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FUNERALS OF THE BADAGAS IN SOUTHERN INDIA
Fingerprints of recent history*

Frank Heidemann

ABSTRACT. The Badagas are peasants living in the Nilgiris Hills District, south India. Their funeral ritual is their most important rite of passage, as it marks cultural boundaries from their neighbours. The extensive documentation of their funerals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries focuses on the symbolic forms at the centre of the event. However, from the point of view of the great number of visitors who come to pay their respects to the deceased and 'his (or her) village' as a social unit, another side of the coin emerges. Such visitors are less concerned about the threat of pollution and ritual conduct and focus instead on local co-operation, micro-politics and inter-village relationships. Nonetheless the 'inside view' and the 'outside view' of funerals are dialectically connected, and both contribute to the ritual totality. Badaga funerals are more than what Robert Hertz called a 'triumph over death' or a re-confirmation of the cosmic order as Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry have it – to cite Peter Geschiere, they are also an 'ultimate test of belonging'. In this article, I shall focus on the social dimensions and the making of group boundaries and deal with the symbolic aspects of Badaga funerals only in passing. I argue that funerals – like fingerprints – can be identified as such by their form, despite each one being different.

Introduction

Badaga funerals (*sāvu*) are well documented, beginning with the first monographs on their society and culture from the mid-nineteenth century, as well as more recently in a monograph on "Mortuary rituals of the Badagas of southern India" by Paul Hockings.[1] Although my own fieldwork on this peasant society in the Nilgiri Hills confirmed most of what was written about Badaga funerals by colonial administrators, missionaries and

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1 Hockings (2001). A detailed description of Badaga funerals was published by William and Louisa Noble (1965), who worked in the Nilgiris region in the early 1960s, at the same time as Hockings. The first monograph on the Badagas is that of Capt. Henry Harkness (1832), who served in south India and spent some time in the Nilgiris in the first decades after the arrival of the British. J. Friedrich Metz (1857, 1864) stayed as a missionary on the Nilgiris plateau for a quarter of a century and was the first European author who spoke Badaga. Their books were used for a compilation in first "Manual of the Nilagiri District" (Grigg 1880) and later for "Castes and tribes of southern India" (Thurston and Rangachary 1909). German publications on the Badagas (Jagor 1876, 1914) are not dealt with there.

anthropologists, after three decades of regular visits, I would like to offer a new look at these.[2] First, I suggest that their appearance and characteristics differ significantly when the observer moves away from the ritual centre, with its highly symbolic forms and performances, to the margins of the ritual, where visitors are hosted and discuss matters beyond the particular death they have come to celebrate. Second, I would argue that on such occasions the Badagas mark the social boundaries of village communities and patrilineal descent groups. Funerals constitute the moment when the social identity of a person, dead or alive, is marked and his or her kinship affiliation is confirmed or, in rare cases, contested. In this article, I shall focus on the social dimensions and making of group boundaries and deal with the symbolic aspects of Badaga funerals only in passing. I would like to argue that funerals, like fingerprints, can be identified by their form, despite each one being different. Each funeral and each fingerprint creates a direct link to a specific person. They are traces of human lives, of unquestioned contacts in the past. They are also considered to be proof of recent events, evidence of a past presence in particular spaces. Some Badaga funerals leave highly visible marks, like fingerprints on a window-pane seen against the light.

There is a long history of ethnographies of funerals that connect ritual symbolism to core values and codified emotions. Johann Jakob Bachofen's "Versuch über die Gräbersymbolik der Alten" (1859) developed fundamental ideas about the connectivity of the imagined afterlife and legal norms. James G. Frazer's "Golden bough" (1936) suggested that individual behaviour such as grief does not originate in an inner self, but in a social collective, a view also found in Robert Hertz's work on death: 'To the organic event is added a complex mass of beliefs, emotions, and activities which give it its distinctive character' (Hertz 1960:27). Ethnographic descriptions of death rituals in Southeast Asia, Melanesia and Polynesia served as a starting point for Hertz's far-reaching thesis on the collective representation of death, which continues to influence numerous works to this day.[3] Hertz's focus was on the opposition between primary and secondary burials, as well as their complementarity, on the symbolism of flesh and bone, and on the ritual transition from the tangible world of the living to the invisible world of the dead. The descendants of the deceased participate in this passage ritually and emotionally and thus overcome the pain of death (Hertz 1960:86). In Hertz's work, death loses its organic determination and acquires social relevance because emotions are collective experiences.

Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982a) built on Hertz's work to stress that funeral rites enable the moral renewal of society and in parallel with other transitional rituals. The rituals at a wedding emphasize the biological survival of a society, while

2 From 1988 to 1994, I conducted twenty-four months of fieldwork in the eastern Nilgiris. First I stayed for one full year with my wife Bernadette and our first daughter in Kotagiri, but after the birth of our twins in 1990, I came alone to the hills and stayed each year for two or three months in Badaga villages and in Kotagiri.

3 See, for example, Pfeffer (1994), Robben (2018), Stepputat (2014), Venbrux (2007).

death rituals guarantee its moral and ontological continuity. In Bloch's and Parry's view, it is rather that society is a 'product' of the ritual. Death rituals produce a kind of collective 'reassertion of the social order' (Bloch and Parry 1982a:6). Their edited volume (1982b) describes rituals in great detail and supports the thesis that death rituals must be analysed in the context of fertility rites: '[T]he more general point we wish to stress is that there is a logical connection between the conception of life as a limited good and the idea that death and reproduction are inextricably related' (Bloch and Parry 1982a:9). In short, '"fertility" is created out of death' (Bloch and Parry 1982b:38). In general, Bloch and Parry follow Bachofen who linked the limitations of organic life with the idea of an eternal social and moral order.

Funerals and ethnic boundaries

The rather small Nilgiris Hills District (2565 sq. km) has considerable cultural and linguistic diversity, despite the demographic dominance of the Badagas. In 1901 34 178 Badagas, 1 267 Kotas and 807 Todas were counted in the decennial Census. In 2001, an estimated 150 000 Badagas were living in the Nilgiris Hills District, together with 2 072 Kotas and 1 001 Todas according to that year's Census.[4] These communities live in their own villages or hamlets on the plateau, but had close economic and ritual connections. In addition, seven different ethnic groups are subsumed under the label 'Kurumba' who number 4 874 persons in the 1981 Census (Kapp and Hockings 1989:236). The latter live on the slopes and foothills of the Nilgiris and were sometimes engaged by the Badagas to perform ritual services in the latter's villages. No clear figures for the Irula groups, who live in close proximity to the Kurumbas on the escarpment, exist. Given the overall diversity, it is hardly surprising that these groups have different death rituals. In 1927 Alfred L. Kroeber confirmed for the North American context what W.H.R. Rivers had previously written about the mortuary rituals of Native Australians: different forms of death rituals exist in parallel – burials, preservation on platforms and in trees, as well as cremation, may be practised by one and the same group. Kroeber concluded that 'several methods coexist in one tribe, and the same method had different applications in successive tribes' (1927:313). This is also true for the Nilgiris.

Five authors have written entries on local mortuary rituals for the "Encyclopaedia of the Nilgiri Hills", respectively on the Badagas (Paul Hockings), Kotas (Richard Wolf), Todas (Anthony Walker), Mullu Kurumbas (Rajalakshmi Misra) and Irulas (Zuzana Hrdlickova) (Hockings 2012a, b:354–374). The Todas, vegetarian buffalo-herders, sacrificed buffaloes. The Kotas, craftsmen and musicians of the plateau, honoured their dead with elaborate musical performances and dances and, like the Todas, sacrificed buffaloes. The Badagas and Kotas built great catafalques for the dead. The Todas and

4 All Census data are from Hockings (2012b:252, 254).

Kotas practised a first (or 'green') ceremony to bury or cremate the dead body and a second (or 'dry') funeral to clean and bury the bone remnants (Walker 1986). The Irulas, who live in the neighbourhood of the Kurumbas, buried their dead in a sitting position, as do the Badaga Lingayats. The Mullu Kurumbas dig graves for their dead, whom they place in a horizontal slit-like chamber in the ground. The Alu Kurumbas, who participate in Badaga funerals in the village of Jackanarai, where I did most of my fieldwork, keep a stone for each deceased under a shelter in the middle of their village.[5] On the northern slopes of the Nilgiris, the Jenu Kurumbas bury their dead, keep no stones, but seek dialogues with the dead through a medium in trance (Demmer 2006:158–226). All authors agree that the mortuary rituals of the Badagas, Kotas, Todas, Irulas and Kurumbas differ fundamentally, though most of the sources quoted above also mention that the funerals of one group were visited by members of neighbouring ethnic groups.

All these rituals have undergone minor or major changes in the last century.[6] The most significant change in Badaga funeral practice is the discontinuation of the *manevale*, a large ceremony formerly held once a generation (Grigg 1880, Thurston and Rangachari 1909). It was once the greatest event at which the Todas, Kotas and Kurumbas met. The last of these grand ceremonies was conducted in 1936, being abandoned thereafter, most likely due to the immense costs (Hockings 2001:61). In the late 1980s, elders in Jackanarai told me that the *manevale* was conducted in honour of all those Badagas who had moved away from the area and were not given a funeral because their fates were unknown. Others said it was a ceremony to unite all the Badaga souls of a generation and to demonstrate Badaga dominance in the district. Today, they continued, it was the outcomes of public elections that show which community is strongest and has the privilege and duty of looking after public affairs.

Most of my older informants remember major conflicts erupting in the context of grand funerals. At many points Hockings' (2001) account of Badaga mortuary rituals mentions the presence and participation of the Kotas, mainly in their function as musicians, but they also helped to build the catafalque and provided a new pot to carry embers (Hockings 2001:8, 31). However, around 1930 a major dispute arose between modernizing Badagas and their Kota partners about playing music at funerals and dancing around the corpse (Hockings 1980: 220). Conservative families continued to engage Kota bands for some time, but today no Kota musicians can be found at Badaga funerals. At around the same time in the 1930s, a different dispute occurred between two Badaga

5 For an early account of mortuary rituals in Jackanarai, see Lucien Schermann (1914), who came to the Nilgiris for a few days and visited the village of 'Jakkanare' on the day of a funeral.

6 Almost nothing is known about the pre-colonial situation in the Nilgiris. Dolmens and stone circles indicate that ritual sites once existed which were abandoned at the time the British arrived at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Today, these monuments can be found in forests, tea fields or on hilltops, and no group claims to have erected them (Kapp 1985, Kelly 2017). In the Badagas village of Jackanarai, Alu Kurumbas, once feared as sorcerers and acting as anti-sorcery specialists, still participate in annual rituals in the village and at near-by dolmens in Banna Shola today (Heidemann 2006:232–338, 398–421).

status groups. Badaga Lingayats had (and still have) a higher status as vegetarians and act in many Badaga Gowder villages in a priestly function. However, their higher status also resulted in the ritual practice of all Lingayats (minors explicitly included) bowing down at the head of the corpse (and not at the feet, as juniors were expected to do). The Gowder Badagas, the demographically largest and politically dominant group, objected to letting younger people greet their deceased elders using this gesture and discontinued inviting Lingayats to their funerals. Today there are multiple occasions on which to express self-identification and to seek or avoid social proximity with neighbouring groups, but funerals have not lost their ability to express visually and claim one's position in local society.

Badaga funeral rituals

The Badagas live in nearly four hundred villages on the Nilgiri Plateau at an elevation of 1800 to 2200 metres above sea level, surrounded by their agricultural land. However, many of the younger generation have an education and follow professional jobs in Chennai, Coimbatore or Bangalore, visiting their native villages for annual temple festivals and life-cycle rituals. In the best sense of both terms, they consider themselves both modern and traditional.[7] In contrast to weddings, which often integrate new ritual elements from the plains and elements of modern fashion and music, funerals must be conducted in what are considered to be traditional forms. Other rituals like name-giving or first menstruation, and occasions like house-warming ceremonies or birthday parties for pre-school children, which were introduced in the 1990s, show more local variation and individual characteristics. In the understanding of most contemporary Badagas, these rituals can be performed in different ways, there being no question of right or wrong procedures. However, for a funeral the procedure should follow a predetermined order. In former times cremations were usual, but today almost all funerals involve burial. The reason for this, Badagas say, is to give each person the same amount of respect. (The cost of buying firewood is a factor too.) For the same reason, they avoid, or even ban, gravestones because their size and quality could be used to indicate differences in status. All villagers are buried in a particular part of the cemetery without any indication of the actual place of burial. In villages with two different status groups, there may be two cemeteries.[8]

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7 For a discussion of 'tradition' ('ākāla' = 'remote time') and 'modernity' ('īkāla') among the Badagas, see Heidemann (2006).

8 There are several Badaga status groups, but I shall limit the following text to the largest group, which, in academic writing, are called the 'Gowder' or 'Gauda' (Hockings 2012). They constitute about eighty percent of all Badagas and practice, what Louis Dumont (1980) called 'encompassment of the contrary'. They call themselves Badagas, but refer to other Badaga status groups, like the Toreya or Wodeya, by their group name. Since the term 'Gowder' is used for headmen, as well as being a suffix

Half a century after Hockings conducted his first fieldwork, it is still the case that Badaga funerals are 'the most complex of all ceremonies […] and […] most important because, being a communal rather than a family ceremony makes […] clearer than anything else does […] the dominant values in Badaga peasant society' (Hockings 2001:viii). Hockings calls the claim that these rituals have many functions a 'truism of modern studies of the funeral anywhere', involving the reassertion, reaffirmation and visualisation of the social order, with a pedagogical impact on the younger generation (2001:viii). His book is a detailed manual of ritual conduct and describes step by step the usual proceedings of the mortuary ritual. In his conclusion, he points out that the corpse and the household are polluted by the death, that evil spirits threaten the social hierarchy, and that a main function of the funeral is to overcome the threat of impurity and guarantee the continuation of an overall order. I have no doubt that the issue of pollution and purity is at the core of the symbolic system that constitutes the backdrop to the ritual centre. But today, pollution is more of a ritual fact than a real cause of personal fear. The ritual procedure, which once took several days, is now condensed into a single day.

In all villages belonging to the largest status group, the Gowder Badaga, a specific pattern can be regarded as a blueprint for ritual conduct. Whenever I asked Badaga priests and headmen about funeral customs, they began with the last day or final hours of a person's life. An elderly person who feels that her or his end is nearing will call close relatives together and say a few last words to them. There are a few cases in Jackanarai of gatherings at an old person's bed after which he (it was always men) recovered. When the close relatives think that the time of death has come, they pour milk or ghee into the dying or deceased person's mouth. In former times, I was told, a dying person swallowed a small gold coin. The substances milk and gold, both standing for purity in a Hindu context, were thought to support the transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Death, it seems, is considered as a transition, and it is the duty of the family to support the last journey of their beloved kin. In the following, I shall give a short description of mortuary practices in a Gowder Badaga village in the eastern part of the Nilgiri Plateau in the last three decades.

When a Badaga dies, mortuary rituals disrupt daily lives in the village. Work must pause immediately. In most cases, the funeral is conducted on the day of the death in the afternoon or on the following day. Peasants suspend their routine work and inform relatives in their hamlets and those who work in the surrounding bazaars or small towns; the headman and close relatives of the deceased are also informed. Before the era of telephones, messengers were sent out, but today death notices spread instantly via mobile communications and social media. If the survivors live abroad, the funeral can even be postponed for a few days. If a Badaga dies within a few hundred kilometres of

attached to the personal names of higher-status persons, I shall use the generic term 'Badaga' to refer to people in Gowder villages.

his or her place of origin, the corpse will be taken to it. Usually the rituals begin around twelve or one o'clock and are completed around four o'clock. Within this period, all members of the village, affinal and agnatic relations and close friends from political parties, farming associations, business partners or other acquaintances have a strong social obligation to come to the place of bereavement, to view the dead and offer condolences to the mourning family.

Accordingly a fire is lit in front of the house, where visitors gather and express their condolences. The corpse will remain in the house, to be washed and dressed in new clothes by family members. Males will be dressed in a turban, females in a white head-cloth. If the death occurred at night, the body will be kept in the house until sunrise. At daylight it is taken out to a cot in front of the house. People mourn, in some villages music is played, and some may dance. From this point on the village community is responsible for conducting the ritual. The corpse is carried to a central place in the village, often in front of a temple or the so-called 'great house'.[9] Volunteers build a catafalque and decorate it with five umbrellas, one at each corner of the cot and one in the centre at the highest point. The eldest daughter of the deceased must provide white cloths to decorate the catafalque, while all the other daughters or representatives of their families bring baskets containing provisions, garlands or utensils for the final journey,[10] to be kept under the cot. Today the catafalques are not as large as depicted in photographs taken at the beginning of the twentieth century, but as in the old pictures, they are also decorated with banana leaves at the four corners. Then the village elders apply horizontal white lines across the brows of the deceased, as in temple festivals, and then stick an old coin, a Maria Theresia *thaler* or any other antique coin, onto the forehead.[11] The feet of the corpse must point in an easterly direction. Women of the village sit beside the lower part of the body, mourning and weeping.

Around noon the first delegations from other villages arrive. They go first to the catafalque to pay their respects to the deceased. Those who belong to the older generation and are older than the deceased bow down at the head of the corpse, while those who are younger bow down at its feet. Women carry baskets of popcorn and, according to individual needs or preferences, medicines, cigarettes or alcohol. Usually large round baskets with smaller baskets fixed to the rim are placed under the cot. The first procession may consist of agnatic and affinal relations, and being included in it counts

9 This term refers to the first house to have been built in the village. In the following, I shall use it to identify the ritual space.

10 For a detailed list of the offerings that were common in the past, see Hockings (2012a:349).

11 The most recent monograph on the Badagas, by Jens Zickgraf (2018), focuses on the role of money in both everyday life and rituals. In the context of funerals, as well as for payments on various other occasions, donations and bookkeeping practices are explicitly and repeatedly performed as acts of recalling the deceased and the relationships he formed during his lifetime. Zickgraf conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the eastern Nilgiris from 2011 to 2013 and worked in the same villages I had stayed in during the 1990s. He depicts the ritual coin of Jackanarai, a Chinese trade dollar, on the front cover of his book.

as the main honour. The second and following processions are honours reserved for the daughters of the deceased. Once these offerings have been made, all the other mourners may come and bow down at the head or feet of the corpse depending on their ages relative to it, the hierarchical order being a serious matter here. The visitors are offered food, either finger food or, more usually, a rice meal with vegetable curry. Rows of chairs near the catafalque are arranged for drinking tea and coffee.

In the afternoon, three rituals take place in front of the 'great house'. First, a large group of men circle three times around the catafalque, sing sacred songs (*bajans*) and throw flowers on the corpse. They then dismantle the cot decorations and move the cot a few meters away from the original spot. If the deceased has left a widow, her jewellery is removed, though it is later returned to her family.

The second ritual is an elaborate forgiving of sins. Every village has a written list of possible sins, which varies from place to place and is kept in the headman's house.[12] An elderly person will read the text out, and after each possible transgression the group of men affirm in chorus that it is a sin. At the end, forgiveness of any sins of the deceased will be requested.

The third ritual is an offering of grain. The men 'of the village' line up and form a procession consisting of agnatic relations in genealogical order at the house of the bereaved. A senior man of the family will sit at the entrance and distribute a mixture of grains, usually millet and paddy, to them. The first part of the line consists of members of the oldest surviving generation of the village, linked by partilineal descent with the village founder. The later generations follow in order, and within each segment of the procession the men stand in age order. The first person of each generation is therefore the oldest; he goes bare-chested and carries a ritual knife. He and the younger ones will carry grain in their hands above their heads. Women who were born into the same patriline, though now married into other villages, follow the men. The affines form a second procession according to biological age and do not carry any grain. The agnatic procession circles around the dead person clockwise and throws its grain on to the body. At the same time the affines circle the cot anticlockwise and move spirally towards the centre. In this formation the agnates and affines appear as one large organic entity. The affines will bow down at the feet of the corpse, while the agnates do so at either the head or feet, depending on each individual's place in the genealogical order. Once this is over, most visitors return to their own villages.

From the 'great house' the corpse is taken to the burial ground, where volunteers from the village have dug a grave in the meantime. Women follow the procession, but stop when it reaches the cemetery. At the grave, rings and other items of value are removed from the corpse. The body is wrapped in a new cloth, from which three pieces are cut and placed at the base of the pit, together with freshly cut leaves. The cot is

12 Translations of such lists are provided in several publications (Noble and Noble 1965). The most detailed list is that in Hockings (1988).

lifted and swayed three times, then the body is slowly placed in the grave with the feet facing west and the head facing east. First, male agnatic relations throw a little soil into the grave, followed by everyone else present. Prayers follow, and incense sticks are lit. Close agnatic relatives of the deceased will have their heads shaved and will bow down in front of an uneven number of affines to receive their blessing. A small number of persons will proceed to the house of the bereaved to take a ritual bath, and receive food.

The following ritual, *korumbu*, was formerly performed several days after the funeral, but now takes place on the same day. Men from the patriline of the deceased bow down in front of a plate of rice and millet, which is cooked with special care. Pollution must be avoided. The cooked food is divided between the living and the dead. Five small balls of food are taken out and placed on the roof, whence birds will take it along with the soul. Invocations to ancestors follow and the unity of the patri-group is confirmed. Then everyone, hosts and guests, eat.

The pattern of funeral rites documented above differs in a number of points from Hockings' account, which is based on his observations mainly on the southern part of the plateau, less than two hours by bus from my area of research. The main difference from Hockings' account is the absence of Kota musicians and the decreasing complexity of gift-giving between agnates and affines. However, the basic pattern, including the procession from the house of the deceased to the village burial ground, the participation of affines, the circular movement of male and female relatives and the forgiving of sins, is almost unchanged. Hockings argues that spatially the funeral moves the deceased's body away from his or her house in four steps: (1) to the front veranda (*keri*), (2) to the yard of the 'great house', (3) to the funeral site, where body and soul, spouse and widow, are separated, and (4) to the cemetery, where the human remains will rest. In a further step the survivors go back to the house, where the *korumbu* is held as a final farewell for the soul (Hockings 2001:x, 2012a:353). These steps are followed up to the present day. I also agree with Hockings that Badaga funerals do not, as suggested by Bloch and Parry in a north Indian context, 'represent a sacrifice' (Hockings 2001:68, 2012a:351), but I would add that other aspects that are important to Bloch and Parry do matter. Thus funeral rituals not only overcome the temporal limitation of life, they also guarantee moral continuity and therefore constitute a 'regeneration of life' (Bloch and Parry 1982b). There is no doubt that Badaga funerals are also a focal point of moral regeneration because all sins are forgiven and the village community stresses its unity, bringing together its agnatic and affinal relations.

On one occasion an elderly Badaga told me what he considered to be the essence of funerary rituals: while weddings unite families, funerals unite entire villages. He mentioned several occasions when a village was split into two factions. In some cases, this was because of a new conflict based on political affiliation, but in others it was a longstanding conflict with almost forgotten origins. At the time of the death of a respected person the mourning families approached their enemies or rivals and asked them to participate in the funeral. Sometimes, the two groups did not talk directly to

each other and had to find a neutral person, either a priest, a factory owner, a politician or – in the best case – an affinal relative who had kinship ties to both factions. On some occasions, a small delegation of enemies would come to the funeral ground. If both factions participated at full strength, the conflict was considered to have been solved. Other conflicts broke out between villages because the right to bury was contested.

Usually, a village community defends its social boundary by claiming the bodies of those who are considered to be agnatic members of their social unit. First and foremost, these are the male descendants of the village founders, including their unmarried daughters. Second are all family members who are settled in the village. Usually, they originate in marriages with a woman who has no brothers, and some of these families settled several generations ago in their present villages. Third and optionally, are all the members of other status groups that have been settled in the village for more than two generations.[13] Those who come under the jurisdiction of a particular village should be buried or cremated by their social group in that village.

Viewing funeral rites from the centre and the periphery

Recently Maurice Bloch has reflected on his fieldwork in Madagascar and on the anthropological project of the last two centuries and made a distinction between two approaches or 'views'. The first, which Bloch calls 'the inside view' is based on ethnographic fieldwork and 'involves making sense of the way people lead their lives in terms of the way they themselves see the world' (Bloch 2017:34). The second, the 'outside view' seeks to explain human beings as they are and make general statements about the *conditio humana*. However, some theoretical schools have developed a great distance from what people do, think and feel, having adopted a perspective like the study of fish, that is, to 'observe their movements, their distribution in space, their speed, and so on' (Bloch 2017:41). The first position studies 'cultures', the second 'culture' in the singular. Bloch reminds us, that these two views each exist in their own right, using different methods and theories and apparently being contradictory, but relying on each other. I argue that Bloch's 'inside view', which can be considered an emic perspective, allows more than one view of complex rituals. In the following I shall make a distinction between the view from the ritual center of Badaga funerals and that from the periphery. How the ritual event is seen depends on its social and physical position.

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13 A rare case is reported by Susanna Schad (1911), the wife of the last German missionary in the Nilgiris. A young Badaga man died on the very day of his proposed marriage. The marriage ritual was conducted with the dead body, and the woman was then declared a widow. I would suggest that, as the wedding had been agreed and the bride price been paid already, the woman was made a member of the young man's family, regardless of his death. For more on Schad, see her life history, edited by her great-grandson Daniel Schad (Schad 2016).

It is a commonplace that the physical location of an observer contributes to his or her perspective, and the perspective determines what can be perceived. It makes a difference whether an observer is at the centre of an event or at its margins, whether you see a building from outside or inside, whether you experience a ritual from the perspective of the priests or from the point of view of a guest. In a similar way, the social position of the observer, including his or her age and gender, personal background, interest and other factors, contributes to what is experienced. In the case of Badaga funerals, the view of a close family member of the deceased differs from that of a guest, who perceives the ritual from a physical and social distance. In the course of my fieldwork, I found myself in different (physical and social) positions and experienced rather different atmospheres. I would argue that, from the different views, the same ritual was seen with two different sets of characteristics.

From 1988 onwards, I did my best to look at funerals over the shoulders of the priests and headmen. Participant observation needs spatial and social proximity to people and events. Therefore, the best place from which to observe a complex event like a Badaga funeral seemed to be next to the persons in charge. In the first months of my fieldwork, I documented several funerals and was confused about the division of labour because the question of who was responsible for which ritual act was answered *ad hoc*. There is no officiating priest, no special person to read out the list of possible sins and – unlike in Tamil villages in the area – no caste is responsible for digging the grave. In most cases, a consensus was reached without much argument about who has to perform the next step. Once I observed a young man who oscillated between the village elders near the corpse and a line of private houses. On the next day, I received no explanation for his role in the ritual. My interlocutors assured me that they had no memory, and I was sure to have touched on a hidden aspect of the ritual. After a few days, when my black and white photographs had been printed, the 'secret' was lifted: the boy was informing the headman about an ongoing cricket match between India and Pakistan.

In proximity to the deceased there is a sad atmosphere (Heidemann 2013, 2018). A few women sit on the death-bed and mourn, pressing their foreheads against each other and weeping. The physical movement of visitors is slowed down, and people talk in a low voice. They hold each others hands and hug friends and family members. An elderly person, it could be the headman or a priest, takes charge of the ritual proceedings and all arrangements: the construction of the catafalque, the digging of the grave and looking after visitors from other villages. He makes sure that the ritual proceeds. Participants share their feelings, a process often described as an integral part in the context of funerals (Berger 2016, Vitebsky 1993:255). On one occasion a retired public servant, who had returned to his village after many years of absence, told me that at a funeral he feels he is again a part of the village community. In the procession he can sense the bodies of those in front of and behind him, and sharing the sadness binds him to the village community beyond the event of the funeral. Songs with lyrics about loss, sorrow and mourning contribute to the general ambience. The deceased is the centre of atten-

tion, and it is the immediate space around him or her which constitutes the focus of the funeral. Relatives worry about the timely arrival of those who come from far away. Often the schedule of the funeral is a matter of disagreement because close relatives want to make sure that all close kin can reach the village in time for the funeral. It is quite common that important persons are expected to arrive while the ritual is still going on, and the question of whether to proceed with it or interrupt it then becomes a matter of concern. That question is even more serious when the oldest son of the deceased is still on his way and his younger brother is asked to lead the procession.

In the last quarter of a century, I had an opportunity to visit the eastern Nilgiris almost every year because I was working on other research projects in the Nilgiris and as a visiting lecturer at the University of Madras. Over the years, I have maintained close friendships with Badaga people, mainly in Jackanarai, a head-village with several surrounding hamlets on the south-eastern edge of the plateau. I knew most of the elderly persons in this region, and when I visited I was often invited to attend their funerals. While I was living in the house of a Badaga entrepreneur in Horashola, a village on the road from Kotagiri to Coonoor, not a single week passed without a trip to a funeral in a village belonging to his wide personal network. If the deceased was not a close relative or acquaintance, I heard it said that 'the village' expects other people, as representatives of their village, to come. We went to the respective villages and were received by male relatives of the deceased. They took us to their homes or offered us coffee and tea on the village green. In some villages a tent roof provided shade or protection from the rain. Men from the host village came to inform us about the medical history of the deceased during his or her last days or hours. On these occasions I stayed with my friends on the periphery and learned more about the 'visitors' view'. Accordingly I argue that the view from the periphery is complementary to the view from the centre and that both views contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of complex events. There are different emotional contours in each space, and participants pay attention to different qualities of the total event.

From the periphery, the funeral appears completely different. Nobody cares about the exact performance of the ritual order; the deceased is no longer the only focus. The responsible persons from the host village make sure that all forms of respect are offered to guests and that the latter are treated well. When I visited the funeral with friends, the topics of our talk centred on the construction of new temples, upcoming elections or increases in the price for tea leaves, the major cash crop in the region, or casual small-talk. A constant focus of attention was the number of visitors who arrived. Bystanders took note of the mode of transport of different guests, whether they came by private cars and taxis (as for weddings) or on lorries (as if they were going to the fields to work). Often, village communities gathered outside the village, formed a procession and moved slowly toward the village burial ground while chanting a rhythmic 'a hau hau, a hau hau', just as at weddings or temple festivals. Office-bearers among the visitors, usually priests and headmen, should wear the white Badaga dress. Men from the host village also wear a

white lower garment (*véshti*) and a white shirt. Bystanders compare the size of the processions from visiting villages with its demographic strength or the quality of agnatic or affinal relationships with it. Funerals, more than other rituals, are the context within which inter-village relationships are performed and evaluated.

Like Bloch's 'inside view' and 'outside view', the ritual contexts at the centre and the margins do not exist independently of each other (Bloch 2017:39–42). Rather, both develop a dialectic co-existence. The anthropologist's analysis of the 'inside view' needs the 'outside view', as thoughts move from one view to the other; both constitute a totality of cultural understanding. I would argue that the two views at the funeral contribute to the emergence of the ritual at large when the visitors walk physically from the margins to the centre and back again. The visitors' area gains its status from the centre, and the status of the funeral in the strict sense of the term is experienced along with its periphery. I have no doubts that I shared an emotional transformation together with my informants when we moved towards the corpse and back again to the catering area. The feeling of sadness increases and decreases on the way to and from the corpse. There is no clear-cut boundary between what I called the centre and the periphery, but in between there is an emotional *terra nullius*. The centre is dominated by tears, sadness and mourning, and allows space for families and neighbours to reconfigure their social bonds. The forgiving of sins is addressed to the deceased person and at the same time to the village community, whose visitors act as witnesses to this. At the margins, the village performs its coherence and co-operation and re-evaluates its agnatic and affinal relationship with other village communities.

The pragmatics of funerals: conflicts and social boundaries

In his monograph "Death, property and the ancestors" (2004), Jack Goody reminds us that mortuary rituals are more than about death; they also include references to the legal aspects, inheritance, material aspects and status of groups and persons.

> The composition of the obituary, whether a written report in a newspaper, a funeral oration in an ecclesiastical building, or a mimetic performance at the graveside, involves, directly or indirectly, a public reformulation of social norms that itself serves as a sanction on behavior (Goody 2004:29–30).

The pragmatics of funerals provides self-assurance to the local community that it is part of history and of power. In the ritual process the deceased receives his or her final identity because (as a rule) the corpse can only be buried in one place and according to one ritual commitment. Only one person can take on the role of the firstborn or of the widow or widower. Death rituals reveal social models, normative patterns of order and ideas about value (Hardenberg 2010, Metcalf and Huntington 1991) and perform death-

ways: 'dying, burial, mourning, and commemoration [are] historical and ethnographic sources' (Lomnitz 2008:12). But a funeral is also, to cite Peter Geschiere, an 'ultimate test of belonging' (2005:45).

Badaga funerals are more than an act of farewell; they are statements about the life of the deceased, his or her social affiliation and status, and the village in general. The ritual performance becomes a fingerprint of recent history. By marking an individual's life, the family and community express statements about themselves and their identities, and comment on social boundaries. Ambiguities about marriages, paternity or other genealogical connections, and affiliation to a village, political group, religious community or political party are (or should be) resolved on the day of the funeral. The fluidity of life freezes on that day and the bodies of the dead become like statues cast in stone, bronze or memory (Verdery 1999:5). Death rituals historicise the present, while the temporal limitation of life supports or even enforces the manifestation of group boundaries. By conducting a funeral, the Badagas demonstrate their claim to the dead body and at the same time mark the social boundary of their ideally patrilineal and patrilocal village.

Before I present three vignettes from the village of Jackanarai and one from Betalada,[14] I summarise a local myth which illustrates the normative force of rituals. It tells the story of a man who attended his own funeral and was therefore declared 'dead'. The reality created by rituals, performed on the village ground and dressed in symbolic forms, seems to be ontologically superior to what happens in everyday contexts. According to the narrative, there was once a longstanding conflict between two forefathers in Jackanarai. When one of them went on a long walk to the market place in Karamadai (south of the plateau near Mettupalayam), an enemy of his provided false evidence that the traveller had died. On the following day, the villagers commenced the funeral rituals. While the traveller was on his way back to the village he heard drum rhythms that are played only at funerals and hurried to arrive back there on time. He ran up to the village and arrived at the village burial ground in an exhausted state. At the funeral ground, he learnt that he had arrived too late and that he was in the middle of his own funeral. The village elders gave him the choice of either committing suicide or leaving the village permanently. He decided on the second option and married a woman from Keselada (or, in a different version, became the founder of Keselada). Until the present day, this story is recalled whenever a procession of elders from Jackanarai visits Keselada. According to Badaga kinship rules, these two villages belong to different status groups and cannot intermarry. But the myth of Keselada's alliance with a Jackanarai forefather, who did not make a mistake but was *de facto* expelled, serves as the foundation for a close relationship between the two village communities.

In Jackanarai Melkeri (the upper village) the main mortuary rituals are performed in front of a temple to Krishna. On this ground, next to the ritual gate of the village (*akka bakka*), stands a plaque placed there in memory of the fatalities in a railway ac-

14 To respect the privacy of the respective families, I shall not use personal names.

cident in 1956. Most of the senior members of the village were on a pilgrimage when their train derailed and fell from a bridge into a river. The dead bodies were recovered from the coaches but were not returned to the village. Relatives rushed to the spot, and the ceremonies were held near the location of the accident. The descendants of the deceased emphasize that they bought a piece of land there, where they buried the dead, who therefore rest 'in Badaga land', a *conditio sine qua non* for the ritual. On this village ground in Melkeri the three funerals, which are recounted as they are remembered till today, took place.

I.
In the late 1980s, at the beginning of my Badaga research, a tragic death occurred. A young man and active cricket player from Jackanarai, who had found employment in Chennai (then Madras) some 600 kilometres away, succumbed to injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident in the city. His friends organized the transport of the body back to Jackanarai where he had been born and raised, and began preparing for his funeral. Completely unexpected to the mourners, however, was the claim of a delegation from the birthplace of the dead man's father, who had married into Jackanarai. The delegation insisted that the deceased should be buried in their village for reasons of patrilineal succession; the fact that the father of the deceased still owned a house in his native village indicated that the dead man's family had not yet moved in genealogical and legal terms.[15] The friends of the deceased man rejected the claim and showed themselves ready to defend the corpse physically. They succeeded in performing the death ritual on the same day in their village. The following day a group of dignitaries from Jackanarai went to the plaintiff's village to apologize formally for the breach of the rule.

In the course of the following three decades I heard of a few similar cases of the deceased's birth village claiming the corpse of a man who had lived and died in his wife's village. In other cases, the deaths of women who had left the villages of their husbands after the latter's death and had been looked after by their brothers (in their native villages) or their married daughters (in their son-in-law's villages) caused similar disputes over the right to conduct the funeral rituals. On most occasions, the Badaga legal understanding that a married woman should be buried in her husband's village proved more decisive than the moral claims of those relatives who had cared for her in the last years of her life.

II.
In the early 1990s, a highly respected Badaga, a former Member of Parliament and entrepreneur, died in his residence near Coimbatore and was brought to Jackanarai. He had no male grandchildren, and the only male member in his paternal family to continue his patrilineage was his great-nephew (brother's son's son), a Chennai-based lawyer. A few years before his death, the great-nephew had married a non-Badaga woman and was accordingly

15 A man who moves into his wife's village but owns a residence in his parental village remains under its jurisdiction and has to fulfil ritual obligations in his birthplace.

excommunicated from the village.[16] As an excommunicated member, the young lawyer was not supposed to participate in his great uncle's funeral. However, while the ceremony was going on he appeared 'out of nowhere', as attendees reported in astonishment, stood next to the corpse of his great uncle and bowed down to it. He quickly left the village without speaking to anyone. Discussion among the elders concluded that they should have prevented him from participating in the ritual, and that as it was their own (the villagers') responsibility to conduct the ritual, it was their 'mistake'. At the next council meeting, they decided that the excommunication should be ended, and from then onwards the young lawyer was permitted to attended weddings and funerals in the village.

The story of an excommunicated person who was re-integrated into the village because he had ignored the village council's verdict shows parallels to the myth, already mentioned, of the ancestor who was declared 'dead' while attending his own funeral. The same certainty that is manifested in the words of a registrar declaring two persons to be husband and wife is created by the ritual conduct of a funeral. The young lawyer told me later that the ending of his excommunication came as a surprise to him. His intention was to see off his great uncle, who – and this is another aspect of the story – had given shelter to himself and his wife after they had secretly entered into a marriage together.

III.

Several years after the death of his uncle, the young lawyer mentioned in the previous example died in his forties. In the village, the question of his non-Badaga widow's participation in the death rites generated a great deal of controversy. Some voted for her exclusion because they considered the marriage undesirable. Others, who formed the majority, opted for a change in their customs and for a more 'modern' understanding, thus supporting her participation. Finally, the widow received permission to conduct her part of the ritual, but when she appeared in the traditional Badaga dress in a white robe and white headscarf, the traditionalist faction objected vehemently on the basis that her participation in Badaga dress would constitute a retrospective confirmation of her 'inter-caste' wedding. The compromise between the two factions was that she should wear a *sari* and appear as a Tamil woman. One village elder told me that Badaga 'stand on two legs', one being tradition and the other modernity. 'Weddings must be modern, and funerals must be traditional'.

This third vignette highlights a crucial socio-political constellation. The village community (or more precisely the village council) failed to prevent the wedding of the last male member of the headmen's patrilineage. A registrar, a representative of the Indian state, certified the marriage of the young lawyer and his wife by following the legal provisions of the secular state and thus circumventing the authority of the village elders. In this sense, the Indian state's administration endangered the foundation of the social order

16 One of the reasons for this harsh judgement, I was told, was the importance of his family, from which the village headman had been selected for more than a hundred years. The young lawyer's responsibility to maintain the headmen's patrilineage, Badaga elders said, had more weight than his personal choice, which was granted to others in his peer group.

of Hindu India by permitting and performing alliances across caste boundaries. At the funeral, however, the village council regained control of the proceedings and was able to take decisions without the government's verdict. On that occasion, the village elders forgave the sins of a deceased Badaga and guaranteed the moral permanence of their community (cf. Bloch and Parry 1982a). When they read out the list of possible sins, they invoked a moral order and proclaim the ethical boundaries within which all Badagas should live. But the most powerful rule for protecting the genealogical boundaries of their community was and is the kinship system. Endogamy knits together a close web of people, and this is confirmed at funerals. The second and the third vignettes can be read as manifestations of the power vested in the village and are linked to the question of the affiliation of the deceased and his or her connection to the community of mourners.

IV.

The mother of three very influential brothers, widow of a former factory owner and a highly respected Badaga, died the village of Betalada.[17] News of her death was circulated in the early evening, and her friends and relatives came to Betalada. Hosts and guests shared their mourning, food and alcohol was provided, a band was hired, and men and women danced on the veranda. The next day, after the usual rituals on the veranda and the village green, the corpse was brought to the funeral ground, where all the participants donated wood for the pyre. They removed the earrings of the dead woman and presented her with a whisky bottle, twelve-year-old Glenfiddich packed in its duty-free bag. The eldest son lit the fire, which was visible from many of the surrounding villages. More than two dozen men, agnatic and affinal relations, had their heads shaved off. On the way back to the village, the sons of the deceased woman and other agnatically related village members bowed down in front of the relatives on their mother's side, their classificatory wife-givers. The next day, all the mourners went to the cremation ground, collected the ashes in an urn and smeared some of it on their foreheads. They placed a white cloth on the ground, put a fern on it and then laid the remaining bones on the fern. This cloth bundle was 'buried' in a heap of stones next to the burial ground. The urn was taken to the village, where the Superintendent of Police (S.P.) of the Nilgiris was waiting as the chief guest. In the afternoon, a smaller group of relatives and affines drove downhill to the riverbed of the Bhavani, not far from Mettupalayam. They conducted *pūja* for the urn, placed it on a small raft with a banana leaf and floated it off at sunset. While it was floating, they threw stones at it to sink in the flowing river. That same evening, everyone returned to Betalada. After six days, a final ceremony was conducted in Betalada: a tent was erected, guests were entertained, and the deceased parents of the three influential men were honoured. Framed photographs

17 Jens Zickgraf, who was closely associated with the three brothers, observed the funeral and told me about it. According to a local migration myth, Badaga forefathers crossed the Bhavani River south of the plateau, climbed the hills from the south and rested for the first time at the place where the small village of Betalada was later founded. Therefore, this village is known as a memorable location of Badaga mythical history. Most of the houses are visible from Jackanarai and the two villages are still closely connected through marriage alliances.

> of their father and mother were decorated with flowers, *pūja* performed, and most guests bowed down in front of the images.

This funeral must be considered exceptional for several reasons. First, it appears that the ritual was conducted as a family ceremony and not as a village one, though the boundary between the mourning family and the village proved to be fluid. The S.P.'s reception as a powerful chief guest and the extensive hospitality extended to the guests exceeded the standards of other funerals, the rich and powerful included. Second, cremation is now very rare among the Badagas; I have seen only one, and that was more than twenty years ago. Third, I have never before heard of Badaga ashes being thrown in the Bhavani River. This ritual can be seen as a demarcation of space. Obviously, social and spatial boundaries were marked by ritual performances, but the fight against pollution and the maintenance of moral order were not foregrounded in this memorable funeral. A view from the margins rather suggests that in this case an influential family marked the boundaries of affinal and agnatic relations, as well as their respective standing in Nilgiri society and the space their ancestors had crossed while migrating to the plateau.

A random comment about the connectivity of social belonging and funeral rituals, which is not in my notes, but clear in my memory, was made in an informal context. It was in the first year of my fieldwork, when I joined a Badaga friend at a kind of stag party. The young men at this gathering told me that I 'could' (or 'should') consolidate my close ties with the Badaga community by investing in land with tea bushes, buying a house in the village and marrying a Badaga woman. My friends encouraged me to live permanently in a Badaga village when a debate arose about legally buying a house in the mono-ethnic villages, or rather entering into a rental agreement.[18] In the course of the conversation, I became curious about where the young men (at a stag party!) drew the line between what a non-Badaga could or could not do. I asked whether I needed to convert to Hinduism, but religious affiliation did not appear to be important. I nonetheless persisted in trying to locate the border which I, a non-Badaga, could not cross. I remember well the definitive answer: I could never be buried as a Badaga because of the ritual process, the forgiveness of sins, the giving of grain for the last journey, and a place in the burial ground was reserved for the sons of the village, which constituted its patriline, and their spouses.

The constitutive power that inheres in funeral rituals is also the reason for a small number of old and obviously abandoned houses in almost all Badaga villages. At the beginning of my fieldwork I was astonished to find ruined houses in several prosperous villages with neatly kept residences and daily cleaned verandas. Asking for the reasons, I was told that the owners had left the village. Later, when I talked to elderly Badagas in Chennai and Bangalore, I learned that they keep a 'house', even if it is a ruin, for the

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18 Badagas rent their houses to non-Badaga teachers or administrators, but avoid selling them.

day of their funeral. They stressed that they should not sell their houses if they wanted to prove their affiliation to the village. The ownership of a house implied their right to be buried in the village and at the same time conveyed the duty-cum-right of the village community to conduct the funeral. In Badaga society, mortuary rituals are the public proof of a person's identity at the end of his or her life, and they manifest ethnic and social boundaries.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that the Badagas regard their funerals as evidence for their recent history, and I have used the analogy of 'fingerprints'. The vignettes show how mortuary rituals demarcate social boundaries and are important aspects in the process of identification of both village communities and individuals. Conducting a ritual indicates the belonging of a deceased person to a village and patrilineage. The existing boundaries of agnatic and affinal relationship become visible. The Badagas consider the ritual performance to be an imprint showing singularity and authenticity. But unlike fingerprints, the traces of funerals are marks that are consciously made, being perceived with all the senses and being kept in the collective memory in both the past and the present.

From the beginning of the first ethnographic description in the early nineteenth century, and most likely even before, mortuary rituals were the most important rites of passage. In the twentieth century conflicts over ritual participation in funeral and the corresponding symbolic forms have culminated in disputes and become markers for ethnic identities and social boundaries. Today, the Badagas regard their funeral as a ritual practice that should not be modified, but conducted in the forefathers' style. Villagers contrast rites of passage organized by the village with weddings, which are family affairs and include symbolic forms of modernity. It is the right and duty of the village community to conduct funerals, and by doing so, they manifest the affiliations of the deceased with a particular location. The social status of a village family that has out-migrated might not be clear for a long period of residence, but on the day of the funeral it will be decided whether it should be considered as belonging fully to the village community or not. Funerals mark the social limits of a residential patrilineal group.

The Badaga case supports the connectivity of death symbolism and core values (Hertz 1960), especially in the practice of forgiving sins. When the biological continuation of a group is threatened, the ritual, in Hertz's words, is a 'triumph over death' (1960:86). By reading aloud all possible transgressions the normative setting is made public, and the dead person is explicitly made a permanent member of the patri-group. Morality and social boundaries are both re-confirmed. There are several obvious parallels between weddings and funerals (Bloch and Parry 1982a) because they both reconfirm existing relationships between patrilineal groups by showing respect in a recip-

rocal way. The link between groups is demonstrated by the procession, the rhythmic chanting, the reception of the procession before it enters the village and the presentation of gifts. The strongest visualization is the joining of the two processions when they walk around the corpse, agnates clockwise, affines anticlockwise, thus appearing as one moving physical body finally meeting at the corpse. However, in modern India the genealogical continuation of a caste-like status group is threatened by the country's secular constitution and the possibility of inter-caste marriages. In this respect, village elders have lost their power to control social boundaries, but they are reclaiming this power by monitoring funerals, which, according to Geschiere (2005:45), clarify the status of a person at the time of the funeral.

The forgiving of sins and the processions of agnates and affines constitute the centre of the ritual event. The family of the deceased makes sure that the final journey has occurred and that all the ritual obligations have been observed. At the same time, a related sphere exists at the margins of the funeral ground. The people on the periphery focus on the more general co-operation of the local community, the logistics and catering. They also watch the arrival of special guests and processions from other villages as an expression of inter-village relationships. In each space, a distinct social atmosphere emerges. But these spaces are not independent of each other, as people walk from the margins to the centre and vice versa. The guests are the witnesses without whom the centre would be incomplete. The two spaces are in a dialectic relationship with each other, and both contribute to the totality of a Badaga funeral. The ritual performance proves the existing social relationships, just as a fingerprint is the evidence of the past presence of an individual.

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