The Meaning of Death in Northern Cheyenne Culture

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Human death is distinguished from other death in Northern Cheyenne culture, human life from other life; and the meaning of human death must be considered in its relationship to the meaning of human life. Human-ness is tied to physical life, but selfhood and tribal identity are not: human death terminates physical life while self and Cheyenne-ness persist.

Human life is understood here as a “journey on the surface of the earth” (as represented in figure 7.1 below). The developing fetus has not yet begun the journey and is described as “someone coming to join us”. Intercourse is understood as necessary but not sufficient for conception: conception is tripartite, male and female contributions of blood and substance are required, but the animating life principle comes from the Creator, Ma?heo?o. Ma?heo?o’s blessing is tenuous and especially insecure during fetal life. Spontaneous abortions are believed to be caused by amoral or un-Cheyenne-like behavior of either parent which leads Ma?heo?o to “call the child back”, withdrawing the blessing of life. A child is considered to be “close to the spirit”, likely to be “called back” for the first twelve years of his life, but especially during this very early period. The death of a newborn infant or a fetus is the source of great family strife, the relatives of each parent blaming the other parent for the death.

In the first months of life, the fetus is not considered to be fully living: the creation of life is a process, not an event. Traditionally, a fetus aborted in this early time would be treated like the placenta of a newborn, potentially lifeful, potentially human, but not yet realized, and it is hung on a branch of a tree beside a river to dry and ultimately to be eaten by carnivorous birds (and perhaps also to call forth its twin; the original ‘second twin’ developing in a river from the thrown-away placenta of the first). The older fetus, in particular the fetus which has manifest its life principle by beginning to move within the womb, is buried as if it were a newborn infant. At the moment of birth, the infant has life, but is not yet human: it has Ma?heo?o’s first blessing only.

Ma?heo?o blesses all living things in this way. His special blessing to human beings is the gift of breath/power (omotome) and the associated spiritual potential (mahta?sooma). Omotome, meaning breath/air and also word, is inspired in the child when the “plug has

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Figure 7.1 The journey of life is represented here in association with the four directions and the four earth colors: east is taken as the orienting direction and thus is found at the top.

been removed”, the mucus loosened in the infant’s throat, and the child inhales his first breath of air. With his first breath he draws in his consciousness and his ability to communicate verbally, and thus his only access to power in a world where he is otherwise weak and ignorant (cf. Straus 1978: Chapter VI). In the exercise of his onotome and under the direction of his parents, especially during the first twelve years of his life, the human being develops his mahta?sooma or spiritual balance. When the mahta?sooma is differentiated into its four parts, two of them “good” (representing the ordered cultural existence of man), two of them “crazy” (representing his unordered, animal heritage), the individual will demonstrate in his behavior that he “knows the difference”, that is, comprehends the moral order within which he must live. Only at this point is the individual considered to be responsible for his own behavior as a functioning self, a full participant in the tribal community, a person. It is at this point as well that the individual’s behavior may be classified by other adults, a fundamental classification being that based on the “good” and “crazy” potential present in everyone, and the extent to which each directs the behavior of the person in question. Personhood, full participation in the tribal society, then, is not ensured by birth: it is possible for a child never to become a person. Personhood is the result of a long process of development.

The origin of death like the origin of life is explained in sacred traditions. During his instruction within the Sacred Mountain, Bear Butte, the culture hero Sweet Medicine chose to be like a plant rather than like a rock which exists forever, and thus im-
posed death upon all human beings. Birth and death are closely associated here, as are the beginning and the end of the "journey of life": the very old like the very young are described as "close to the spirit." Reincarnation is a common though vague notion among contemporary Northern Cheyenne: Sweet Medicine himself was said to have lived four lifetimes; infants born with scars or with teeth, and those who cry until they are given a particular name are thought to be reincarnations of tribal ancestors; and all twins are considered to be reincarnations of the original twin spirits.

The demise, like the creation, of the human person is a process. The mahiš-sooma, last to develop is the first to leave the body, its loss resulting in behavioral and cognitive changes. The omotome departs next, bringing loss of senses, consciousness and ultimately, breathing. As the individual literally ex-spires, the omotome joins the mahiš-sooma as the spirit self of the Above World. An individual who is strangled (traditionally a woman's way of suicide) traps his omotome inside his body and thus never makes the transition from living to spirit self.

The life principle, first gift of Maheošo, once diffused throughout the body, becomes localized in the skeleton as the flesh rots away or is eaten, and remains there dormant until the bones begin to crumble into dust/earth. (In the old days, reburial of the disarticulated bones might occur at this time.) The skeletons of deceased human beings (sešote) are known to move about on their own, playing handgame, which they taught to the Cheyennes, or frightening the living: they are animate (and animate in gender [cf. Straus and Brightman, 1977]) but unable to communicate verbally with the living. It was possible for such skeletons to become revivified through a sweat lodge ceremony, and there are many popular stories about dissembling human beings who are really skeletons, encountered by Cheyennes alone at night. One informant compared the revivification of such skeletons to the life cycle of the snake which he said sheds its flesh in the winter, becoming a mere skeleton, but returns to new body and full life each spring.

The process of death may be reversed. Occasionally a spirit which has travelled to seana, land of the departed, has returned to the body (often with the help of a powerful medicine person) which then "comes back" to full life. Individuals who have "come back" can recall visiting with those long dead and being in a beautiful place. Such experiences occur within the first four days after apparent death, so burial does not take place earlier than four days after apparent death. The spirit self may leave the human body temporarily without death, as in sleep and unconsciousness (both of which are named in Cheyenne by words related to that for "die": naʔeotse (= becoming or almost unconscious/dead) sleep; and naʔa, unconscious or dead. This equation causes an interesting confusion in Cheyenne-English between "passed out" and "passed away", which are used as identical phrases).

The moment of death, then, is difficult to discern: death is a long process. Claims to the immanence of death include the wandering about of the external mahiš-sooma or shadow-image of the individual. One informant reported a typical experience of seeing the shadow-image of a particular woman walking along the Tongue River road one night when she was known to be in the Buffet Bar in Ashland. That same woman died later in the evening in a car wreck on Highway 212. Such a separation of image from body is taken as evidence of personal disintegration. The individual who sees his own shadow-image should also expect his own death: hence the special power of the mirror as an offensive weapon in oldtime warfare and the present-day anxiety concerning photographic images. Radical behavior change is also taken as evidence of illness, as is loss of hearing, which presumably indicates the failing physical powers of the omotome.

Continuity of the non-physical or spirit self after death is clear: "You die, but your spirit takes over", explained one young informant. The spirit-self is animate, even when separate from the body: it has self-awareness, it perceives its own death, separates from the body, and moves on to another place. It continues in its awareness of and participation in the Cheyenne community, both as a dream visitor and as a memory carried in a name. Young people especially encounter grandparents in dreams, and these deceased elders advise them about the direction of their lives. Spirits of the dead, called heomaveʔesta-neoʔ0, Above People (seana being above the surface of the earth), in general warn, advise, direct, and give
power to living human beings: they are relatives and are addressed by kinship terms and/or appropriate respect terms for older and more powerful people; they have a place in the continuing tribal community and their behavior appropriately reflects that place. They have identities and names, and must grant permission for their names to be given to a new person, just as is the case among the living. They are conscious of the moral order within which they continue to function: they know how to behave in the Cheyenne Way. They are no longer alive and they are no longer human; but they are indeed persons, full participants in the tribal society.

Seana, at the end of the long fork of the Milky Way, is by far the most common destiny of Cheyennes after death; but it is not the only one. Medicine people, specially powerful on earth, may travel a special path after death. They are properly buried with their heads facing Bear Butte, (noaha-rose) and are said to go there after death. Within the sacred mountain, these medicine people may become nesemoono, personal spirits, who continue to guide and instruct their people, assuming a variety of incarnations on the surface of the earth. As nesemoono or heama-vo'estaneo'o, medicine people, like most Cheyennes continue to exist after death and to exist as fully functioning members of the tribal community. They are differentiated from other heama-vo'estaneo'o primarily on the basis of their greater power, just as in life medicine people are distinguished from others. The interaction of nesemoono with living human Cheyennes is patterned according to the norms for conduct between those of greater and lesser power (cf. Straus 1976: Chapter 5).

Some Cheyennes in death as in life are exiled from the tribal community, isolated from all that is meaningful to them. Those whose behavior in life was irredeemably evil, who sinned and had not been redeemed by ceremonial pledge of their relatives, travel the short fork of the Milky Way or "suicide road" and are lost. Some may fall back to earth and become reincarnated as were-animals befitting the animal-like, a-moral manner in which they conducted their lives on the surface of the earth. There are stories, for example, about does which enchant and entice solitary hunters in the hills at night, causing them to become hopelessly lost and confused. Their mode of seduction is to appear as beautiful women, irresistible to the hunter who pursues them relentlessly. Perhaps such deer are the incarnations of women who had been sinfully "loose" during their life on the surface of the earth. Male "devils" as they are called, are reported frequently at night on the "divide" between Lame Deer and Ashland: a person driving a car may be hailed by a man asking for a ride only to find when he stops that the 'man' has green eyes and cloven hoofs. Such "devils" invariably incite their victims to unruly and unCheyenne-like behavior. Then there are the owls. Owls are widely recognized as heralds of death, and owls will haunt and bother people walking alone on the reservation at night (particularly terrifying is the noise of the flapping wings as the owl pursues you closely). Owls are in some sense seen as inherently evil: there may well be some connection between owls and the spirits of those who behaved in evil ways but are now deceased, perhaps even with murderers, the arch-sinners among traditional Cheyennes. The best way to cope with the curse of the owl is to kill it. Eventually all such were-animals die or are killed, thus ultimately purging both seana and the living Cheyenne community of evil beings.

Those who die a "bad death" may also become isolated from the tribal community. The most common "bad death" is death by violent accident. Accidents, particularly violent accidents, disturb the spiritual balance of the individual and may result in the loss of good spirits. With its two "crazy spirits" then dominant at the moment of death, the self may never regain sufficient integration to make it "over there" and may be condemned to earthbound wanderings and non-participant(!) observation of tribal life. Spirits of those who have been obsessed, unmodulated in life, perhaps as the result of a malicious curse, are likewise off-center and may fail to find the way. Moreover, it is important for the departing spirit to "rest upon its journey", its resting place being its own body: if that body is mutilated or otherwise unrecognizable, it may not be able to "find its home" and may exhaust itself to nothingness in its search. Hence, personal belongings and identifying paints are part of the traditional burial practice to mark and distinguish a particular body, and sol-
diers will risk their lives to recover the corpses of their fellows.

A “good death” is a tribal death, one which serves a tribal purpose and exemplifies tribal values; a “good death” contributes to the tribal solidarity and provides for the security of the self within the tribal community. From conception, a Cheyenne is a tribal being. His substance is Cheyenne substance, and his heart, the center of his physical being and locus of his person motivation, is a Cheyenne heart (the Cheyenne name for themselves, tse'ese'tahase, means those who are hearted alike). Each individual is defined as special, unique: each has his own powers and his own problems. Individuals are encouraged freely to develop their own talents and interests and are taught not to interfere with the free development and expression of others. Yet this encouragement of individuality obtains only within the context of tribal membership which ensures, ultimately, that individualism serves a tribal purpose and supports a tribal identity. Without tribal membership, there is no freedom, there is only “being lost”. The community is defined as prerequisite to, not limiting of, individual direction within it.

One’s death should be as valuable a contribution to the tribe as one’s life. In the days of warfare and still today in times of war, the best death was to die in battle, in defense of your community and your place within it. “If you died a natural death, your name was forgotten: if you died fighting, it was remembered” (Stands-in-Timber, 1969: 69). The old people are respected for their wisdom and their spiritual powers, for their special place in the life-system of creation. It is understood as “natural” that they should depend upon those younger than them for food and physical strength, as it is that others should depend upon them for advice and instruction. But physical debilitation is not good: it helps no one. “When a man gets old, he teeth are gone. I am afraid (of that time), I wish to die (before it comes)” (song of the Kit Fox Society). The suicide warrior was common in pre-reservation days, choosing to die a valuable, positive death instead of withering meaninglessly into nothing. The reservation period has had its suicide warriors as well, most famous among whom are Head Swift and Crazy Mule, whose names exemplify the importance of a death which is a meaningful, tribal death.

Loneliness is considered to be the universal condition of mankind, the inescapable consequences of Ma'heo'oo's gift of human consciousness. “No two people on the face of this earth are alike in any one thing except for their loneliness” observes the controversial Northern Cheyenne author, Hyemeyohsts Storm (1972: 7). Isolation and loneliness are central themes in the major tribal rituals as well as in day to day interaction among contemporary Northern Cheyennes. This becomes particularly evident among those who are drinking, and whose expression is thus somewhat less guarded: the fears confided in these situations invariably include fear of loneliness and isolation from those important to him. Exile is considered to be the ultimate punishment for deviance: it is the worst possible condition for human or other persons; it imposes constant loneliness. The deepest and most acute loneliness is occasioned by the death of a relative or close friend. The anguish is sometimes so great, according to one informant, that the bereaved may expire of his loneliness, literally drowning his heart in the build up of fluid/tears around it. For those who remain, open contact with the departed is irrevocably lost; subsequent contact is dependent upon the will of the heama-ro'ostanese'n. The departing spirit, caught up in human loneliness during his four days’ search for the Milky Way is said often to visit those closest to him and to beg them to accompany him. One informant spoke of her cousin’s efforts to entice her to join him on his journey to seana, for example. Once “over there”, however, the spirit is free of that loneliness and is no more a threat to the living. Many of the prayers for the recently deceased are focussed on helping him make it “over there”.

The exquisite pain of loss through death is said to be the hardest thing a human being must face in the arduous journey on the surface of the earth: grief and the expression of grief are to be expected at such times. But the weeping must end in four days. If it continues longer, the mourners “may be given something else to cry about”. They must realize that life is hard and that the departed has been liberated from a struggle. Death is a release, and reunion with those already departed is the great reward at the end of the journey. The place made ready for them by Sweet Medicine is a beautiful place, and it is one step closer
to the Creator from whom all things came and to whom all things will return.

Cheyennes do not so much fear their own deaths as they do the deaths of others who will leave them, making them lonely. In facing one's own death, the possibility of dying in a bad way, of not finding the way, and thus of isolation and loneliness is the deepest concern. What Cheyennes fear most about death - their own as well as others' - is the loneliness associated with it. They do not fear the loss of 'productive self' (cf. Schulz, 1976) presumably primary for Americans in general, for normally it is not lost. They fear what they already know to be inevitable, - the loneliness which is at once their unique power and their universal problem as human beings.

Death is defined as transformation, not termination, of selfhood for those who have lived in the Cheyenne Way: deceased Cheyennes continue to participate in the tribal society as *heama-vólestaneote* and *nesemoono*. Death is understood as a process, not an event; and the process of death may be reversed. Death should be expected, even courted: it should not be accidental. Isolation, not annihilation, is the greatest fear associated with death in the Northern Cheyenne community.

REFERENCES


