wycliffe, Antiya, and Yamesi—told us that preparations for burial occur in the cemetery adjoining the deceased’s main susu hamlet and are overseen by several senior clan members—male or female. As owners of the deceased’s body it is they who control events, deciding where “their body” will be placed, when, and by whom. At all times they tend “their” body lovingly, respectfully, for the spirit of the deceased (together with the ancestral spirits) is known to dwell in the hamlet with his living kin until tau’ala’alahi, the resurrection or transformation feast, which is generally held five or six days after burial. The disembodied spirit roams freely, watching over the unfolding events to ensure that his body, living, and living relationships are duly honored by susu, clan, and affinal kin.
By honoring the deceased’s body, the embodied life already past, the clan also honors the collective body—the living susu/clan. In so doing they enable the living spirit of the deceased to readily join with the community of living susu and clan spirits at Mount Bwebweso, the realm of the dead. If people fail to properly honor the deceased they may invoke his wrath, causing his spirit to remain at Nuakata, creating havoc and mayhem. Acts of retribution by this spirit may make the living sick or even cause them to die.

The task of handling and tending a dead body is considered so important that each matrilineage appoints two galiyauna, senior men responsible for carrying the dead. The galiyauna, assisted by other male clan members, also dig the grave. One of these men, the senior galiyauna, generally the most senior member of the paired matrilineage, carries the head and shoulders of the deceased and is known as galiyauna mwala’ina or big galiyauna. The other man, galiyauna habuluna, or small galiyauna, carries the deceased’s lower body and legs. He is generally a less senior member of the paired matrilineage and, therefore, less experienced in the practices associated with burial. These are representative positions of great honor, responsibility, and risk, and for this reason the work of the galiyauna is watched closely and judged critically by others, especially members of the deceased’s susu. The deceased’s body—its smell, fluids, and flesh—is considered powerful and potentially dangerous. Galiyauna must show great respect and care to the deceased, for they are at constant risk of becoming ill themselves or making others ill. If the body is treated disrespectfully, as though dispossessed, the risk of illness to the dispossession is magnified. This illness is spiritually mediated. Therefore galiyauna must protect themselves and others by observing strict food taboos (i.e., eating only roasted foods and refraining from all meat), burning leaves and plants to disguise the smell of the body, saying ‘oba (magic words), and remaining distant from all others for a designated period of time after the burial.

Feeling like conspicuous intruders, we sat on the ground in the shade toward the rear of the hamlet, in the area where women were preparing food. We waited. As we waited we watched from a distance. Antiya and several other senior men from the clan were ambling around the cemetery, discussing where to dig the grave. Time dawdled by. People dallied over their preparations, working silently or speaking with one another in hushed tones. Others simply sat, their eyes drifting around the hamlet or
scanning the sea for a sign of the boats. A sense of distilled inactivity prevailed. No one within earshot spoke of the death or mentioned Eric’s father’s name. If people spoke at all they spoke of the mundane tasks before them. In their silence I remained alert, vigilant, and tense. Having discarded my notebook and camera as a gesture of respect, I was placing considerable and undue faith in my ability to remember salient details of the events about to transpire. I told myself over and over again, reciting it like a vivisectionist’s mantra, that nothing should be overlooked or considered insignificant.

Wycliffe stressed that while the presence of friends and nonclan mourners at the ‘waliwali and initial burial feast brings honor to the deceased, it is considered highly disrespectful for these people to name the dead and his passing. When declaring someone’s passing, the word for death, mwalowoi, is used very selectively. Only the owners of the body, the susu and clan of the deceased—people who belong as one to another—pronounce the death of one of their kin, and they alone can utter his name. Unlike its English counterpart, mwalowoi does not mean a cessation of life, ceasing to be, but translates literally as “a return to before.” Implied is a movement toward—or, perhaps, a return to—a prior time, place, or state. But who or what moves, to where, or when, remains implicit rather than explicit in this literal translation.

How or why naming the dead and declaring death causes offense was not explained. But, as these naming practices were consistent with the prohibition preventing use of susu names by non-susu members, it seemed likely that naming the dead, like naming the living, indicated the relationship between people. Perhaps naming the dead also highlighted the particular loss, exposing and thereby deepening the wounds felt by the remaining, living susu. By avoiding the name, people avoided provoking the sadness and distress this name evoked for the living susu. They also avoided causing offense to the deceased’s spirit who, lingering in his hamlet until the burial feast is completed, may be distressed at leaving his loved ones behind. Perhaps, too, the declaration of mwalowoi—the return to before—can only be recognized and confirmed by the living members of the deceased’s clan and susu.

During the mourning period and beyond, affinal kin refer to the dead by the term of address they used in life. People whose names are the same or sound similar to the recently deceased’s may change their name in an effort not to offend. Others show respect for the dead and bereaved alike
by referring to someone recently died as ‘asiyebwa.\textsuperscript{10} When normally used in conversation, this word means “to be sick” or “sickness,” but when used without personal or possessive pronouns it denotes, without being equivalent to, what English speakers call “the corpse.” Named in these ways, someone recently dead, but not yet interred, was not simply understood as a dead body, a disembodied spirit, or even a confluence of relationships already past. Rather, as the detached term ‘asiyebwa suggests, the recently deceased was, for a time, the embodiment of sickness and depletion.\textsuperscript{11} Wycliffe stated that at the time of burial this sickness passes into the ground, where it slowly decays. People never eat garden produce grown in or around their cemetery, for they risk illness by feasting on the flesh of their ancestors.\textsuperscript{12} However, they will plant and harvest seed yams there, in order to replenish and multiply their seeds for future planting. And so it is understood that the flesh of susu and clan life permeates the soil, replenishing the ground on which living susu and clan stay. While the flesh decays and with it the combined labor of matrilineal and affinal kin, the bones of the deceased remain as permanent, if anonymous, testimonies to the living susu.

Later on, well past the time of burial and when the flesh may well have rotted away, people unrelated to the deceased say his time is over, finished, completed (yana hauga‘i’ovi). As discussed in chapter 5, hauga also means weather in Alina Nu’ata. Weather and time are believed to have their seasons, their cycles, but each repetition is considered unique. Each has its consequence felt long after it has passed away. As indicated by the use of yana, the distant possessive pronoun, someone’s time (yana hauga) belongs to him only in an alienable sense. Unlike body and spirit, or particular relationships with matrilineal kin, someone’s time is not an integral, fundamental, or inalienable aspect of him. It is time potentially shared by or between others. Time assumes embodied forms; however, the particular, fleshy forms of these embodiments are transient, ephemeral, finite. Understood this way, time is embodied, and embodiment is temporal. In time someone is grown, nurtured, and sustained into mature embodiment, and in time his strength diminishes, dissipates, and finally ceases before his body withers away. Somebody’s lived time must be completed by all those who mourn his passing. His past ways and obligations must be completed by living kin.

More than an hour passed before the boats carrying the coffin and the mourners rounded the point and moored in the waters directly out from
the hamlet. Two *galiyauna* from the Ao‘ao clan carefully loaded the coffin onto a dinghy, brought it ashore, and placed it under the house adjoining the cemetery. With the deceased temporarily laid to rest and watched over by female kin, the *galiyauna* joined the four or five men in the cemetery who were digging the grave. In the coffin’s wake came the principal mourners: Eric’s mother (the widow) and her seven adult children—five daughters and two sons. As Eric’s mother stepped ashore, dressed in a black calico skirt, black T-shirt, and a black cloth covering her head and face, a wave of grief flooded the hamlet. From behind the veil anguished cries pierced the stillness, disrupted the waiting, announced the loss. Unable to stand or proceed alone, she was supported by her daughter on one arm and a female member of the Ao‘ao clan on the other. Her sense of desolation and distress was palpable. With halting steps the three disconsolate women—widow, sister, and child—traced the path already taken by the *galiyauna*. Although a relatively short distance, it was an arduous crossing punctuated by mournful wailing that seemed to ebb as it flowed.

Death creates rupture among the living. Living kin, *susu* and affines alike, must cope with the loss from their lives of someone with particular “ways,” but they must also adjust to the loss of someone who is a visible, tangible, and unique confluence of living social relationships. Those relationships actively created in life, between someone and his friends and affinal kin, are actively unraveled upon death. No longer able to do things together, the relationship dissipates, then finally disappears.

Wycliffe, Antiya, and Yamesi stressed that while the clan honor the dead by claiming his body and his name as their own, the widow (or widower)—as principal mourner—honors and respects the spouse by the observance of customary mourning practices and by visibly displaying grief. For a widow, in particular, the death of her husband ushers in a period of intense mourning. It is a bleak transitional time, culminating in the dissolution of the obligatory, reciprocal relations between herself (and her kin) and her husband’s *susu*. Bound to stay in her husband’s hamlet for the period of mourning declared by his kin, the widow dwells there on the margins, redefined to her affinal kin as “our widow” (*yamahiwape*). During this time, particularly immediately following death, she does not wash herself. She “does not make herself properly.” Nowadays she dresses in long dark clothing, but in the past widows wore ankle-length grass skirts, and their faces and bodies were smeared with a
putrid mix of ash and coconut oil. Now, in the day(s) leading up to the burial, a widow stays with her husband’s body, her desolation evident. Unclean, unkempt, unable to eat with her affines or eat produce from their gardens, she dwells among them at their behest, a living testimony to loss. Unable to return to her susu at this time, she belongs with neither affines nor susu, but remains in a liminal state, neither dead nor fully alive, a nameless outsider—a living embodiment of her husband’s death, the loss experienced by his susu, and the imminent dissolution of his affinal relationships. With her spouse and their living relationship now lost to her, her accepted place within her husband’s hamlet forgone, it is her grief alone that recalls her marital identity—an identity, a place, a confluence of reciprocal relationships that fade away with the withering of her sorrow.

Swamped by emotion from this coffin-bearing tide, by the sight of the grieving widow and children, my perspective suddenly dramatically changed. There, amid people in obvious distress and pain, my sense of anticipation and curiosity about the forthcoming events evaporated, leaving a feeling of disgust in their place. Confronted with people’s real, tangible loss, their wailing and tears, their attempts to cling to the body, to summon new life from it, to forestall death—feelings and responses familiar to me—I questioned my right to be there. How had I ignored the reality that this was a time of real loss and vulnerability for the bereaved, a time culminating in the final passing from sight, touch, smell, and sound of someone unique, known, and loved? By what leap of the imagination, by what violent act of abstraction had I hoped for a death, imagining the bereaved as disembodied representatives of distinct mortuary rituals; as cultural icons rather than living, loving, fleshy human beings? In remembering this, how should I respond? How best could I respect the dead, the bereaved, the living? By my presence or my absence? On what grounds would I base this ethical decision? My own? The people of Nuakata’s? Anthropology’s? How should I enact and negotiate the irrec-
concilable tension between my participation and observation on Nuakata in this particular context? Uncertain and unable to voice my plight to those around me, I remained in the hamlet, my dilemmas unresolved.

Faced with this ethical dilemma, I reflected on the ambivalence, the agnosticism that pumps at the heart of the participant observation methodology. Participant observation is both a contradiction in terms and a contradiction in deeds. When its epistemological pretensions are
taken as real possibilities, the participant observation method offers the ethnographer hope for a truly empathic understanding and knowledge of the people with whom she temporarily lives. There is the suggestion that by placing herself with, and participating in, the daily lives of people, the ethnographer may become so familiar with these lives and their living that she understands them *almost* as they understand themselves. The method as such invites the ethnographer to strategically play with the incongruities between her life in the field and the one beyond its margins—to temporarily suspend disbelief, to partition and immobilize doubt, to assume faith, in the interests of an arguably “purer, deeper, more authentic” participatory understanding. This form of participation—life, living in the field—is totally dependent upon relationships of mutual intimacy and trust (Eipper 1996; J. Weiner 1998).

But the ethnographer does not only participate. She also observes. Participation is a vantage point from which to view and speculate upon shared lives. In observing while participating the ethnographer-observer not only sees but also selectively attends to and filters what comes before her, rendering it irrelevant, salient, incidental. Through speculation she makes an object, an event, an experience of her participation (see Abrahams 1985; Jackson 1989, 51). The speculation born of participant observation is not subject to the same constraints as participation. The ethnographer may subsequently question and challenge practices and, in so doing, liberate her disbelief, mobilize her doubts, and disavow her faith. Observation of this kind necessarily compromises both participation and the understanding born of participation by consolidating imagined boundaries and reinforcing the space between observer and observed. This space is neither vacant nor neutral. Its definitions and boundaries are contested, negotiated, as often the observer is also the observed. As such, it is an intersubjective, social, and ethical space. Perceived as distance, the space bolsters difference; perceived as proximal, it solidifies similarities. If under observation’s sway participation and the trust on which it is founded become mere playful performance, serving purely epistemological interests, then the ethnographer risks bad faith. Not only is she ethically compromised, but she also jeopardizes her relationships with people and the very understanding that flows from such relationships.

Floundering in this maelstrom of emotion, I looked across to Roger’s senior namesake, hoping for reassurance, some indication that it was appropriate for us to stay and bear witness to this grief. But his thoughts seemed elsewhere. His face was awash with pain. Cast into the distance,
his eyes seemed to reveal the haunting story of his own grief and loss—the sudden, inexplicable “passing” of his fourteen-year-old daughter less than a year earlier. Following his gaze, I recalled my grandmother who had died soon after we left Australia. Sitting with head bowed, these griefs—Eric’s father, Waligeha’s daughter, my grandmother—felt as one. But a short time later, when this burst of feeling had passed, I wondered at my presumption. Then, Waligeha’s grief and my own seemed not one but two—similar yet distinctly different—losses. Of course there were many obvious ways in which this was true, not the least being that, in contrast with Waligeha’s loss, the death of my aged and infirmed grandmother was expected, anticipated, although none the less mourned. Above all I realized that Waligeha’s loss must be understood in the knowledge of his absolute certainty that death was not a cessation of living but the joining of the deceased with matrilineal kin already gone before. Although I was attracted to this understanding, I did not share Waligeha’s comforting certainty—the certainty of his inheritance. But this certainty did not only bring comfort, it also brought inconsolable sorrow. Sure of his daughter’s place among her susu, in the realm of the dead, Waligeha was sure too that her place in this realm was not his. Waligeha’s abiding love for his daughter—a love that enacted and substantiated his paternity in the realm of the living—was eternally thwarted by her death. In the realm of the dead his daughter had no tangible need of his care and nurture. I imagined, without knowing, that this loss must be akin to amputation. Like the phantom limb, the nurturing love remains, longing to give form and movement to its impulses.

Unlike someone’s susu relationships and identity, which were considered continuous—an irrevocable birthright that conferred a distinct, identifiable place among the living and the dead—affinal identities, established through marriage or one’s paternal inheritance, were considered ephemeral, discontinuous, insubstantial. Marriage relationships replenished living susu, because without in-marrying spouses a susu could not regenerate. Marriage relationships directly regenerated a susu by reproducing offspring and indirectly replenished them by the additional labor power they contributed to the husband’s and wife’s susu. However, the regenerative power of the marriage relationship was lost upon the death of one partner.

Absorbed by these griefs, it was some time before I was aware of Roger’s discomfort beside me. Suffering from a malarial headache and no longer
able to countenance what felt like voyeurism, he decided to discreetly slip away and return to Gohiya. Not wishing to offend or draw undue attention to ourselves, I stayed behind. Roger’s passage out of the hamlet was immediately noted by people with concern and what seemed like disappointment. When I offered an explanation in English to one young man, originally from Normanby Island but at that time living in Port Moresby, he boldly dismissed my suggestion that people might resent our presence. On the contrary, he said, “They felt thankful and honored by your show of respect. Where is your camera? Why don’t you take photos?” Looking around I noted that others there—kin from Moresby—had cameras and were taking photos freely. I reasoned that as kin of the deceased man their actions were permissible. Surely, though, it was inappropriate for me to behave in a similar fashion. “And why,” I asked rhetorically, “should our presence bring honor to the dead man and his kin? We did not know him.” Raising his eyebrows the man replied, “But you are dimdim.” At that moment my attention was drawn back to the widow.

Assuming their place by the coffin with women from the dead man’s susu, the widow and her daughters (also dressed in black) continued their vigil by the body. As people came to sit with them for a while, some praying, some bearing flowers, many crying over the body, the widow’s wailing reached a crescendo before trailing away as the sympathizers moved on. While all this was happening Eric and his older brother, John, together with their families, positioned themselves on the shoreline, some distance away from their mother and sisters. Talking quietly among themselves, they seemed like marginal bystanders to the unfolding events. Seated close by was a senior man from the Ao’ao clan, who was instructing Anne’s father (also a member of the Ao’ao clan) and—through him—Anne, a woman in her late thirties and first-born in her generation, in the customary ways to respect the dead. Around this time the two galiyauna, working in the cemetery under a fierce sun, took a break from their digging and returned to the area close to the house and the coffin. They took great care to avoid direct physical contact with people, particularly the mourners. As the sun rose higher in the sky and the mound of earth grew in the cemetery a stream of people trickled into the hamlet, many bearing food to contribute to the burial feast.

Wycliffe later told us that the current practice of burying the dead in horizontal graves, six feet deep (some with concrete headstones), in a cemetery on the margins of the main susu hamlet, was termed missionary-style burial. While he did not know when the old burial practices finished and
this new form of burial began, he attributed the changes to the missionaries. Yamesi together with his friend David (the brother of Antiya)—senior men in their mid- to late sixties—spoke with me several times about the old ways, the burial practices they had witnessed as boys. Yamesi said that

in the past *galiyauna* dug the grave maybe three and a half feet deep. The *galiyauna* himself went down into the grave and then the *taumwalowoi* (“the one gone before,” the deceased) was carried and placed inside the grave. From his nose down they put him down in the grave and they sat him there. The *galiyauna* stood and straightened up the dead person from his neck down, and the head [of the corpse] came up, outside the grave.

Present during one of these conversations, Wycliffe added details told to him by his grandfather:

When they were putting the dead body vertically inside the grave, all the owners of the dead body watched and if the jaw of the dead body fell, and the head *galiyauna* did not use his own mouth [to reposition it], then he was not considered a good *galiyauna*. Also if fluid escaped from the mouth of the corpse at this time, then the *galiyauna* had to drink it.

Once the corpse was positioned correctly, then, according to Yamesi, “they closed the grave with timber and covered the body with earth, and the head [which was outside] they covered with a ‘walata [or pot].” During a later conversation Noah, in consultation with Antiya, further explained:

The head *galiyauna* slept with his head on his right hand which rested on top of the right hand side of the ‘walata. This sleeping arrangement remained until the head rotted and popped off—maybe several weeks. The men slept in a line maybe up to twelve men, six on either side of the ‘walata, and at either end of the line there had to be an actual sorcerer. When the person with his head on the ‘walata coughed, then everyone had to turn over. When he wished to relieve himself, the next man in line would take his position until he resumed. The person who rested his head on the ‘walata listened for rumbles like thunder as the
body rotted. When they heard this, they then knew that already there were worms inside. They would build a small hut to protect themselves from rain, and when they opened the ‘walata, the worms would shoot up out of the head, hit the roof and fall on them. They did not kill them, as the worms would die naturally themselves. If the worms landed on them, it was a sign that they were doing their job well. They are said to be good galiyauna. During this time the galiyauna would observe strict food taboos. They would eat only roasted food, no protein, no coconut cream. They used different smelling trees and special magic words to hide the smell and protect them.

According to David, only the galiyauna would chew, smoke, and eat roasted food. Their helpers would eat porridge made out of taro. Every day they had to kill a pig for those helpers until the head came off. All of, say, Nuakata would bring food to them, not just the owners of the body. Yamesi continued:

Once the body rotted, the person who was resting his head on the pot would take the ‘walata off, pull the skull off and take it to one big river. They would take the rotten flesh off with their mouths, not their hands. . . . They would not close the grave where the body was buried, for later they would take out the bones and use the grave again for another clan member. These bones would be buried elsewhere.

Repugnant to me, these burial practices were also repugnant, even ghoulish, to Wycliffe. It was a shared reaction matched only by Wycliffe’s horrified response to the discovery that in Australia, as in other parts of the world, some people cremate the dead. While I offered a range of explanations for the practice of cremation—pragmatism (e.g., space and money), religious disavowal of burial, respect—my justifications were met with utter disbelief and disgust. Wycliffe’s reaction reflected his understanding of the relationship of the dead to the living, death to life, body/bodies to spirit(s). He, like his elders, noted that in the realm of the living, people necessarily comprise both body (tau) and spirit (‘alu’alawa). In this realm only people possessing exceptional powers (witches and sorcerers) can, in certain contexts, dissociate their spirits from their bodies. Upon death, however, people’s spirits are no longer bounded or constrained by their bodies; their spirits remain, free to roam in the realms of the living and the dead. While people’s living bodies or
embodiments discontinue in death, their bones remain. For this reason, Wycliffe believed that, where possible, dead bodies should be left in susu/clan ground so that their flesh may decay and rot leaving the skull and bones placed in the ground. There they remain as a permanent yet, more often than not, anonymous expression of both their own living past and that of their susu/clan. In one sense, then, this past—now interred, but previously retained in skull caves—quite literally grounds the lives of those kin already present and those kin yet to come.

Just as my attempts to explain why people in some cultures cremate their kin did not satisfy Wycliffe so his claim that the historical practices of the galiyauna were simply signs of respect seemed inadequate to me. He, like his father, big father, and uncles, spoke of their sense of relief and gratitude that these onerous burial practices had ceased with the missionaries. Repulsed yet captivated by the (imaginary) image of decaying flesh held in the mouth of the galiyauna as he prized it away from the skull, it was some considerable time before I could shift “my gaze” peripherally to review the context for such practices. For, like my colonizing forebears—missionaries, explorers, anthropologists, and government administrators—I was intrigued, perhaps even seduced, by the specter of this historical Other, realized in these seemingly barbarous acts. I was, however, also suspicious of the subject inquirer this Other reinforced. It was this suspicion that forced me to look once more at this spoken, barely remembered, yet discontinued past.

Imagining that past, I allowed myself to contemplate if my (and, more important, Wycliffe’s) response to the historical practices of the galiyauna had been shared by his forebears. Perhaps these acts, compellingly repulsive in and of themselves, were curious acts of devotion, expressions of care made all the more powerful and poignant by their dangerous, transgressive quality. Perhaps the actions of the galiyauna—positioning the jaw with their own jaw, drinking the putrescent bodily fluids, resisting the impulse to brush away showering worms engorged with the festering flesh of the deceased—were unparalleled marks of love and respect, revealing the deceased as one with the susu and clan. Maybe these practices revealed galiyauna as people, more specifically men, who literally and metaphorically embraced death and the deceased in order to facilitate its transformation from corpse to ancestral bones, embodied to disembodied spirit, and to aid the deceased’s journey from Nuakata to Bwebweso. Perhaps, too, the honor and respect granted to galiyauna for their courage in handling the potentially dangerous corpse was enough reward for them to undertake these horrible duties.
Such an interpretation of the historical practices of the galiyauna is consistent with anthropological reappraisals of the transgressive nature of cannibalism and the significance of its social memory (Arens 1979; Macintyre 1995, 34–39). Seen in this light, cannibalism’s greatest insult was to treat the other, the slain enemy, in a way that contemptuously gestured to the respect and care shown by galiyauna for a deceased body belonging to their clan. Acts of cannibalism, of appropriating and feasting on the flesh of an enemy, defiled the deceased’s body and, by implication, his susu and clan. Unlike usual treatment of the corpse, the body of the deceased was handled and ingested as a dispossessed object or thing. In so doing, his relatedness and belonging to susu was desecrated, denied. Just as the acts of the galiyauna can be considered unparalleled expressions of respect and relatedness, so cannibalism can be thought of as an unparalleled mark of disrespect or transgression that literally disembodied, depleted, and disempowered not only the dead but also his living relations. Defiled and diminished by this act, the afflicted susu and clan could only restore themselves by retribution enacted in kind.

During my time on Nuakata, cannibalism, the collective memory of it, acted as a powerful and persuasive trope, one hostage to evangelical Christian rhetoric. Along with witchcraft, magic, and sorcery it was regularly cited as a forbidden, demonic practice, hostile to the Christian God and His church. Its eradication by the missionaries is celebrated as marking the community’s delivery from a depraved and primitive past.

In the early afternoon, women from the Yalasi/Bolime and Bwauli/Bomatu Women’s Fellowships entered the hamlet, bearing crosses, wreaths, and bouquets of flowers. Walking in two lines, headed by the United Church pastors, they approached the coffin and the mourners, singing a hymn in full voice. The pastors discreetly withdrew. Assembling around the coffin, the widow, and her daughters, the women stopped singing and paid their silent respects to Eric’s father, carefully placing the flowers on his coffin and the surrounding mats. Several women prayed, then singing rose up again, this time seeming to gather and hold the widow’s grief in a chorus of support, a hymn of solidarity.

Their declaration complete, the Women’s Fellowship quietly retreated to an area close by, where people had been invited to sit for the church service preceding the burial. A senior male from the Ao’ao clan opened the service in prayer. The head pastor then addressed those gathered in Dobu (the church language), before the head deacon delivered a longer, impassioned speech about the glory of God. The same member of the
Ao‘ao clan closed proceedings with a prayer. The service over, attention turned to the owners of the body. People watched and waited silently as the galiyauna, instructed by senior kin, made their preparations to move the coffin toward the grave.

Wycliffe indicated that it was usual for the deceased’s body to rest on a narrow stretcher lined and covered by sago palms and mats. Following the church service, the galiyauna raise the stretcher to shoulder height and begin the journey to the grave. He, and later Noah and Yamesi, explained that women, together with their infants, stand on the path leading to the grave. At the appropriate time these women carry their infants underneath the stretcher as a gesture of respect to the deceased. In a taped interview conducted with Wycliffe and Noah several days after the burial, Noah stated:

After death the spirit of the deceased, together with their ancestral spirits, gather in the hamlet of the deceased and remain there for three or four days until the feast known as tau’ala’alahi. These spirits are visible to small children in the night. Children wake up crying because they are frightened of them. They are not visible to bigger people.

Wycliffe added:

At the time of a death, ancestors may want to come and take the child’s spirit away with them, because they may feel that the parents of the child are not looking after the child properly. [People] believe that most of the spirits like small children. . . . By walking under the body it shows a sign of respect to it. . . . If ancestors come and get the spirit of the child we use the word labavai. It occurs without people seeing or knowing. It doesn’t mean that the child will die, but their spirit will be affected. Maybe the ancestors will carry the spirit away and they will be patting the spirit—looking after the spirit in their hands. Physically the child will be crying all the time.

In a taped conversation with Yamesi in our house several weeks later, Yamesi suggested:

Maybe the ancestors . . . will come because the child’s parents may be smacking and scolding the children. Parents can tell that this has hap-
pened because the child won’t be eating properly; its health, its look not good. And then the parents must take the child to anyone who knows the ‘oba for labavai and [maybe] they will call the child’s spirit back or call them to leave the baby girl or boy and go back to their place, and then the child will be healthy again (tubuiuyo). This sickness won’t happen by itself, only if parents aren’t looking after the child properly.

Wycliffe, Noah, and Yamesi all implied that when taken by ancestral spirits, the newborn/infant’s spirit is separated from the body. The boundary between the body and the spiritual realm is rendered permeable. Dispirited, the newborn’s body becomes depleted, sick, and may even die. Young children are considered attractive to ancestral spirits, as they are playful and unspoiled by living. Wycliffe explained that, unlike most older children and adults, small children can see spiritual things—ancestors, dwarfs, and fairies—“because [they] . . . aren’t mature, they can’t think yet,” and they cannot protect themselves. By providing good care and demonstrating respect for the deceased, the infant’s kin protect her from ancestral spirits. The spirits of ancestors, witches, and other things are known to take or interfere with the spirits of older children and adults. However, such acts were not termed labovai. Wycliffe insisted that the term labovai only refers to the acts of ancestral spirits to take the infant’s spirit and the “bad feeling” arising in the infant as a result of this action. Vai means “to take or get,” and, as noted in chapter 5, the stem word laba means “line.” It is used in the words labalaba and labahi, which denote the temporospatial process of birthing, of crossing the line between inside and outside, between the unborn and born state, between concealed spiritual realms and the visible, embodied realms of the living.

Hoisting the coffin on their shoulders, the two galiyuna carried it toward the grave site where Antiya and several other senior men were gathered. Women trailed behind, carrying flower arrangements and a bowl of yams. Then came the widow and her children, followed by a procession of people—kin from Port Moresby and nearby Normanby Island, and friends and kin from Nuakata. Reaching the grave, and with burial imminent, Eric’s mother asked the owners of her husband’s body if they would open the coffin, so that she could see him for one final time. Without lowering the coffin to the ground the two galiyuna prized open the
lid. A hubbub developed around the widow as she stepped forward toward the coffin. As the cloth covering the deceased’s face was peeled back, powder was released into the air to protect people from the smell of the body, now dead for over two weeks. Senior men burned fine smelling leaves, waving the smoke around to discourage flies. Seeing her husband for the first time after his long absence in Port Moresby, glimpsing his face withered and cast with a deathly pallor, Eric’s mother let out a desperate, agonized cry. Rising to a pitch, her cry once again pierced the air, this time puncturing the seamless flow of events delivering the body to the grave. It was as if in that fleeting, shrill moment the gravity of her loss was realized, the finality of death faced. Stricken, she collapsed into awaiting arms. Following their mother, the man’s daughters also stepped forward to see their father, and they, too, were overcome with grief. Bracing themselves against the force of this grief, the two galiyauna closed the coffin and, together with their kin, moved silently onward to the grave. As the powdered haze fell to the ground the distraught widow and her weeping daughters were assisted back under the house. Brian, the junior pastor, offered a brief prayer for the deceased man. This completed, the two galiyauna, advised by senior men at every turn, gingerly lowered the coffin into the hole, resting the casket on the deceased man’s sleeping mat that lined the grave. New mats were produced and placed on top of the casket.

Wycliffe later explained that the deceased’s body is carefully placed in the grave so that the head points in the direction of the rising sun. Like the sun, the spirit of the deceased is believed to rise beyond the grave. At the end where the head is buried a pot of roasted yams is placed on top of the grave by the members of the deceased’s clan. Known as tamahina (literally, father, mother), or “food for a journey,” this pot of yams is placed there to sustain the deceased during the journey to Bwebweso, the realm of the dead. It is considered “spiritual food.” Like the deceased’s body, the yams will rot away, but their spirit sustains the spirit of the deceased (cf. Fortune [1932] 1989, 181).

Reflecting on the “olden days,” Wycliffe and Yamesi told me that their ancestors believed that on the journey to Bwebweso people’s spirits came to a fork in the road. At that intersection two paths diverged, each with a spiritual woman guarding their entrance. On the right-hand path stood Sinelautegege, a good spiritual woman, who waited to claim people who had been good (e.g., those who have lived humbly and in harmony with
others) throughout their lives. Sinelautegege washed people, making them clean, so that they may enter Bwebweso with joy. On the left-hand path stood Sinemuyamuyalele, a bad spiritual woman, who took those who have been bad (e.g., sorcerers, witches, those who have killed others) throughout their lives. Sinemuyamuyalele took them to the fire where they burn. Later, they went to the bad spiritual place, an unnamed place close to Bwebweso.

What little was known of Bwebweso at the time of my stay on Nuakata was based on the eyewitness accounts of people who were long dead, among them Yamesi’s mother. In the past, those who knew the necessary magic journeyed there to visit their kin. These people described it as a “nice place,” where there was “no rubbish.” “There’s no bad things there and the people are nice, friendly. People do not go to the toilet there; . . . there is no night, only day” (Wycliffe). Yamesi added, “At Bwebweso all the clans have a tree and if one of the leaves or branches fall off, then the people staying there say, ‘Tomorrow one of our friends will join us here.’”

As people trickled back toward the hamlet I, too, withdrew from the grave. Remaining at the site were the two galiyauna and senior male members of the clan. Positioning myself within view of the grave, I saw them place some of the dead man’s belongings in the grave. Not long after, I was tapped on the shoulder and invited to come and eat. Ushered into an enclosed veranda, my hosts then left me alone to eat. Once again I had occasion to ponder my position, my difference. Singled out as a guest of great importance, amid a gathering that included kin who had traveled from distant places at great expense, I felt acutely embarrassed at this show of respect.

Later, when I reflected on burial practices on Nuakata past and present, it seemed that just as women on Nuakata bore children/kin into the realm of the living so—through their representatives Sinelautegege and Sinemuyamuyalele—they bore the spirits of their kin into the realm of the dead. But as indicated earlier, the spirit’s embodiment—and later its liberation from temporospatial, bodily constraint—was only made possible by the complementary, supportive activity of both susu and affinal men. Galiyauna, past and present, delivered the deceased’s body to the grave. In the past these men subsequently removed the deceased’s skull, then carried it in secret to a river or the sea, where it was washed, anointed
with coconut oil, and adorned with flowers. At that point—according to Wycliffe (speaking in English)—

[the] two galiyauna would remain concealed from view until their preparations were completed. Then the sister, mother or uncle would be crying and she would go and look for them. She had to be a well-prepared woman. She had to put some things around her body (leaves, magic words) to protect her from the men’s power. Because the two galiyauna had fasted they had different spiritual power. She would find them, and when she found them, they would all come to the village and the skull would be carried by the head galiyauna. When they came into the village, all the women had to leave the village. Only women who knew the magic and could protect themselves could stay. When they came, they sat on shelves made by owners [of the skull] and they chewed areca nut. Then the village elder would take the spiritual power away from the galiyauna.

The responsibility of the two galiyauna for carrying the deceased’s skull did not end with the delivery of his skull to his susu village. One journey remained: a journey undertaken during guyau, the final feast of the mortuary sequence. Wycliffe translated guyau as gift or offering, thanksgiving for the spirits. During this feast the senior galiyauna carried the skull of the deceased to the sacred skull cave of his clan and placed it there with the anonymous skulls of his maternal forebears. There the skulls remained, a permanent testimony to an embodied ancestry, a reminder of lived time, long past. Through the actions of susu women and men, the journey taken by someone into life, then later to “the before” of death, was made possible. Although the burial and birthing practices of susu women and men have changed over time, women have continued to carry and give birth to children, thereby reproducing and sustaining their living susu, while senior men have continued to assume responsibility for carrying their clan’s dead.

With the burial complete, the hole filled, attention turned back upon the principal mourners: members of the dead man’s susu, the widow, and her children. For the first time Eric and his brother moved to sit with their mother and sisters under the house. Senior women from the Ao‘ao clan placed red hibiscus in the mourners’ hair and then washed their hands. This done, final preparations for the communal feast began. Women who
had been busying themselves with the food laid banana palm mats on the ground in two long lines. Women sat at one mat and men at another. Tapioca, pumpkin, and sweet potato were distributed evenly along these mats. Two smaller mats with rice, a small amount of tinned fish, and a plentiful supply of tapioca and pumpkin were laid out on higher ground closer to the houses. Men from the deceased’s clan sat at one, and the pastors and deacons from both the Yalasi and Bwauli churches sat at another. Grace was said and the meal began. Solemnity gave way to restrained levity.

Wycliffe explained that as a sign of respect, a sign of living diminished by loss, the principal mourners—generally the widow/widower and children of the deceased—observe food taboos until the feast known as bilai. The owners of the dead body cook the food for this feast. It is following burial. During this period of fasting the principal mourners are forbidden from eating highly valued foods, such as taro, yams, sago, fish, or protein of any kind. At the feast the owners of the dead body wash the hands of the widow and her children, thereby signaling to their kin that they are able to eat freely once again. In the distant past the widow observed these food taboos until the final feast of the mortuary sequence.

Immediately following the meal speeches began. After some initial words by the head pastor, the brother of Eric’s father spoke, thanking people for their work and their respect. Eric then rose to his feet. Speaking tenderly of his father, he explained that he and his brother and sisters wore black on that day as a sign of respect and remembrance for a man who would do anything for them when they were children. If they wanted a coconut he would climb a coconut tree. If they wanted fish he would go fishing. “But now,” he said, “we wear a red hibiscus to cancel out the black, to celebrate our father’s life, to signal an end to mourning. Now we will return to our village and wash and eat. We will wear red hibiscus so we don’t feel sad when we return to the village.” Eric was followed by his brother John, who stated that their mother had only learned of her husband’s passing when the boat arrived at Tutuma the previous evening. The family had gone to great lengths to keep the news a secret from her. When I had questioned people about this decision, everyone assured me that this was for the best. “Otherwise she would be crying and mourning and fasting for many days prior to the burial.” “By this time,” they said, “she will be too tired [to mourn properly].”
Wycliffe, Antiya, and Noah later confirmed what these comments implied. It is crucial that the mourners, especially the principal mourners, demonstrate or perform their grief properly during the ceremonial events associated with death and mourning. In other words, they must do and be seen to be doing things respectfully. In making this point I do not wish to infer or suggest that a distinction between real and false, inner and outer feelings exists on Nuakata, but rather to assert that mourning at once expresses the personal, familial, and communal implications and ramifications of death on the island (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Appadurai 1990).

Like all performances, mourning performances on Nuakata are validated by their audiences, their witnesses. On Nuakata, these witnesses are both visible and invisible and include the deceased, his susu ancestors, and living susu/clan. Following death, the primary task of the community of mourners is to visibly affirm what was previously assumed, namely, that someone’s living, now past, previously and uniquely enlivened particular susu, affinal, and other communal relationships. Integral to the deceased’s former life/living, these relationships or pathways are integral to the living of those who remain behind. In this way, these people are depleted or wounded by the loss. Paths linking them with the deceased are now closed. It is only by publicly recognizing the nature of these wounds that their cause is fully revealed and respected, thereby preventing further development of the wound and making possible the process of restoration of the living and the transformation of the dead. Through death and mourning the life of the deceased and his susu is widely acknowledged and valued. By respectfully testifying to the former relationships and ways of the deceased, his life is completed by those who mourn him. The mourners, in turn, are accorded prestige by the deceased’s living susu and spared retribution by the spirit of the deceased and his ancestral spirits.

Finally, a woman from Gaimanugini thanked all those who had helped with the preparations for the funeral. Then Antiya rose to speak. He, too, thanked people for coming and now urged us to return to our hamlets, as the day’s proceedings were over, the sun was setting, and for many the journey ahead was long. As he sat down members of the widow’s susu stepped forward and presented members of Eric’s father’s susu from Normanby with a bale of rice and a pig for them to take back to Normanby for a feast to commemorate his life.
Wycliffe explained that unlike the prestation of love gifts (*mulolo*) buried with the deceased—generally mats freely given by members of the deceased’s *susu* and people close, but often unrelated to the deceased—the gift-giving by the widow (or widower), her children, and their *susu* to the deceased’s *susu* is conspicuous. Neither Wycliffe nor his father knew the name of this gift. As personal expressions of love, of deeply felt affection for the deceased, *mulolo* are given without expectation of repayment. These gifts, and the bonds they represent, may be recognized and appreciated by the place given to the giver at the ensuing mortuary feast. In contrast, the affinal prestation of pigs and yams (and/or rice) to the deceased’s matrilineage is given in recognition of the deceased’s prior contribution to his affinal *susu*. The broader meaning and expectation created by gift-giving remains implicit rather than explicit, for this gift occurs in a sequence of giving between the two *susu*. For example, this gift may reciprocate in kind a prior gift, and so end the sequence of giving between the two *susu*; or it may create a debt leaving the recipients beholden to the deceased’s affinal kin. If this is the case, it is usually understood that the gift is intended to enable the children of the deceased to use some portion of their father’s land in their lifetime. This arrangement can only last while their deceased father’s kin remain beholden to them through unmatched or unreciprocated gifts.16

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*Negotiating Respect: Between Voyeurism and “I”-Witnessing*

As I walked back to Gohiya my companions asked me why Roger had not stayed for the burial. I simply replied, “He was sick.” Only three months into my fieldwork I did not have the words to explain that because he did not know Eric’s father or his kin, and he was not an ethnographer, he felt like a voyeur. Although keen to participate in and observe Nuakatan people’s knowledge and practices, his interest was motivated by a desire to forge friendships with people living on the island. Unlike my own, it was not motivated or bound by research imperatives. As a result, he felt morally compromised by observing others grieve merely to satisfy his sense of curiosity. He risked viewing this occasion as theater, thereby objectifying the bereaved as actors and their distress as mere performance. My walking companions seemed disappointed by my explanation. Their reaction was perversely reassuring to
me, vindicating my own ambivalent decision to stay and witness the burial feast. Nevertheless, I remained uneasy.

Feeling compromised by my decision to attend the funeral I subsequently raised my ethical dilemmas with Wycliffe. My concerns were summarily dismissed. He claimed that people expected me to attend; it was important for me to see, for how else would I really know or understand their burial customs? Knowing Wycliffe for such a short time I could not discern whether these comments were politely deferential remarks designed to allay my guilt or his considered opinion about acceptable ethnographic practice on Nuakata.

Disturbed, and finding no convincing or acceptable consolation, I determined not to attend another death and burial, unless I knew the person or was obliged to attend because of my friendship and relationship with people. When another death occurred some three months later—an old woman to whom I had given medicine, but did not really know—I resisted my ethnographic impulses and reluctantly stuck to my earlier resolution. My resolve was tested, however, by a stream of people who, when passing by our house on the way to her funeral, stopped to ask when I was coming to the old woman’s hamlet. To their questions I simply replied, “I am not going.” They in turn asked, “Why?” “Because I don’t know the old woman,” was my reply. To this they added, “nige teya hava, ūlaoma (No matter, you come!).” Three days later when these same people returned from the burial, they laughingly told how they had not slept for two nights. All through the nights they had been pelted with spiritual stones by the old woman’s spirit. Explaining this as her act of retribution, they claimed she was unhappy with people’s show of respect. She had not been buried properly. Again they asked, “Why didn’t you come?”

On hearing this news I was filled with regret. Not only had I missed an opportunity to witness these events, but these people were clearly perplexed by my decision, if not my lack of respect. More questions presented themselves to me. For whom did my nonattendance at the burial feast demonstrate respect? In my desire to be ethical, had I denied people’s capacity to accommodate me and my work? Whose “high moral ground” had I settled upon and to what end?

Several days after the death and burial of the old woman I passed through her hamlet while walking around the island. After inviting me to rest with them, her relatives—among them a woman I knew—asked me why I had not come to the hamlet when she died. Relieved by the opportunity to explain, I stated my reason. Dismissing my concerns, they stated
that to understand their burial practices I must witness them. Then they could explain them to me. Not only would I honor them with my presence but I would honor the old woman. Once again I was reminded that—like it or not—because I was a white person in a region with a history of white colonization and Protestant mission involvement dating back over a century, my presence on these occasions conferred honor and respect on the deceased and her kin.

Chastened, I could not ignore this tide of opinion. Clearly, in both identifying myself and being identified as someone interested in local beliefs and practices, the people of Nuakata expected me to attend communal events, including burials. My presence was viewed as a measure of my genuine interest in understanding their customs (kastom).17 Apparently many of the adults on Nuakata, both young and old, understood my ethnographic project as documenting practices they identified and privileged as customary/cultural. My presence, my time on Nuakata encouraged local people to understand and value their customary practices as unique.

Among the significant things I learned from my ethical equivocations at that time was that on Nuakata death was a tangible part of living, with direct personal, familial, and communal implications and effects. Many people directly participate in burial ceremonies: making wreaths, preparing food, singing, digging the grave, preparing the body. While familiarity and intimacy with the deceased and/or her susu compels some people to publicly mourn and respect the dead, many participate in burial ceremonies for a variety of other reasons. Some people attend mortuary ceremonies to express communal solidarity, others attend for fear that they may incite the wrath of the deceased and her susu. Some attend out of curiosity, while others wish to learn respectful practices. In reality, at Eric’s father’s burial, I was but one of many conspicuous learners, for many kin living on the mainland—people who had been away from their island villages for a long time—attended his burial and were also witnessing, even photographing, practices they had not seen for a long time, if ever. Perhaps like me their interest was ethnographic. By taking photographs they could describe and show what they had witnessed to friends and family “back home” in Port Moresby. Children’s attendance at these events was unquestioned, if not encouraged. It was only by watching their elders, by listening to their explanations, by admonishment when they behaved disrespectfully, that children and young people learned expected customary ways.
Therefore, in deciding not to attend the funeral, I had reluctantly stood my (high moral) ground, but in so doing had lost shared ground. I had not only missed an opportunity to learn, but, more important, I had missed the opportunity to demonstrate respect by witnessing to others’ witnessing of death and burial. I had failed to appreciate that as both a respected visitor and anthropologist on the island I had a responsibility to observe and witness such occasions.

Like an adolescent with an identity crisis I had come to grief somewhere between my childlike fascination and desire to see, learn, and participate and my adult impulse to know already, to be socially competent, to avoid mistakes. Scheper-Hughes speaks to my dilemmas when she writes:

One hears of anthropological observation as a hostile act that reduces our “subjects” to mere “objects” of our discriminating, incriminating, scientific gaze. . . . [G]iven the perilous times in which we and our subjects live, I am inclined toward compromise, the practice of a “good enough” ethnography. . . . Not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and of turning away. (1995, 417)

I placed considerable emphasis on observation and participation in these mortuary sequences, and so did local people. Seeing was considered integral to knowing, participation to understanding, just as performing and witnessing mourning practices were crucial demonstrations of respect. “Seeing” on Nuakata, though, neither implied nor necessitated a form of dispassionate, scientific observation—observation that created (emotional, thoughtful, and spatial) distance between observer and observed. Nor did it necessarily lead to speculation. People often watched so that they could “do.” In this sense, my seeing differed from theirs, motivated as it was by a wish to translate, interpret, and make meaningful what I saw. I wanted to see, therefore know and understand. I wanted to observe, in order to make the observed transparent, to conquer its mysteries. I wanted to see, so that I might render it faithfully in imagined texts, for example, field notes, articles, a book. In one sense, then, my observations were hostage to these imaginary, explanatory texts. Yet I had failed to anticipate the emotional effect and force of these events and therefore did not consider how my emotional responses to “seeing” and participating might influence my understanding of death
and mourning. Perhaps most important in the context of this discussion, I had conveniently overlooked the ethical dilemmas and decisions that necessarily arise during, and ensue from, participant observation. To my genuine surprise I realized that I had thought of myself as an impassioned participant, but a dispassionate observer. I had inadvertently assumed and made a distinction—at once temporospatial, epistemological, and political—between doing, seeing, and knowing. It was a distinction that, in the interests of a dispassionate knowing, also enabled me to defer ethical decisions until after the “seeing” had occurred.

Understanding Respect and Respectful Understanding

My specific ethical dilemmas in the field can be dismissed as the trifling concerns of a fledgling ethnographer ensnared by her own well-meaning ambivalence or “a fact of research life” confronted by all ethnographers. However, I believe that they not only raise broad epistemological questions for ethnography, they also challenge us to consider how we represent these issues in our texts. Seemingly overlooked and/or displaced by research imperatives, ethical dilemmas in the field are often relegated to private texts—field notes, diaries, letters, and conversations. They surface in ethnographies as absences, elisions, or asides in introductions. Sometimes they emerge in articles as ethical practice issues in specific fieldwork contexts. Occasionally they are detached and liberated from their uncomfortable living contexts, emerging in articles or books as theoretical questions about the merits of politically engaged ethnographic practice and writing (see Visweswaran 1988; Walter 1995; Wolf 1993), the possibilities of and for objective research (e.g., D’Andrade 1995; Denzin 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1995), and abstract reflections on ethical practice in anthropology (e.g., Adams 1981; Knauft 1994; Whittaker 1981). By compartmentalizing the ethical in this way, the impression is given, if not the assumption made, that dilemmas and questions of this kind have little direct bearing on what, how, and with whom we participate and observe in the field, how this influences our understanding, and how our experiences are subsequently represented and/or interpreted beyond it. When detached from their experiential context, ethical issues simply become “ends in themselves,” independent objects of study, rather than “integral dimensions of” and “means to” understanding the context from which they emerged. Clearly, this was not consonant with my own ethnographic experience—my own interpretation, misinterpretation, and
negotiated reinterpretation of what I could respectfully witness in the field and extrapolate beyond it (see Scheper-Hughes 1992, 14–23). For it was in a specific context (a burial ceremony) that I became preoccupied with my own respectful ethical practice on Nuakata. My response was both the effect of and affected by the context. It was a context in which people’s actions express, and are primarily intended to elicit, demonstrations of respect. Conversely, it could be claimed that my preoccupation with respectful/ethical practice led me to understand respect and respectful understanding as a central dimension or purpose of mourning practices on Nuakata. Of course neither proposition is mutually exclusive. Both offer a valuable perspective on the way practices associated with death or mourning are understood and represented in this text.

My practical ethical dilemmas were sparked by my failure to anticipate the emotional impact of seeing and participating in mortuary ceremonies. Perhaps this is not surprising given my pre-field reading of the ethnographic accounts of death in Melanesia and Milne Bay in particular (Battaglia 1990; Damon and Wagner 1989; Munn 1986). These texts mostly offer nonspecific, dispassionate accounts of death, detailing the author’s interpretation of the strategic purpose, meaning, and comparative significance of the ensuing mortuary sequence and associated prestations. In these texts the gravity of the loss is often buried in the page. So, too, is the multifaceted response of the witnessing ethnographer. The impression is given that the feelings evoked and expressed by participants and witnesses on these occasions, especially those of the ethnographer, contribute little to an understanding of the social effect and meaning of mortuary practices. Equally, the significance of emotional expressions as forms of social action that create social effects is underemphasized. As a result the view that expressions of feeling (and the possible ethical impulses that may flow from them) reflect the inner subjective states of individual selves is perpetuated by the form, if not the content, of such texts (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Lutz 1988, 1990). So, too, are the related assumptions that thinking is separable from feeling, and understanding detachable from experience (Jackson 1989; Rosaldo 1989; Wikan 1991). Widely acknowledged by both anthropologists and feminist philosophers as ethno- and phallocentric, these assumptions, grounded as they are in Western, Enlightenment philosophy, valorize knowing and understanding founded on dispassionate and disembodied Reason and the objectifying gaze of the implicitly male Subject. However, on Nuakata observing, doing, and experiencing the social effects of
this seeing and doing are integral to understanding. Understanding is neither dispassionate nor value free (Mallett 1995, 1997).

Overt resistance to consideration of feelings/emotions in ethnographic texts, especially those of the ethnographer, remains well entrenched in anthropology. Opponents argue that feelings contaminate the text, that they are inimical to reasoned analysis and preclude objective knowledge. As a consequence the status and strategic political import of ethnographic knowledge are undermined. In his article “Ethnography Without Tears” Roth (1989) seems to speak for those in the discipline who ignore feminist ethnographies and explicitly reject the (nonfeminist) reflexive and dialogical ethnographic genres that reveal the ethnographer’s feelings and experiences. He argues that both the authors and proponents of dialogic, reflexive texts (e.g., Clifford, Fabian, Rosaldo, Asad) mistakenly attribute epistemological significance to their strategic political efforts to redress inequitable post-/colonial power relations by producing representative texts. They attempt to diffuse their authority, gain credibility, and establish authenticity by including multiple voices and confessing to feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability in their texts. Rejecting these efforts as “epistemologically innocuous” and politically misrepresentative, he claims they merely affirm the widely held belief that all truths are partial. This, though, accuses these ethnographers of seeking an authenticity they do not claim. More important, it mistakenly interprets their projects to acknowledge and explore the historical, political, and relational “contingency” of ethnographic knowledge with vain attempts to develop superior epistemologies and “guilt free” methodologies (Clifford 1989).

I do not wish to imply that all ethnographic responses to death and mortuary practices, including textual representations, should focus on the specific ethical/emotional expressions and responses of participants, including ethnographers; rather, following writers such as Clifford (1986, 1988, 1989), Rosaldo (1984), and Danforth (1982), I argue that there should be room in the discipline for methodologies/epistemologies and genres of ethnographic writing that can. When represented in abstract terms and forms, the experience and significance of death for the people studied risk becoming completely foreign, other to the reader’s own. In telling the stories of particular deaths, ethnographers risk promoting the idea that the practices associated with these examples, and the significance and intent attributed to them, are representative of a given culture that, in terms of affection, coincides with the reader’s and/or the ethnographer’s own. By representing their own experience in the text,
ethnographers risk becoming the focus of the account, thereby devaluing the experiences, the stories of those with whom they researched. Despite these and many other “risks” there is much to be gained by making reflexivity and the encounter between researcher and researched “ethnographic rather than contemplative projects” (Herzfeld 1989, 563). For such encounters invite us to reflect on the contemporary anthropological project, the multifaceted role and responsibilities of the ethnographer, ethical practice in the field, and what and how we can claim to understand and/or know in our ethnographic texts. Specifically, they expose the limitations of speculative ways of knowing that valorize dispassionate observation while inviting us to consider a way of understanding that values the ethical and emotional responses invoked by our participation and observation.

*Tau’ala’alahi: One Who Burns*

Following my discussion with the old woman’s kin, I decided to attend the *tau’ala’alahi* feast held five or six days after her burial. At dawn on the day of the feast I set out alone for the old woman’s hamlet. When I arrived at the entrance to her hamlet, a group of women who were preparing food together beckoned me to join them. Spirits were high. Wresting my camera from my backpack, I tried to capture this levity on film. Absent was the solemnity and mournful weeping that marked Eric’s father’s burial. Absent, too, were the ethical ruminations that marked my participation in, and observation of, that occasion. But unmistakably present throughout this day—as with all other “events” I attended, mournful or otherwise—was a sense of time, suspended.

Freed of time’s demands, festive events on Nuakata seemed to claim their own unique space. It was a space/time in which the present was privileged, a space/time that did not clearly delineate between an event and the preparations necessary for that event to occur. On these occasions, in this “space,” people did not “wait” for things to happen; rather, they seemed to accept that events simply unfolded.

Sitting there, talking, eating, I found myself waiting expectantly for something to happen. Eventually a senior woman belonging to the old woman’s clan invited me to join her in the center of the hamlet, so that she and several other older people could explain the day’s events. These
same people, mainly older men, instructed the two women primarily responsible for the feast—members of the dead woman’s *susu*—in the proper and respectful ways to proceed.

Noah and Yamesi variously described *tau’ala’alahi* as the “feast for those two *galiyauna*” and the “resurrection feast.” They added that “after the feast the deceased’s spirit departs for Bwebweso.” Confused by their explanations I asked Wycliffe about the significance of the feast’s name. *Tau’ala’alahi* literally translates as “one who burns.” He replied:

I don’t know why they say *tau’ala’alahi*. But those two *galiyauna*, once . . . [the members of the deceased’s *susu*] cook this feast, they’ll make those two *galiyauna* maybe strong. I am not sure how *tau’ala’alahi* works.

Months later, when speaking with Wycliffe and, through him, Antiya and Noah about mortuary practices in the olden days, Wycliffe added:

Before, the three burial feasts—*tau’ala’alahi*, *bwabwale*,21 *guyau*—used to be all joined together, but now they have become separate. Before, [when] I heard my grandfather22 talking he did not mention *tau’ala’alahi*. Once he said, if a person dies and they take [the] skull off, that is *guyau*. And when they are bringing pig and food to the grave [for the two *galiyauna* and their assistants], then that was *bwabwaleta*. *Bwabwaleta* was the feast that follows *tau’ala’alahi*. Now *tau’ala’alahi* and *bwabwaleta* are mixed together. This is a bit different from Duau.23 We call it *tau’ala’alahi* here, but at Duau this feast is called *pwaipwai*. If a person dies [at Duau] he remains on his sleeping mat until they kill a pig. When a person dies, a pig must die for the *galiyauna* and his family. *Ai’ai bwabwale* is food that is eaten by those *galiyauna* and their family and relatives.

These comments only served to confuse me more, for how were they to be understood? Was *tau’ala’alahi* to be considered a relatively modern phenomenon, or did it exist in the precolonial and early colonial past? If so, what was the significance of its past to its present form? What, if any, remnants remained embedded in current practices? If, as Wycliffe suggested, it was then a combination of two feasts, how, when, and why did
this transformation occur? Also, what was resurrection? Who or what was resurrected? Given the influence of Christianity, what was meant by “resurrection”?

Of course, simple and direct answers to these questions were not forthcoming, but Leenhardt’s general observations about the meaning of death in Melanesia were suggestive. If in Melanesia death does not mean “annihilation” or consignment to “oblivion,” then resurrection in this context cannot be considered a physical or spiritual reclamation or return from “the nothingness of death” (see Leenhardt 1979, 40–43). At no time does the spirit cease to exist, it merely stays for a time in its natal hamlet to ensure its work is complete before departing to dwell with its spiritual kin.

Before long, I caught sight of two galiyauna and their fellow grave diggers, entering the hamlet by the main path. Earlier in the day these grave workers had left the hamlet—where they had remained since the old woman’s burial—to wash and prepare themselves for the feast. Until this time they had been fed and attended to by the old woman’s granddaughter. They made their way past the people gathered on the edge of the hamlet, then sat down on several mats placed a short distance from the houses. Members of the susu and clan of the deceased assembled close by, yet—with the exception of several older men and the two women coordinating the feast—they remained distant from the grave workers. Like other members of their clan before them, the grave diggers and the two galiyauna were issued with red hibiscus or white frangipani flowers to place in their hair, thereby signaling the beginning of the end of their customary observances. The colors of the flowers were significant. Red flowers were given to members of the clan who had already lost one or both of their parents. White flowers were distributed to those whose parents were still living.

Soon after, the two galiyauna positioned themselves in front of the deceased woman’s house. A small crowd gathered around them. In the doorway of the house stood the old woman’s granddaughter, the principal mourner. Looking up to her, the galiyauna asked if she had beda [betel nut]. With this, she threw several handfuls of beda in their direction, scattering the crowd who clamored and clambered to get it. Everyone was joking and laughing. Next, the two galiyauna asked for mustard, lime, and, finally, tobacco. The woman flung her replies at them with theatrical flourish. And with each throw a new group formed around the
galiyauna as everyone tried to snatch these offerings. Someone explained to me that the two galiyauna were now free to partake of these things.

Following these proceedings, the crowd dissipated, and with this the excitement and laughter faded away. One final sign remained to be enacted for the two galiyauna. A woman from the old woman’s susu placed two pots containing fish, tapioca, yams, and sweet potato before them. The two galiyauna bent down to smell the food, which had been cooked in coconut juice, before it was whisked away.

Talking afterward with Wycliffe and Antiya, Wycliffe explained in English that

in the olden days, when the galiyauna came back from the grave, they would have to stay and fast until the big feast called guyau. When the guyau was over, they were allowed to eat fish or pig or any type of protein, or work in the garden, or go and fish. Those people who helped them with digging the soil or working around the cemetery, they could do anything. But now some of the culture is already changed. . . . Usually we cook only the tau’ala’alabi, and that’s it. We will be staying and the galiyauna will be fasting from protein for how many weeks, and then they are allowed to eat or do anything they want. Now . . . between death and the tau’ala’alabi feast, [the galiyauna] will not eat fish and pig until the feast. Only [roasted] yams would be eaten. If [there aren’t any] then we use sweet potato, good tapioca or bananas. The people cleaning around the cemetery after the funeral, they will wash in a strong current and drink a coconut shell of salt water each day to purify themselves. The people who are digging cannot eat protein. The galiyauna will not eat protein after the feast either. They believe they will get sick. Some [galiyauna] will take about one month before they eat fish; some don’t eat pig at all.

By these men’s account, in the “olden days” the two galiyauna, like the widow/widower, observed food taboos until the final feast in the mortuary sequence. For the two galiyauna, maintenance of these taboos was precautionary. Made vulnerable and susceptible to illness by their efforts with the dead body, galiyauna could only be restored to full strength by the reciprocal efforts of the deceased’s susu. Although, in the past, taboos may have been customarily lifted following a feast (either bwabualeta or tau’ala’alahi) held long prior to guyau, the two galiyauna (and by associ-
ation their kin) lived with some threat to themselves while the spirit of the deceased remained at Nuakata. In the past, the spirit’s rising—or resurrection—was possible only when its life had been duly honored and, if necessary, its death avenged. Living kin had to settle the cause of death, avenging their loved one when sorcery or witchcraft was believed to be involved. Now, however, when both the talk and practice of witchcraft and sorcery are actively discouraged by the church, and when the burden for the spirit’s passage beyond death has increasingly fallen to God rather than living kin, people no longer speak openly about avenging the death of their kin through witchcraft. Despite the church’s influence, though, many deaths are still surrounded by rumors of sorcery and witchcraft.

Just as the expression and period of mourning observed by the widow have evidently compacted over time, so too the fasting period for the two galiyauna has been reduced. As Wycliffe suggested, in its contemporary form the tau’ala’alahi feast aims to restore strength to the two galiyauna and—through them—members of their matrilineage. In this sense, perhaps the living were also thought to be resurrected; wounded by the loss of death, perhaps it was they who were restored to health. Although the visible work of the feast was important, the invisible or concealed work—namely, the spirit’s departure—remained a necessary, if unexplained, consequence.

With these activities completed, the galiyauna retreated to their mats, where they played cards, chewed betel nut, smoked, and ate roasted food provided by the old woman’s granddaughter. Attention was focused on the final preparations for the feast, overseen by the female members of the deceased’s susu. Two lines of food were laid out on mats in the center of the hamlet. I was directed to sit at one with some members of the deceased’s susu, and at the other were clan members, including members of the susu of the galiyauna together with their in-laws. Everyone else sat further away, gathering around several mats laden with food. Following the meal some older members of the deceased’s clan complained that the food had been laid out incorrectly. They declared that a separate “table” should be laid for men and women of the clan and that members of different clans should not eat together as one. Resigned to yet saddened by these violations of customary practices, they assured all those people within earshot that they would continue to observe these customs.

With nightfall imminent, the feast completed, many people slipped away, back to their hamlets. I joined a small procession that stumbled its
way back in the dark along the path that winds its way through Bolime and Yalasi. Coconut palm flares lit our way. Many, particularly the young people, remained in the old woman’s hamlet for the night, singing and playing cards. Passing by our house the next day on his way back from the old woman’s hamlet, Yamesi dropped in to see us. Obviously weary, he told us that he had not slept. All throughout the night the old woman had been throwing stones—spiritual stones—and crying. She was still angry that she had not been shown proper respect. His comment launched a discussion about Christianity, culminating with the question, “Where does the spirit go when your time is over?” Laughing, musing with us, issuing us a challenge, Yamesi replied, “Do you know where the spirit goes?” Pausing, he added:

When we are living on the earth we are watching carefully to see where the spirit goes, but we don’t know. Before, they thought that they go to Bwebweso. But this time, nobody knows where they go. They go to Bwebweso or they go to heaven. . . . [Nobody knows] where is their living place, where they are staying. The Bible teaches the spirit goes somewhere, but it does not explain how or why the spirit comes back and does these things.

That the spirit of the deceased endures beyond death was not questioned by the people I spoke to on Nuakata. Some, however, questioned where the spirit goes after death. Of these, some older people stridently believed that the spirit goes to Bwebweso. Others were troubled by their inability to decide. Many people told me that the spirit goes to Heaven, while others responded to my inquiries with indifference or amusement, declaring “ta’i’ita (Who knows!—and by implication, Why care!)—Bwebweso? Heaven? What’s the difference?” The spirit continues wherever it stays.

Forgetting Guyau

Hoping that memories of past mortuary practices would reveal the significance of current ones, I turned my attention to the final, climactic feast in the mortuary sequence: guyau. According to Daphne Lithgow’s unpublished dictionary of Auhelawa, the terms guyau and soi are interchangeable. Both mean “to distribute.” No longer made or enacted, guyau was barely remembered on Nuakata. People prefaced their
remarks about guyau with expressions of relief at its passing. Guyau belonged to the ancestors’ time. Noah, a man in his early fifties, told us that it was discontinued in his generation when their marriages were young and the birth of a new generation had barely begun. By his account the last guyau held on Nuakata was in 1960, one year prior to Wycliffe’s birth. Conducted or sponsored by Wycliffe’s namesake, a senior member of the Bo’e clan, it was held at Gogobohewa—the Yalasi hamlet, where Wycliffe’s maternal uncle Hosea, sister Geteli, brother-in-law Justin, and their children were living. This guyau was attended by relatives from Duau and Koyagaugau and people from Nuakata. Wycliffe’s namesake died two or three months after the feast, and with his passing it was decided among his susu, clan, and affinal kin that, given the immense amount of work involved in hosting this feast, it would be the final guyau for the Bo’e clan. It seems that this decision was subsequently adopted by all the clans on Nuakata. Born of pragmatism and necessity, this decision was apparently not influenced by European or local missionaries or government personnel.

As a result of the decisions and actions of their parents, grandparents, and in some cases great-grandparents, the succeeding generations did not know about guyau. When asked about this feast, they merely repeated the refrain learned from their elders: “We no longer do this, it was too much work.” Not only did these generations not perform or remember guyau, it seemed they did not want to know about it. Perhaps, more to the point, they wanted to forget this feast. When asked about it, younger (married and unmarried) people referred me to Antiya or Wycliffe, and when present while Wycliffe and Antiya attempted to describe some aspect of the feast, they invariably became bored and distracted. Unable or unprepared to contribute to the discussions, they gradually drifted off to do some other activity.

Both the language and practices of remembering and forgetting on Nuakata suggest that, like the people of Sabarl, the people of Nuakata have traditionally had no “concept of memory as a faculty” (see Battaglia 1990, 8; 1992, 5)—an internal, neural epicenter located in the mind. Remembering was understood as a particular expression of thinking-feeling—thinking-feeling directed toward the person, place, thing, or activity to be remembered. Spoken of as an alienable or semialienable possession, remembrance was an activity that could be spoken, performed, placed. Three words were used to describe remembering in Alina Nu’ata. The first, nuwatawulobai, means to think-feel (nuwatawu) and finally find it (lobai). Remembering in this sense was to search and locate something;
to direct thinking-feeling toward something and thereby find it. A second word, rarely used, *nuwamomobi*, means thinking-feeling pulled or squeezed together tightly. Described in this way, remembering was a bringing or gathering together of thinking-feeling—a re-collection of that which was to be remembered (cf. Battaglia 1990, 55). The third word, *nuwatawu'avivini*, more difficult to translate, means something like thinking-feeling (*nuwatawu*) that is cared for (*'avivini*)—thinking-feeling that is nurtured. These memories and rememberings were nurtured, supported, and maintained. People generally used *nuwatu'avivini* when their thinking-feeling (remembering) was directed to and placed with people, events, customary practices that they held dear. Remembering of this kind drew past, present, and future together. By directing thinking-feeling to that which went before, the present and future were also nurtured.

If remembering was to nurture thinking-feeling by bringing the past into the present, then forgetting (*nuwapwanopwanowei*—from *nuwa*, meaning heart, think-feel, and *pwanoli*, meaning adultery, mistake, to do or make something wrongly) was to think-feel something incorrectly. Implied was a sense of transgression, of acting improperly, disrespectfully. Forgetting was not so much an inability to bring something to mind, as it is often conceived in English, but more like its reverse—an inability, or even a reticence, to direct or take thinking-feeling to something, whether that something be a place, time, object, event, individual, or action. Inferred was a loss of empathy—an inability or reluctance to place one’s thinking-feeling with someone, something, or activity to be remembered. By forgetting, the forgotten may be defiled, diminished, displaced, and dispossessed. Conversely, it may be finished or completed. When used in the latter sense, forgetting was a deliberate, intentional, indeed necessary act—an act that completed the past (actions and relations) to make way for the present and the future. This interpretation of forgetting does not suggest that all traces of the past were necessarily erased, but rather that the present and future were absolved of the past.

In day-to-day living, isolated acts of recollection, remembrance, or simple forgetfulness passed unnoticed. However, in “customary” matters, forgetfulness or the ability to remember assumed a broader significance and meaning. For example, when someone forgot the names of people and places in a story, they were reluctant to tell it, for they were unable to wholeheartedly place themselves in the story’s time and space. The converse was also held to be true. Without entering the time and space of the story, the storyteller would forget pertinent names and details. If the story told of ancestral connections to the land, then a
flawed retelling was considered improper. When details of a mortuary feast were forgotten or overlooked or incorrectly performed, as was the case in the tau’ala’alahi feast that occurred following the old woman’s death, then older people in particular considered it highly disrespectful to the deceased and her kin. Forgetfulness of this kind was not only a failure to recall and/or reenact the customary ways of one’s forebears but it also expressed, embodied (see Eves 1996b), and displayed a lack of empathy with the deceased and her living kin—an inability or reluctance to place oneself in her time and space.

As implied previously, though, forgetfulness, like recollections, may also be strategically or pragmatically motivated acts to complete the past, as was the case for the guyau feast. The community chose to discontinue this practice and thereby forget an aspect of their past. Rendered irrelevant, it was only worth remembering the reason for abandoning it. Arguably, this interpretation of the significance of forgetting guyau on Nuakata is an extension of the claim made by many Melanesian and, especially, Massim ethnographers, notably Battaglia (1990, 1992, 1993), Macintyre (1989b), Thune (1989), Munn (1986), Eves (1996b), and Lattas (1996), of the centrality of remembering and forgetting the social relations embodied by the deceased and his or her kin in (Massim) mortuary practices. Reflecting on the Sabarl mortuary sequence and the gift exchanges integral to these practices, Battaglia (1992) states that “forgetting is an accomplishment of remembering.” She argues for a “consideration of forgetting as a willed transformation of memory” (1992, 14, emphasis in original). In so doing, she suggests the “possibility of a collectively performed forgetting that actually has constructive social effects . . . forgetting [that] is linked to social re-construction and cultural re-evaluation,” forgetting understood as a “desirable social goal” (1992, 14). In relation to the gift exchanges that accompany the mortuary sequence she asserts that “gift exchange performances make such a process explicit in that they foreground objects which embody the relations to be forgotten and sequentially articulate the course of their transformation and substitution” (1992, 14).

Remembering Guyau

Still wanting to know more about guyau, I talked with Antiya. When I initially asked him to explain this feast, he commented that it was the “feast for those dead bodies, those dead ancestors within the clan.”
Knowing from Wycliffe that he had lived experience of guyau, I appealed to his memory of the witnessed event. Reluctant to elaborate, he deferred further discussion of the feast until he had time to consider things in private. Several weeks later he returned, this time volunteering what seemed like his final and complete word on the feast—a written description of the muli prestation. “But what was muli?” I asked. “How was it relevant to the feast?” Arrived at with some considerable effort, he could not be persuaded to discuss or expand upon his written recollections. When he left, Wycliffe explained:

_Guyau_ was a big feast that is held within the clan for those dead ancestors who have passed away a long time ago or a person who has just recently died. They take the skull and put it in a sacred place where all those ancestors died a long time ago. They have to put them together with the new dead person’s skull. . . . That’s how the custom goes.

He added that _muli_ is an offering or gift made and performed by a man or woman—supported by their respective _susu_—affinally related to the matrilineage hosting the feast. At my request Wycliffe and I turned our attention to Antiya’s text. Loosely translated it stated:

If a man or woman together with his or her respective matrilineal kin were giving ‘ai’ai nabwanabwa (guyau food offering) and five pigs, they would take them to the hamlet where the guyau occurs. _Muli_ comprising five pigs are called ‘waiwai (mango) in the Duau language. Two celebratory performances (‘anayaliyaliyamane) integral to the prestation of _muli_ are possible: one is called ‘asawe (mango) and the other ‘wawa. Asawe does not possess a magic chant (‘ana’alavahivahili), but it is accompanied by dancing and happiness. But ‘wawa comes with its chant and with its happiness. The bird/clan called _bo’e_, the black crane—people see and perform its games, its actions, its ways. The ‘wawa chant is said like this:

\[
\begin{align*}  
Bo’e\ bo’e\ ‘iya’o &\ Bo’e\ auseloi \\
& auseloiya’o \ Bo’e\ aubigai \\
aubigaiya’o &\ Bo’e\ pauli\ lagana \\
tauneteneteinaya’o. . . \\
Bo’e\ pauli\ luguna &\ tau’ava’avalainya’o \end{align*}
\]

Black crane . . . Black cranes dance
Black cranes mangrove branch
cross over it
Black cranes branch carried . . .
Neither Antiya nor Wycliffe could fully translate the chant, written in the Duau language. From the remnant translation it was clear that it described the performance of the ways of the black crane. Still, I felt none the wiser about the guyau feast. I had been expecting, hoping for, a linear narrative accompanied by a brief synopsis of the purpose of the feast, and Antiya’s seemingly obtuse account confused and confounded as much as clarified. Why had he explained guyau by means of the muli prestation? I felt I was being presented with pieces of a jigsaw, each piece a mere fragment yet apparently whole in itself; each reflecting a larger picture, which remained ultimately elusive. Where I wished to define the borders of this puzzle, thereby framing the picture, containing its possibilities, Antiya seemingly felt no such need.

Once again Wycliffe bore the brunt of my confusion. Plying him with questions, I asked, “What does guyau mean? What happens to the skull? Who supplies the food for the feast? How long does it last?” Spoken in English and in a linear narrative style that I could readily understand, his answers assumed an authority and authenticity that, at the time, Antiya’s lacked. By Wycliffe’s account, told to him by his grandfather, mother, and maternal uncle,

each guyau was hosted by either the uncle or relative of the dead body within the clan. Once this person had made the decision to host a guyau, other members of the susu and clan had to respect that decision and begin preparation for the feast. Guyau was held during harvest time, particularly July and August, when there were plenty of yams. Gardens may be planted by both susu and . . . [affinal kin], especially for the guyau feast. [In preparation for the guyau, the sponsoring] susu would build a traditional saddle-backed house, [known as] a pahoma, or ‘abanuwatuwu’avivini, a place of remembrance. [As a remembering place] it remembered and honored the dead bodies, the dead ancestors, within the susu and clan. No one would live in the house, but yams collected and offered as gifts may be stored there in preparation for the
feast. [Several days] before the feast [was due to] begin, hinevelam and wobiwa—women and men who had married into the village of the feast-givers—together with their susu would present their mulina (marriage payment) to the awaiting host of the guyau. When they brought their gifts of food, they placed them on the shelves made for the guyau. [Particular note was taken of] how much they brought and if their gift was not [considered adequate] then the in-law was [said to be] of little worth to the clan. The clan would gossip about him and he would have to [fulfill his obligations] properly on another [festive occasion]. The guyau lasted up to a week. If the guyau was held for someone recently dead, then during this time the big galiyauna within the clan would carry the skull on a mat and place it in the ancestral skull cave. . . . The guyau began when the host declared it had started. Then he would climb onto a big shelf and begin the distribution of the uncooked food. He would call out the name of each person in turn, and when they come up to the shelf he gave them a piece of pig and some yams. The food would be given like this until there was no longer any left on the shelf. Once this distribution was completed, cooked food would be served. The guyau was declared finished when the host declared the last dance. After this, people would disperse and return to their villages.

Wycliffe’s assertion that guyau (soi) was held for each dead body of the clan was at variance with Macintyre’s (1989b, 143–44, 147) account of the Tubetube practice of soi. On Tubetube, in the past, soi was not held for each dead body within the clan, but, rather, marked the passing of a susu generation. In other details, though (e.g., the building of the shelf and the distribution of uncooked food), the ceremony seemed very similar.

Thinking Antiya’s description and discussion of guyau was completed, I was pleasantly surprised when, in conversation several months later, he voluntarily elaborated on the affinal prestations. He added that

at the place where the guyau was held they built a pahoma and put all the food. And when they arrived at that place, they used this type of dance called ‘asawe ‘wawa. Someone beat the drum and men danced, and one man—his body decorated with charcoal—would break the ‘asawe branch. This man would go first, and then the drummers, and then the in-laws carrying food. Then they would put food inside the pahoma, and then the dance would finish and the owners of the guyau would prepare some food and they would eat. There was also a ‘wawa
dance, but the in-laws would do one or the other. For the ‘wawa dance strong men would put a tree on their shoulder. As they made their way carrying the tree—if something was blocking their way, they would bump it down (like a coconut tree), because they put a spell on the tree so that it would become sort of active or powerful. They would not go around trees. Mulina is for big feasts, like guyau, or when they are putting cement on bodies. Now when they put cement on a body there is a party.

Preoccupied with the past, I failed to ask Antiya about the party for the concrete headstones. Cement graves were by no means a common or necessary feature of the cemeteries scattered around Nuakata—their cost alone prevented this. Where possible, however, the graves of senior members of given susu were cemented, as a sign of permanent respect, much like the depositing of the skull in the skull cave.

The day after my conversation with Antiya I talked with Yamesi about guyau. He, too, described the shelves for the in-laws’ food (‘waiwai) and elaborated further on the baskets of yams brought for the feast. He noted that, although the host of the feast would not be told how much the in-laws brought, he would know whether or not the gift was an exact or equivalent payment for a prior gift of his own. There were four different ways in which yams could be collected together and presented at the guyau. The first, nabwanabwa, comprised a hundred or so yams, depending on their size, collected together in a string bag. The second, baditutula, consisted of yams placed in a five- to six-foot-square stick pen. The third group was called sabaliya; these were placed in front of the pahoma. They comprised one type of yam called pwane’ahu placed on a stretcher made of sticks. The last type, lomwau, were a bit like nabwanabwa, but were simply heaped on a shelf.

The significance of Antiya’s account of guyau eluded me until I returned to Australia and reread the ethnographic writings on mortuary sequences in Massim communities. Only in writing down his words and attempting to recall the circumstances of their delivery did I appreciate why he focused on the muli prestation, and, indeed, why Wycliffe did not. Wycliffe’s knowledge of guyau was based on the recollected experience of his matrilineage—hosts of Nuakata’s final guyau. In contrast, Antiya’s account privileged his own experience of this guyau. As an affinal kinsman to the Bo’e or Black Crane clan he contributed muli to this final guyau. Understood in this way, his elucidation of the bo’e chant
was not offered as an example of a prestation chant, as I had first imagined, but as a specific recollection from his personal past. As a senior representative of his generation he, like Yamesi, was instrumental in the decision to abandon this mortuary practice. Although a hard worker, no doubt his experience of preparing *muli* for the feast gave impetus to his pragmatic push for change! Of course, other reasons for change existed. Exhumation of the dead had long been forbidden by law and frowned upon by the United Church. Accordingly, a significant part of the purpose and practice of the feast—the placement of a skull in its skull cave—was necessarily precluded.

There is a second, more speculative yet seemingly consistent, explanation for Antiya and Yamesi’s preoccupation with the *muli* prestations. Believing that the main purpose of the feast was to place the skull of the deceased in the skull cave, thereby celebrating and honoring matrilineal clan ancestors—and with it the matrilineage/clan—I had assumed that the primary work for the feast would be performed by the hosts. In my thinking and questions about the feast I had focused on the host’s role and activities. While clearly interested in the descriptions of the affinal prestations by Antiya and Yamesi, I was preoccupied with the unspoken accounts of the host’s role. As a result I did not fully explore the possibility that the affinal prestations themselves were pivotal to the celebrations honoring the host clan. Affines, friends, or members of the paired matrilineage of the hosts dance, chant, and perform the actions of the host clan bird as they present their substantial gifts to the feast-givers. They detail, celebrate, and imitate its ways, thereby celebrating the clan identity of the hosts. As in marriage and birth, the integrity and identity of a given *susu* and clan are reinforced and replenished by affinal kin. It could be argued, though, that it was not only the host *susu* whose reputation was enhanced by these *muli* prestations. On Vanatinai, where the same term—*muli*—is also used to denote the affinal prestation of valuables at the start of the final feast (zagaya) in the mortuary sequence, these affinal prestations can enhance the giving reputation of the entire affinal lineage. Lepowsky notes that “the whole *muli* procession . . . is a public display of the affines’ wealth and generosity” (1989, 221). For this reason, *muli* prestations were a source of concealed pride for those who made them.

At birth a child on Nuakata was considered a living embodiment of past, present, and future relationships within its matrilineage—a babe who would continue to grow into someone who was distinct within this
matrilineage. A child is a unique confluence in time, space, and place of the conjugal relationship that led to its conception. In death and the unfolding mortuary sequence the deceased’s individuality was recognized as it was also completed. So, too, the mutual support between the deceased and her affinal kin was publicly recognized and ended by members of the deceased’s susu. The integrity of the matrilineage, the maternal inheritance that sustained the deceased in life, was reaffirmed as her place within the matrilineage was finally consolidated in the realm of the dead with those clan members that “go before” (bodaowa himugaiwa—those who died before, those that went first). In this sense the “before” that death referred to was not thought of as an empty space, but rather as a transhistorical, communal, and familial place, a place where spirits dwell unconstrained by time’s embodiment.

The women of any given susu bear and nurture living seeds, babies, susu members, thereby facilitating the continuity of the susu/clan. The men of any given susu prepare the ground for women to plant seeds, nurture susu members, and receive deceased bodies, so that their spirit may continue on to the realm of the dead. Therefore, through their bearing, nurturing activities the women belonging to a given susu facilitate the continuity of the susu/clan. But these activities are only made possible by the supportive work of susu and/or clan men. Neither women nor men alone, or together, are considered the source of continuity for their susu. As such, their actions facilitate rather than ensure the continuity of the susu/clan.