CHINESE DEATH RITUALS IN SINGAPORE

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THE PROBLEM OF DEATH

One of the most striking features about Chinese death rituals in Singapore is the astronomical sum of money spent to ensure their performance. It is not uncommon for families to spend the equivalent of S$30,000 to S$40,000 to enact these rituals; the average family spends between S$10,000 and S$20,000.[1] Even poorer families desire and attempt to make the death rituals as elaborate as possible, often incurring huge debts that will take them years to repay. The Chinese in general, including the immigrant Chinese in Southeast Asia, are generally perceived to be a very pragmatic people, especially regarding economic matters. Why, then, would they spend so much money to ensure the proper enactment of rituals? How do we account for the conviction, even among people who clearly do not have sufficient resources, that death rituals must be as elaborate and ostentatious as possible?

Many Chinese in Singapore prepare for death long before its arrival is imminent. It is not unusual, even for those in their twenties and thirties, to subscribe to mutual aid associations to ensure adequate funding for and participation in their death rituals. Many set aside small amounts of money every month for that purpose whilst others pay a deposit to reserve a place in a Mahayana Buddhist temple to accommodate their ancestral tablets. Known as *chang sheng lu wei*, or "long-life tablets," these look exactly like a normal ancestral tablet, except that they are covered with pieces of red cloth that will be removed upon the person's death. Similarly, graveyard plots are purchased long before death. What is the rationale for this seeming preoccupation with death, especially when we consider the high value that these people place on hope for a long and prosperous life?

The high value and importance that the Chinese in Singapore attach to death rituals raise a simple yet significant question: What does death signify to a purportedly pragmatic people? The book seeks an answer to this central question on the meaning and significance of death by observing and analyzing the rituals related to death, beginning with the preparations for a person's death, followed by the funeral and burial of the deceased. Death rituals continue with the worship of the ancestors at the family ancestral altar. The

book also describes daily ritual propitiation and special rituals conducted during the ancestors' death anniversaries and other important family events, such as the birth of a child or the marriage of a son.

In addition to the rituals performed in the household, death rituals are also performed in ancestral halls. These rituals are corporate in nature, and ancestors, except for the founding ancestor, are worshiped as part of a "body of ancestral spirits," not as individual entities. Their role as a member of a group of ancestors guarantees that the individual ancestor will continue to be worshiped. However, despite their importance, I will also show that there have been significant modifications in the nature of ancestor worship in both the familial altar and ancestral hall which are partly a consequence of the immigrant status of the Singapore Chinese. Unlike traditional Chinese society, which regulates admission of persons into the lineage ancestral hall by the strict criterion of proving patrilineal descent, entrance to ancestral halls in Singapore is based on more flexible criteria of surname, dialect, or locality, meaning that clan ancestral halls have replaced lineage ancestral halls, and modifications in rituals reflect these changes. In addition to household and clan hall ceremonies, annual rituals are conducted at the graveyards during the *Qing Ming*, literally, "clear and bright" festival.

Singapore society has been undergoing a rapid process of modernization and industrialization, particularly since World War II, which has vastly changed the physical and socio-cultural milieu of the Chinese. These changes have necessitated adaptations in the practice of death rituals, and have affected "traditional" perceptions of such rituals. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence that, despite the modernization process, death rituals are still prevalent and their performance is seen as a necessity. How do we account for their permanence and significance in an increasingly industrialized, technologically oriented society?

The book will also examine the increasingly popular practice of disposing of the dead by cremation rather than burial, the exhumation of traditional graveyards to make way for urban renewal projects, and the keeping of bone remains in columbaria. The form and process of Chinese death rituals will be described and the ramifications of such changes will be discussed. Because of the "folk" nature of these rituals, however, there is no fixed, singular way of performing them. Variations occur, often reflecting regional or dialect differences or even personal preferences. Among other things, my objective is to identify the common and essential elements of the rituals and to explain the significance of the variations.

Cultural logic of Chinese death rituals

I adopt a cultural anthropological approach to the study of death and its rituals that is based on ideas first articulated by Max Weber and Clifford

Geertz. Geertz proposes that anthropologists study meaning rather than behavior, seek understanding rather than causal laws, and reject mechanistic explanations in favor of interpretive explanations. Culture is symbolic and meaningful. To Geertz, the concept of culture is essentially semiotic.[2] Believing with Max Weber "that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," Geertz finds culture to consist of those webs, and an analysis of culture to be an interpretive process that searches for meaning. Thus, for Geertz, "analysis is the sorting out of structures of signification and determining their social ground and import."[3]

A central assumption of this book therefore is that death and the rituals associated with it cannot be seen merely as an event with a haphazard collection of ceremonies and activities; rather, it is always meaningful, coherent, and expressive. Death is not simply a natural fact but a culturally constructed and highly variable idea. Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf note:

> In all societies, regardless of whether their customs call for festive or restrained behavior, the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences. Life becomes transparent against the background of death and fundamental social and cultural values are revealed.[4]

Following in Weber's footsteps, we must view humans as cultural beings, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate attitude toward the world and to lend it significance. This significance, whatever it may be, will lead them to judge certain phenomena of human existence in this light and respond to these in a meaningful way.[5] In this respect, an individual acquires, creates, and subscribes to meaning central to his ethical world. Indeed, man, according to Weber, is constantly striving to articulate his life and search for the meaning of the human condition. Man always faces moral choices, not so much as ideals but as a continuous, necessary fact of existence.

I will carry out a cultural analysis of the belief system and rituals associated with death. It will be shown that, despite the many variations and diverse interpretations, amidst the seeming mass of religious beliefs and rituals, there is an underlying logic to these rituals. From the perspective of the participants involved, they are rational behaviors; they make sense to the ritual sponsors and one task of this book is to uncover these meanings. Through an analysis of the symbols used in death rituals, the perception of the meaning of death and how they deal with this eventuality will be illuminated.

In addition to the cultural analysis, the book also includes a social analysis of Chinese death rituals. I suggest that the logic of death, particularly in

its organizational features, is consistent with the larger socio-cultural value system of the ritual participants in Singapore, most obviously in its kinship and economic networks. This book examines the effects of death rituals and associated ideas on social behavior; that is, the reciprocal relationship between ritual and society. Death rituals must be viewed as heightened activities that conflate, refract, and highlight the most important values of the Chinese. By looking at death rituals, values that are not always visible, explicit, or understood, are revealed and become understandable. Moral values that are significant in life, such as filial piety, loyalty, continuity, and provision of posterity, are all prevalent in death rituals. The ability of ritual to reflect as well as to shape social life therefore makes it a useful tool to understand the complex nature of Chinese society as the dynamic values important to the Chinese are worked out in the ritual process.

Death, to the Chinese, is inevitable but not final. It is merely a point of transition and does not signify the end of a person's participation in the lives and activities of his family, nor of they with him. Indeed, ancestors are not to be considered as persons apart from life but are given crucial roles in the life of the living. This notion of mutual interdependence between the dead and the living reinforces the importance of the rituals because each depends on the other for emotional, social, and economic security. Ancestors depend on the descendants for food, shelter, and money; the family, in turn, requires the assistance of the ancestors to deal with the problems of daily life. A process of continual exchange takes place between the family and the ancestors.

Death, family and the kinship group

What effects do death rituals have on the social group? Most studies on Chinese death rituals have emphasized the importance of the rituals in the integration of the family, the cohesion of kinship unity, and the perpetuation of the continuum of descent,[6] with death rituals seen as a function of descent. Such an approach is not incorrect, but it is a simplification and idealization of a very complex process. In the functionalist tradition of Emile Durkheim, most of these studies see only one facet of the total picture – the unifying power of rituals. To provide a more complete picture, we have to examine death rituals at two levels. At the public level, religious ideas form the basis of group formation and cohesion, particularly within the family unit, and to a lesser extent in the kin network. The family is required to put on a show of cohesion in making a presentation for the community, and will "lose face" if they are not perceived to be united at a time of crisis.

A closer examination, however, reveals that at the private level, the enactment of death rituals is often punctuated by many incidents of conflicts, quarrels, compromises, tensions, and even bitter feuding among family

members. Arguments erupt over such matters as how the rituals are to be performed; monetary contributions from family members; and, who can and cannot participate in the death rituals. Conflicts arise and are resolved, if only partially, within the private domain of the family. In contrast to the public level, where kinship relations are essentially formalistic, at the private level, or the level of practical strategies, kinship relations are mobilized and manipulated to serve the necessity of practical functions.[7]

Victor Turner suggests that, although rituals are aimed at the reanimation of societal norms and values, conflicts or representations are as an inherent part of many rituals as they are of social life in general. Portrayals of conflict underscore segregation of social groups, the overt verbalization of which is often inappropriate.[8] Drawing on Turner, it is suggested that an analysis of these conflicts, when, how, and why they occur, will help our understanding of the meaning of death rituals. They are a ritual drama in which practical social relations within the family are acted out, bringing to the surface the social interactions, individual interests, group alliances, and points of tension. Instead of a static model of formalistic kinship ordering, death reveals the dynamics of social relationships, allowing members to define and redefine their allegiances within the group. People make choices within the framework of culturally prescribed action, and the way in which they arrive at their decisions tells us much about their values and beliefs. One key to understanding Chinese death rituals is the role of the social actor or ritual sponsor. What meanings does he confer on the rituals and why?

Death unites the members of the kinship group but it also separates them. It unites by bringing together a diverse group of people for a common purpose – to bury the dead. Cooperation, both financial and social, is required to ensure the enactment of the rituals. In addition, death also invokes the convention of exclusivity. It delineates the family group against outsiders, as exemplified by demarcations of who can and who cannot take part in the ritual or touch the corpse. It will be shown, however, that the very enactment of the rituals allows for the social differentiation of the group and the articulation of these divisions. At the same time as bringing it together, death, particularly that of the patriarch, segments the family unit.

Most studies have characterized the domination of the collectivity over the individual as a central feature of Chinese social life;[9] indeed, one of these studies goes so far as to suggest that the individual is unimportant and exists only to continue the family. He is a personification of all his forebears and all his unborn descendants and though his existence as an individual is necessary, it is insignificant beside his purpose as representative of the whole.[10] A careful examination of the execution of death rituals suggests that constant tension exists between the interests of the individual and the needs of the group or collectivity.

Central to Weber's work is the idea that man is in a constant struggle to control his social environment. Social man is seen as a creator of society – an actor interacting with others on the basis of his attempts to control their action in an attempt to impose his own meanings and definitions upon situations involving himself and others. The world consists of individuals, autonomous in a sense, choosing from an infinity of values and imposing meanings upon concrete reality:

> The highest ideals which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to them as ours are to us.[11]

Understanding the choices people make and the way they resolve tensions allow greater insights into the relationship between individual strategies and collective mandates among the Chinese in Singapore.

In examining the social implications of death, I suggest that death mobilizes and reflects material and social distinctions. This is especially true in the case of the Chinese, whose social organizations are basically hierarchical in nature, with their social relationships based on the generation-age-sex principle. This hierarchy is replicated in the death rituals, and is visible in the proximity and social distance required between the living and the dead and the differentiation in the various grades of mourning garments. At the public level, formal kinship relationships are rigidly followed. At the private level, however, the hierarchy within the family is decided not by kin relationships alone but by the relative power of the members as well. This is often dependent on wealth, education, and achievement, rather than simply by ascription. In making arrangements for the ceremonies, there are many disagreements involving the placement of the dead and the working out of the kin relationship to the deceased. This is especially true in cases when a person has more than one wife and many children.

Because of their migrant origins, the social organization of the Chinese in Singapore is highly diversified according to economic activities as well as by dialect and regional variations. Moreover, Singapore society has undergone tremendous transformations in the last twenty-five years, with rapid economic growth resulting in drastic changes in occupational, residential, and social organizational patterns. The evolving social structure of Singapore in terms of its socio-cultural, economic, and political environment, is quite different from that of traditional Chinese society. Among other things, the kinship structure of the Chinese in Singapore does not replicate the lineage organization found in southeastern China. Instead, clan associations replace it.

I will argue that death rituals among the Chinese in Singapore are constantly being modified and adapted to reflect this evolving social structure.

This is exemplified in the use of "substitution ancestral tablets" and the increasing emphasis on family-centered rather than corporate-centered worship. These are not merely changes in form, but have serious consequences for the idea of death rituals themselves.

Gift exchange and the appropriation of death

Apart from the examination of the cultural logic of death and its rituals, and insights into kinship relations, this book also analyzes the material and ideal interests of the different individuals and groups involved in the enactment of the death rituals. Wee suggests that ritual performance among the Chinese is anthropocentric and egocentric. Chinese religion is human-centered instead of spirit-centered, and it is from the human standpoint that the entire cosmos is viewed. Religion is primarily concerned with solving the problems of human existence and humans are the key religious figures acting upon the rest of the cosmos.[12] It is egocentric because the ritual participants enact rituals to serve calculated self-interests.

The performance of rituals is perceived to improve the ritual sponsor's fate and luck in this life; a belief clearly demonstrated by the instrumental quality of the rituals. It will be established that all features of the death rituals, from the nature of the *bai*,[13] to the types of food offered and items sacrificed to the dead, are directed toward the idea that these rituals are performed because the participants (individually and/or collectively) expect to get something out of it. The very enactment of the death rituals assures the descendants of their rights to appropriate and inherit from the dead father.

Death ceremonies involve a complex system of presentation. Viewed from the perspective developed by Marcel Mauss,[14] gift exchanges are marked by three related obligations: to give, receive, and reciprocate. I suggest that death rituals must be understood as a process of reciprocal gift exchange between the dead and the living. Through the enactment of the rituals, the living descendants give the gift of life to the dead by ensuring their rebirth and transformation into an ancestor. Gift offerings are important because they not only ensure the well-being of the ancestor through the provision of items that they will need in the Otherworld, but the gifts act as an agent of transformation, converting a hungry ghost into a property-owning spirit. This is an important part of the process because, as informants assert, a person without property cannot conceivably become an ancestor. In return, the descendants receive gifts of luck, wealth, good health, long life and the general well-being of the family. Death rituals embody and accelerate the process of exchange.

Death rituals allow the descendants to inherit the property of the deceased, to transfer his authority, and to acquire his status. But it will also

become clear that it is not simply the inheritance of the properties the deceased possesses at death, but also the potential for greater benefits, that motivates the descendants to hold elaborate rituals and spend large sums of money. By converting the deceased from a hungry ghost into a rich ancestor, the now well-off ancestor will see fit, and is in fact expected, to reciprocate with even greater countergifts and benefits to the descendants. Exchange takes place at two levels – between the living and the dead, and between the family and the larger community. Funerals are elaborate and noisy affairs, with an atmosphere of constant activity that is related to the social status and prestige of all involved. An elaborate funeral is an indication of the family's ability to mobilize social resources and thus is a reflection of their status.

I will show that death rituals are important because they allow the ritual participants to tap into the powers and resources of the dead. An analysis of the treatment of the soul and bone remains of the dead will illuminate this idea. The ritual participants, I suggest, actually attempt to appropriate the soul and bones of the deceased for themselves. Why would they do this? One of the reasons is because the informants equate the bones with power, and proper management allows the descendants to access this power source. Because of the idea that there is a natural extension between the human world and the natural environment, great emphasis is placed on the correct orientation when burying the dead, in line with the principles of *fengshui* or geomancy. It is claimed that man can manipulate nature to ensure his own well-being, which resonates with Maurice Freedman's idea that through geomancy men use their ancestors as the media for the attainment of worldly desires, making puppets of forebears and dominating the dominators.[15] Many informants do use their ancestors to attain personal benefits, but the relationship between the living and the dead is a reciprocal, not a dominant-subordinate one that Freedman seems to suggest. Ancestors are conceived not as passive but as active participants, capable of punishing the descendants as well as rewarding them. Punishment could also be in the form of non-reward; that is, to punish by not blessing. It may be added that the informants do not conceive of *fengshui* as a purely abstract force, but in real terms; that is, they are interested in the physical comfort of the dead.

Chinese informants performing death rituals emphasize ethical and moral values. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu,[16] there is a "guaranteed misrecognition" of the gift exchange. The calculated self-interest or egocentric motivation is almost never made public but is masked by the emphasis on ethical and moral values such as filial piety and duty, which are often the reasons given for the necessity of performing the rituals. But an examination of the things requested and expected from the dead will reinforce the idea that death rituals are also to do with giving gifts to the dead and the obligation of the deceased to reciprocate with larger countergifts.

Pollution and the power of death

Informants conceive of the *linghun* or soul as consisting of two components; the *hun* element, and the *po* element. When a person dies, his soul leaves his body and goes to Hell to be judged. During rebirth, the two souls bifurcate.[17] One, the *po*, is reborn into this world in another form, and the other, the *hun*, returns to the home to become the ancestral spirit. This dichotomy of the soul is important because it manifests itself in the dual nature of Chinese death rituals. It can be argued that rituals function to dispose of, and separate from the family, the negative aspects of death by ensuring the rebirth of the *po*. At the same time, death rituals are also for the purpose of appropriating the positive features of death by reincorporating the *hun* back into the family. The completion of the rituals ensures that the soul is refined and under control, fit to be recovered by the descendants. Correctly managed, death offers great benefits.

The dual nature of Chinese death rituals is further clarified by examining the treatment of the flesh and bones of the deceased. I suggest that death rituals seek to get rid of the flesh, the putrescent part of death, and incorporate the bone remains, which are imbued with the powers of the dead. The dual nature of the soul explains the seeming paradox in ritual behavior; that many death rituals emphasize the separation of the living from the dead, while others stress the reintegration of the dead with the living. Because rituals surrounding death are often permeated by symbols of rebirth, Bloch and Parry have suggested that the promise of rebirth is often used in many cultures to negate the finality of death.[18] For the Chinese in Singapore, the principle of rebirth is given a unique twist. Because of the idea of a dual soul, reincarnation is not seen simply as the reincorporation of the deceased back into the community, but also an attempt to expiate the negative soul. Rebirth thus rids the family of the unwanted, while the wanted is incorporated.

The pollution of death

Death is extremely polluting. Death rituals can therefore also be seen as a process of refinement of the dead, making the deceased into a purer form and finally transforming him into an object of worship by his descendants. Death creates an impure ghost; rituals modify him into a settled ancestor. The manipulation of food symbols and the ritual condition of the mourners are keys to understanding this process. In this sense, the rituals must be viewed as an attempt to control death, to make it manageable. The book examines the conception of pollution, suggesting that it must be seen at both physical and symbolic levels. Pollution is connected, at one level, with the idea of uncleanliness and impurity, meaning that bodily excrements, menstruation blood, dirt, and death are all thought to be polluting.

Following Mary Douglas, it is suggested that pollution is also linked to the idea of "things out of place."[19] Informants often use the word *luan*, or "chaos," to describe pollution. Death is polluting because it causes a disjunction, violating order. For example, it is said that death releases a wandering, unbounded soul that is unpredictable and dangerous. Rituals bind the soul, making it predictable and safe. Death rituals therefore provide a means of converting an unpredictable event into a predictable sequence, and by restoring order, eliminate pollution.

To understand the idea of pollution, we cannot look only at death but must see how Chinese informants conceive of pollution in birth, marriage rituals, and social life in general. Having defined pollution, the book proceeds to examine why certain categories of people must necessarily take on a portion of death pollution while others take measures to avoid it. To arrive at an answer, we have to see which people are polluted by death and why they are polluted. Who can and cannot participate in the death rituals? I will show how ideas regarding pollution demarcate the family group against outsiders. Family members are necessarily polluted by death, both by their physical proximity and by their social relations with the deceased. Friends and visitors to the funeral are not intrinsically polluted, although their physical proximity means that they are in constant danger from it. Family members are not only polluted by death but become polluting because they carry the aura of death around them. Hence, they need to undergo a process of ritual isolation.

Special attention is paid to the "bloody pond" rituals, in which sons symbolically drink the blood of the dead mother. To account for the desire to take on this extreme form of pollution, I suggest that the ritual must be understood as a transaction between the mother and her sons, an exchange of her fertility for their taking on her pollution, freeing her from the bloody pond. By giving her fertility, she can finally be joined into the body of her husband's ancestors. Sons, by taking her pollution, accept the gift of fertility and are obligated to conduct rituals on her behalf. At another level, the bloody pond ritual demonstrates the dual position of a woman in Chinese society. She is both subordinate, with an inferior role and social status, especially in public, and powerful, wielding immense influence within the family and, because of her procreative powers, responsible for ensuring the provision of descendants.

Blood and the color red are also dominant symbols. By analyzing the multivocal meanings of these symbols, it can be surmised that blood has dual symbolism, signifying both pollution and the vitality of life, and most of the time it resonates between the two. Similarly, red is not only associated with life but is thought to have prophylactic powers to neutralize the effects of death. Red not only wards off evil; it brings blessings too.

It is important to stress that death rituals must be seen as having multiple foci. Descent is but one, albeit the most important, of a range of factors

that create an obligation to worship the dead. Another focus is the linkage between death rituals and moral imperatives, such as filial piety and duty. The invoking of tradition – "it has always been done this way" – is a reason that is often given for the enactment of death rituals. *Mian zi*, or "face," is also extremely important to the Chinese. There is a great deal of social pressure to ensure that the proper rituals are enacted. Furthermore, there is a sense that death rituals function to elicit blessings and prevent ill-effects. Death rituals are also related to ideas of inheritance, gift exchange, and the management of pollution.

Unnatural deaths

An analysis of the extraordinary, that which is deemed to be outside the system, provides a mirror of society's conception of itself as the ordinary. The book inquires into the cases of exclusions and examines the reasons why certain categories of people are not given the benefits of a normal funeral. According to informants, two causes of death are unnatural – violent deaths, which include death by drowning, automobile accidents, suicides and murders, and immature deaths, those of children and unmarried women. The souls of people who die unnatural deaths are trapped and cannot complete the ritual cycle. This marginal state is a source of extreme pollution and a danger to the living. Special rituals are therefore enacted to rescue the souls of persons who die through unnatural circumstances. An analysis of the treatment of unnatural deaths will illuminate the perception of "normality" and "abnormality" for the Chinese in Singapore.

Community rituals, such as *zhong yuan* celebrations to rid the community of hungry ghosts, are described, and an analysis of the process of enactment of these rituals will show the points of tension and alliances within the community. It also demonstrates the ability of the ritual participants to manipulate the impure and dangerous to derive positive benefits.

Edmund Leach suggests that rituals denote the communicative aspect of behavior – they "say things" about how a society sees itself. He writes that:

> ritual action and belief alike are to be understood as forms of symbolic statement about the social order . . . the main task of anthropology is to attempt such interpretations.[20]

If ritual enhances the social importance of values that are esteemed in society, the analysis of Chinese death rituals therefore allows us to understand the values that the informants hold important. For the Chinese, as C. K. Yang suggests, religion is closely intermeshed with society, or what he calls "diffused religion."[21] The study of death tells us much about Chinese social life and social organization as it is a manifestation of the coherent

meanings that the living give to the world around them and establishes the conception of social order for the Chinese in Singapore.

Review of death and death rituals

Views on death and death rituals

The anthropological study of death has witnessed many ebbs and flows. According to Huntington and Metcalf, early anthropologists, such as McLennan, Morgan, Lubbock, and Wake, were more interested in sexual morality and its relation to the evolution of social structure than in the significance of death.[22] Edward B. Tylor and James Frazer were among the first anthropologists to study death and its rituals seriously. Tylor, for example, maintained that the worship of the *manes* (ancestors) is one of the great branches of the religion of mankind, and that the principles of ancestor worship are to keep up the social relations of the living world:

> The dead ancestor, now passed into a deity, simply goes on protecting his own family and receiving suits and services from them as of old; the dead chief still watches over his own tribe, still holds his authority by helping friends and harming enemies, still rewards the right and sharply punishes the wrong.[23]

Frazer comments on the widespread significance of death rituals in a similar fashion:

> To judge by the accounts we possess not only of savage and barbarous tribes but of some highly civilized peoples, the worship of the human dead has been one of the commonest and most influential forms of natural religion, perhaps the commonest and most influential of all. This belief in the survival of the human spirit after death is world wide; it is found among men in all stages of culture from the lowest to the highest; we need not wonder therefore that the custom of propitiating the ghosts or souls of the departed should be widespread also.[24]

Both Tylor and Frazer were interested in an "intellectualist" understanding of death by reference to men's attempts to deal with questions presented by natural phenomena. They assert that early humans' contemplation of death and deathlike states, such as sleeping and dreaming, was the origin of the concept of soul and hence of all religions. Both Tylor and Frazer proceeded from an evolutionary perspective typical of their day, with the thoughts and institutions of primitive people held to represent early stages of the evolutionary process. The "primitive" were thought to be qualitatively different