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# NOTES FROM INDOCHINA

**on ethnic  
minority cultures**

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## DEATH AND BURIAL IN KATU CULTURE

Nancy A. Costello

The Katu are a group of approximately 20,000 people who inhabit the mountainous jungle area west of Da Nang in Vietnam. The Katu economy is based on the cultivation of rice in swiddens using the slash and burn technique. Hunting and gathering also make a significant contribution to the Katu subsistence.

The patrilineally extended family and the patrilineal lineage system are the basis of social groupings in Katu society. The village is the largest political unit. It is governed by a loosely organized council of elders, one of whom is considered the village headman. The religious beliefs of the Katu include the recognition of a creator and his son and the belief in a large group of other spirits. Both animal and human sacrifices are offered to the spirits.

### BELIEFS CONCERNING DEATH

*Types of Death.* The Katu believe in two kinds of death: a good death and a bad death. According to legend, long ago the spirit of the sky, the creator, decided which deaths were good, and which were bad. Good deaths are those due to old age, sickness, or sorcery. Bad deaths include accidental deaths such as drowning or falling from a tree, and any sudden or unexpected death such as homicide, childbirth, animal attack, suicide, or death from an unknown cause.

The Katu say that, at times, bad spirits (abu'i) steal children at waterfalls. The spirits lure the child by putting an attractive crock at the mouth of a hole. When the child reaches the hole, he falls in and is never seen again. It is also believed that this can happen to adults, but less commonly. This is considered a bad death.

When a bad death occurs, all the pigs, chickens and dogs in the village are killed and thrown out; then the entire village moves. At the new site, houses are built with wooden statues at the doors. There are also statues at the communal house and on the trails. Their purpose is to frighten

away the bad spirits, and they may take a variety of forms. Some are fashioned like human figures with huge faces, others are squatting figures with their hands on their knees or the head between the hands, and still others are dancing women.

To the Katu, all sicknesses are caused by the bad spirits, who take a person's soul to the jungle; and if the soul is not returned, the person dies. In this case, the Katu beg for the return of the person's soul by sacrificing to the bad spirits. A person has chills because the spirits have put his soul in water, or a person perspires profusely because they have put his soul in the fire.

*Abode of the Dead.* The Katu concept of good and bad deaths ties in with their concept of a life after death. The soul of a person who dies a bad death is sent to the abode of the bad spirits, called bayô. No one sacrifices to these souls or remembers them by putting food for them as they would do in the case of a soul of one who had died a good death.

The soul of a person who has been killed by spearing remains with the killer. This helps the killer to succeed in killing others as well. These spirits drink human blood brought to them by the Katu.

The soul of a person who dies a good death remains with the corpse in the grave until after the second burial. At the time of this second burial, people ask the souls of those in the grave to accept these new people and to make them happy. Some time after the second burial (the Katu are not sure just when), the souls go to maraaih, a place inside the earth where the souls live like people, having houses and fields. The Katu are aware of the existence of maraaih, they say, because once when a man was sick, his dead grandfather took him there for one day.

After the first burial, however, a soul may return to the village impersonating a tiger to frighten his relatives. This results when a tiger sleeping near the grave bites the coffin. The dead person then changes into a tiger and generally returns to his own home. In cases where this is said to have happened, the villagers have killed the tiger before it entered the house. One such tiger, in particular, was



known to be a dead man returning to frighten his wife, because the tiger's back was rotten like a dead person. In another case, the villagers killed a tiger which they said was wearing a bracelet. They assumed that it was really the spirit of a dead woman.

A dead person becoming a tiger is not considered as resurrection from the dead because the person has a different body. The Katu say, however, that such a person does leave his coffin, leaving it empty.

*Resurrection from the Dead.* A Katu legend states that at the beginning of time everyone who had previously died rose again. In this instance, people rose with improved bodies. They were fat instead of thin. It is said that they shed their skin like a snake and received a new body.

The legend explains that two people had a disagreement over whether those who had died should remain dead or not. One thought that everyone should rise again, but the other argued that this would cause the earth to become overcrowded. The first person told a bird to fly him around the earth to see if there would be enough room for all the people. (He hung onto the bird's foot as it flew.) As they were flying, a lizard happened to see them. This lizard was of the opinion that people should remain dead because he had climbed a tree, and from that close proximity looked over the earth and decided it was too crowded. After this the lizard told everyone to bury people. Before this time people had not died.

More recently, there have been stories telling of several cases of people rising from the dead. One story tells of a young man going to the grave of a close friend, to mourn. When the young man arrived, his friend rose from his grave and they went off to fish and catch frogs. Being afraid to return to his home, the young man sent the food he had caught home to his parents with his friend. Then he returned to his grave to sleep. When his friend arrived at the young man's home bringing the food, he told the boy's parents that their son had sent the food. The father thought the friend was lying, so the friend told the parents to come with him to see that the young man was really alive, but to hide so

that their son would not be afraid. When the parents saw their son, they rushed forward to grab him and he immediately turned into a grasshopper.

Another story tells of a young girl who, after the death of her boyfriend, went to his grave to mourn; but when it was time to return home, she was afraid to go by herself. So the young man rose and offered to take her home. He said, however, that he could not go all of the way with her. When he turned to leave, he told her not to look back at him as he left. But she did look back, and saw that his back was rotted. She screamed and cried; and because she was afraid of the young man's soul, she died of fright that night. (The Katu feel that she died because the young man called her soul to him.)

Another Katu story tells of a man who had died, but whose son-in-law had not yet killed a buffalo for the second burial. So the dead man told his son-in-law to kill a buffalo; but since the son-in-law did not have one, he could not do this. So he cried and cried. The bad spirits then came to him and asked, "What do you want?" The son-in-law replied, "I want to go to my father-in-law." When he had come to his father-in-law in the place of the dead, his father-in-law exclaimed, "What are you doing here?!" His son-in-law answered, "I was afraid, because I did not have a buffalo." So the father-in-law said, "Here, take this buffalo which you sacrificed when I died." So his son-in-law took the buffalo. Now the father was loaning the buffalo to him only until the next morning. That night the son-in-law was to bring the buffalo into the center of the village. If he did not do this, the buffalo would turn into charcoal. Then the next morning he was to kill the buffalo. The son-in-law returned to earth, and his relatives were not aware that he had died (i.e. visited the place of the dead). He told them that he now had a buffalo, and they asked him where it was. He replied that he would bring the buffalo to them that night. This he did, and the next morning he killed the buffalo as instructed.

#### *BURIAL*

The Katu often make a coffin in advance and leave it in the jungle. This way they can have a nicer looking coffin

with carving on it. Whenever a coffin has been made, it is taboo for anyone in the village to build a house for a year, for fear that more people might die. Coffins are made from logs which have been split and hollowed out.

*The First Burial.* When a person dies, his wife and other close relatives wash his body and put his best clothes on him. This often consists of two or three layers of clothes. No one touches the forehead or the knees of the corpse for fear that this would cause them to forget the person and not dream of him. The best cloth is then placed around the deceased and many lights are lit. The whole village then sits and guards the corpse so that the bad spirits will not snatch it away. They guard day and night until the burial.

Stories have been passed from generation to generation enforcing the belief in the necessity of guarding the corpse. One such story tells of a bad spirit named Saying Kruung who long ago tried to snatch a corpse. He had a large stomach and a great deal of body hair. The villagers were guarding a corpse, but at the time everyone in the house was asleep with the exception of one sick man. The sick man saw Saying Kruung come to the door, so he threw some wood from the fire at him, burning his hair. Then Saying Kruung ran off screaming.

When someone dies, people from other villages generally come to the funeral, unless it is the third or fourth month (when rice is planted). These months are taboo for attending funerals. If there is a sister of the deceased who lives in another village, she will bring a buffalo with her for a sacrifice. This is in addition to the buffalo which her brothers bring. She does this so that her brothers will love her and later give their daughters as wives for her sons in the Katu custom of cross-cousin marriages.

Several days after a person's death, a buffalo is killed, or a pig if it was a child, and there is dancing and playing of drums. The relatives ask the deceased to take the soul of the buffalo with him so that he will be happy in the next life. At this time, close relatives sing, praising the dead person if he was a particularly good hunter or if he was rich. The head of the buffalo is then placed on the roof of

the deceased person's house. During the following two days when the corpse is in the house, the villagers mourn and play drums with a slow rhythmic beat.

After the buffalo is killed, there is a feast to which the whole family brings food. People do not take any of the leftover food home for fear of sickness. After they have eaten in the dead man's home, they wash their hands before returning to their own homes.

After the first day of festivities, the body is placed in the coffin. The dead person's belongings--his crocks, baskets, and clothes--are placed near the coffin, but they are not taken to the grave.

Since the Katu believe that the spirits see everything as opposite to the human world, they bury their dead in the late afternoon so that the spirits will think it is early morning. The spirits would not allow a person to be buried in the late afternoon since it is so close to dark. The coffin is not placed far beneath the earth because it will later be removed for the second burial. Only a bowl of rice is left by the graveside for the soul of the deceased to eat, but after this a bowl is set out regularly at meal time until the second burial.

*The Second Burial.* One or two years after the first burial, the second burial takes place. The coffin is exhumed and taken to a grave called a ping. A ping is a large, house-like structure in which the coffins of the dead of the whole village are placed. The ping has a hole about four meters deep into which the coffins are piled, one on top of another and side by side. The ping has four strong posts covered by a roof.

Anyone from the village (even non-relatives) can be buried in the ping provided he had a good death and the family provides a buffalo. Since the soul of the deceased is still with the body, everything must be carefully done to please the soul. So even if a rich person had a buffalo already available, the second burial cannot take place any sooner than is proper. The body must first decay so that it will not decay into other coffins in the ping.

At the second burial there are three nights of feasting and playing of gongs and drums, to which all the villagers are invited. If the deceased had killed many people, the relatives first lead a party to another village to kill. The blood is not brought back from these killings. When the party returns, the feast is held.

At this point, the coffin is taken to the ping. There may be several families taking coffins of relatives to the ping at the same time. Up to five coffins may be buried together. The coffins are placed outside the doorway to the ping. There a pig is killed, and its blood is rubbed onto a stone. This stone is then thrown down into the hole while the men call out to the souls of the people buried in the ping to receive these new people and make them happy. The buffalo head is brought to the ping with rice and alcohol for more feasting. The coffins are then placed inside the hole, side by side on top of other coffins, with no soil between. One ping may contain twenty to thirty coffins.

*Burial for a Bad Death.* For a bad death there is no ritual. There is no mourning, no sacrifice, and no funeral. The relatives, however, do provide a coffin. The coffin is taken far into the jungle away from any fields and trails. The relatives bury the coffin and then leave the grave as quickly as possible.

The Katu fear the soul of someone who died a bad death. When they see red in the sky at night, they believe this is the returning soul of someone who has died a bad death. They hear the soul call out and light fires outside all the houses. For six nights they stay awake.

No one wants to touch the body of a person who has died a bad death. Since no one will wear the deceased's clothes, they are thrown out.

*Burying Alive.* An insane person, to the Katu, is a threat to the whole village, as he might burn down a house or cause some other harm. They, therefore, bury him alive. Burying alive is also used at times as a punishment for adultery or stealing.

The villagers bury the victim in a small hole, sitting up with his legs pushed against his chest. Enough air reaches him so that he may exist for two weeks or more. During this time the villagers go to the grave to listen for signs of life. When the victim finally expires, he is left in this same hole. There is no burial ceremony, since burying alive is a type of bad death.

#### *SUMMARY*

The Katu belief in two types of death results in two different sets of burial practices. Souls of people who die of sudden, unnatural causes, are potentially harmful, but they receive no care. Their abode is called bayô. On the other hand, souls of people who die natural deaths due to sickness or old age receive sacrifices, elaborate ceremonies and feasts, food to eat, and double burials. Their final abode is maraaih. When the Katu sacrifice, they intreat the spirit of the sky not to let them die a bad death.