

## **The Path to the Beyond**

### **Death**

Death is not someone  
who taps you gently on the shoulder  
and says,  
come with me

But someone  
who wraps both arms around you  
and squeezes  
and squeezes  
until you can think of nothing else  
but to say  
alright, I'll come.

Franz Hohler, from: *Vierzig vorbei*, 1988:29

Every human who sets foot on this Earth will, sooner or later, have to leave it again – and no one has ever done so alive. Death is part of life. But it doesn't mean the end of existence. After death, the soul or the deceased person embarks on a journey... A journey from this world to the next.

Every culture, every religion has its own idea of what happens at the instant of death and thereafter. In order for the journey to the beyond to be smooth, preparations are required as well as the help and support of those left behind in this world.

The exhibition explores how societies imagine the transition between this world and the next, what the path to the beyond looks like, what kind of journey the soul or the deceased person sets out on, and what people have to do in preparation.

A note on terminology:

In the exhibition, we use the term "soul" as an abstract term for very different concepts: on the one hand, for the ethereal elements that, together with the physical body, make up a person. On the other, it also refers to the invisible presence of a life force, a personal apparition, or a person-related being from the other world.

We do this in the understanding that the Christian concept of soul often has little to do with non-Christian concepts of the soul, or spirit. In the absence of other terms that would allow for a precise translation from other languages, this also applies to the terms such as heaven, hell, this world, the beyond, and paradise.

Death is not necessarily the end of existence. Among the Ga people of Ghana, ancestors exert powerful influence in the world of the living, with the capacity of impacting the life of descendants in both a negative and positive sense. For this purpose, people go to great lengths to appease a deceased person already at a very early stage, usually by investing in a large and elaborate funeral ceremony and an impressive coffin.

Figurative coffins have been part of Ga mortuary ceremonies since the 1950s. They are more than simple burial objects; on the contrary, their many different shapes and colours are meant to reflect the personality or profession of the deceased, not least with the idea in mind that they might help the person to continue his profession in the netherworld. Thus, a fisherman is often buried in a coffin in the shape of a canoe or a fish, a farmer in a casket in the shape of a tomato or cacao bean.

Until the 1980s coffins in the shape of a house were extremely popular; but then demand gradually waned and today they are mainly used by real estate agents and wealthy homeowners. This “ancestral house coffin” was a commissioned work by the well-known coffin artist Paa Joe for the anthropologist Regula Tschumi. It was built for the exhibition *Six Feet Under* at the Kunstmuseum Bern (2006–2007).

1 Ancestral house coffin | Paa Joe | Ghana | 2006 | wood, colour, glass, plastic, textile | Kunstmuseum Bern, gifted in 2017 | III 27816

## Setting out on the Path

Death marks the beginning of the journey to the beyond. Mortuary and funerary ceremonies are not only important for those left behind. Preparing the deceased person for what lies ahead is a crucial aspect.

**Readying oneself** – Even before death, people tend to prepare themselves for their journey to the beyond. In terms of spirituality, the preparations may include meditation and prayers. In some cases, material items are also required. These are kept in the house in view of possible death so that important rituals, including anointing, can be performed before actual death sets in. Tutelary items help to prevent evil forces from harming or impeding the dying or recently deceased person.

**Upon death** – When death occurs the body of the deceased is prepared for burial. A ritual washing is often carried out and/or the body is daubed with certain potent substances. The relatives hold watch over the dead body and spend the final hours with the deceased before saying farewell.

Amida Nyorai is the Buddha of infinite light and embodies a long life dedicated to the pursuit of Buddhahood. In Japan, he gains special importance towards the end of life, as being reborn in his <Pure Land> promises an early end to the endless cycle of life and death.

Amida Nyorai is the Japanese name for the Buddha Amitabha. His raised right hand shows the gesture of fearlessness, while his left hand is extended towards the viewer in the gesture of generosity. He only reveals himself to faithful devotees during meditation.

2 Buddha Amida Nyorai | Japan | before 1941 | wood, pigments | Fritz Sarasin, gifted in 1941 | Iid 1743

In the Peruvian region of Huancayo, the death of a person marks the beginning of a fixed sequence of rituals and events in support of the deceased on their journey to the beyond. The artist Don Abilio (Pedro Abilio Gonzales Flores) has won numerous awards for his work in Peru. In this work, he highlights the five steps in the cycle of death. The process begins with the closest relatives and neighbours gathering at the home of the deceased, who is usually resting on a bed or a pallet. Candles are lit beside them.

All the figures featuring in the Cycle of Death were made by Pedro Abilio Gonzales Flores in Aza in the Department of Junin, Peru, in 1980. They are made of gypsum, wood, and other natural materials. The textile designer Hugo Zumbühl acquired the cycle while working as a consultant for cooperatives in Peru, and sold it to Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) in 1982. He is still in contact with the Gonzales family today.

3 The model Death Cycle: 1. *The Passing* includes the house, the deceased on a bed along with a group of seven mourners VI 55956

In the night following the passing, the death watch is held. The body of the deceased is laid out in the house or in a chapel. Large candles and crucifixes are borrowed or provided by the church. At the death watch, relatives and members of the community gather to say farewell. It provides an occasion for sharing food and drinks along with coca leaves. Stories and jokes are told, memories cherished, and relationships are renewed.

4 The model Death Cycle: 2. *Death Watch* comprises the house, two angels, the deceased in a coffin, 20 figures along with other paraphernalia VI 55957

In Santa Barbara de Aza, a funeral procession including relatives usually took place on the third day after death in which the deceased is accompanied to the cemetery where a short funeral service is followed by the burial. Current law in Peru stipulates that the burial must take place within 24 hours of death. The grave is dug by friends, with relatives providing drinks and cigarettes to those gathered.

- 5 The scene Death Cycle: 3. *The Funeral* includes the coffin VI 55959; two altar boys carrying crosses VI 55960 + VI 55961; the priest VI 55962; two double figures VI 55963 + VI 55974; eight relatives bearing funeral wreaths and flowers VI 55964, VI 55966, VI 55969, VI 55970, VI 55972, VI 55973, VI 55975, VI 55976; three weeping relatives VI 55965, VI 55967, VI 55968; two other figures VI 55971 + VI 55977; as well as the cemetery including four men VI 55958.

The clothes of the deceased are usually washed on the fifth day after the funeral. For this, family and friends gather at a river or stream where they share food and drinks. Next to that, the widow or widower has his/her hair washed for the first time. As soon as the clothes have dried, they are distributed among those gathered so that the deceased may rest in peace.

- 6 The model Death Cycle: 4. *The Washing* comprises a landscape VI 55980 with seven family members; a cactus tree VI 55978; a double figure showing two men wringing out a cloth VI 55981; as well as a double figure showing two men hanging up a white cloth VI 55979.

The cycle ends with the staging of various games. These provide entertainment and also help to stabilize social relationships. Don Abilio and his grandson Pedro describe the games as follows: “We as a family play the line game so that there will be no more deaths. We play to forget our grief.” In the Andes, death does not mark the end of life but a transition to a new state. The deceased are regarded as intermediaries between the living and the spiritual world and are approached for blessings and well-being.

- 7 The model Death Cycle: 5.1 *The Death Games / Juego de Castigo: The Penitent Game* comprises the ground VI 55982 including nine male along with six other figures VI 55983–VI 55988.

- 8 The model Death Cycle: 5.2 *The Death Games / Juego de Rayas: The Line Game* VI 55989 comprises the ground and eight male figures.

The legend of St Joseph tells the story of how he died in Mary’s lap and in the presence of his son Jesus Christ. For this reason, he is often described as the patron saint of the dying and of a good death – as in this booklet. It includes prayers in which St Joseph is called upon for assistance during the last hours and for support during the ascent to heaven: “Oh, when our eyes finally fade, guide us happily to the divine light.”

- 9 Religious writing | Fribourg, Switzerland | 1922 | paper | Walter Heim, gifted in 1956 | VI 22273

This small booklet contains three prayers that “are of great help to a dying person and beneficial in the search of salvation”. It also tells how a chaplain once recited these very prayers for a dying pope, including the request: “Open the door to heaven today, forgive this dying person all his sins, and accept him into the realm of God Almighty.” Later, the deceased pope appears to the chaplain and tells him how, during the prayer, his sins fell from him “like rain from heaven”, and how his soul was guided by angels to the Kingdom of God. These prayers are said to benefit everyone: “The person who hears them being read will not die a bad death.”

- 10 Prayer card | Europe | 19th century | paper, woodcut | Eduard Hoffmann-Krayer, bequest 1938; previously collection of Anton Pachinger | VI 14609

The skull symbol serves as a memento mori, a reminder that death awaits us all and that life on earth is nothing more than a preparation for eternal afterlife. This chain consists of one skull after the next. Possibly it served as a prayer cord – although the number of items does not correspond to a usual rosary.

11 Carved chain | Bavaria, Germany | around 1900 | wood | Lux Brander, purchased in 1994 | VI 66609

These instructions explain how to prepare for the last rites in the event of imminent death: the viaticum set, that is, the necessary devotional items such as candles, cross and vessels, needs to be arranged as shown in the picture, and a priest should be informed about the person's current state of health.

12 Instructions for the last rites | Hermann Rauch | Wiesbaden, Germany | 20th century | paper | Theo Gantner, purchased in 1980 | VI 52034

In Catholicism, when a sick person is close to death, a priest is called in to administer the last sacraments. For this “*viaticum* ceremony”, a set of special items is required: a crucifix, candles, various bowls for anointing oils and holy water along with a cloth. Occasionally a special cloth is placed on the chest of the dying person during the performance of the last rites.

13 Viaticum set | Unterschächen, Uri, Switzerland | around 1910 | glass, metal, copper alloy, wood | Hanspeter Muster, gifted in 1996 | VI 68169.01-06

14 Three mortuary candles / wax tablet | Basel, Switzerland | before 1974 | wax | Georg Matt, gifted in 1974 | VI 42909

15 Viaticum cloth | Ahrn Valley, Trentino, Italy | 1858 | linen, cross-stitch work | Julius August Konietzko; purchased in 1933 | VI 11503

“Mortuary boxes” like this were used to store the *viaticum* set, that is, the items used for performing the last rites, including candles, crucifix, cutlery and special fabrics. The records for this piece state that this box was part of the estate and that “it should not be sold”. Possibly it was no longer in use when it was consigned to the museum by the dealer Alois Blättler.

16 Mortuary box | Schattdorfer Berge, Uri, Switzerland | 19th century | wood | Alois Blättler, purchased in 1944 | VI 17175

Towards the end of the 19th century, prints featuring popular motifs adorned the homes of many bourgeois families. The picture *The Hour of Death* shows a devout man awaiting his death. He is surrounded by relatives deep in prayer and a priest who is blessing him. The dying man is also praying with a rosary in his hand. The prayers seem to fulfil their promise: next to him stands a protective angel pointing towards heaven where God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit appear to be awaiting him. In the background, Archangel Michael strikes down the devil. The picture was published in Johannes Gossner's booklet *Das Herz des Menschen* (The Heart of Man), which advocated a life of virtue.

17 Oil print *The Hour of Death* | Zurich, Switzerland | around 1900 | oil print, chromolithography | Werner Konrad Jaggi, purchased in 1977 | VI 46519

Small bells like this were rung to keep evil forces away from the dying person. The reliefs depict the crucifixion scene, the Einsiedeln miraculous image of the Virgin Mary, the monastic coat of arms of Niklaus Imfeld, and St Nepomuk. It is titled “Campana

Benedicta / B V M Einsiedlensis” (small Benedict bells). Saint Benedict is invoked, among other things, for protection against evil forces.

- 18 Small St Benedict bell | used in Therwil, Switzerland; made in Einsiedeln, Switzerland | around 1770 | pewter, iron alloy | Mr Tschäpperli, purchased in 1911 | VI 4891

In southern and south-eastern Romania, these incense burners were used to cleanse the resting chamber where a deceased person had been laid out after death, by circling the spot where the body had lain. On commemorative days – three days, six weeks, six months, one year, and seven years after the day of passing – such vessels were used to circle and purify the grave. When finished, the vessel was smashed next to or over the grave.

- 19 Incense burner | Oboga, Romania | 1969 | ceramic | Robert Wildhaber, purchased in 1970 | VI 37393

This so-called “powder of the dead” is used to ask Santa Muerte for protection and healing or, as the case may be, to harm another person. According to instructions, the powder is rubbed on arms, legs or candles. Such candles can be used at a wake. The “powder of the dead” usually consists of a mix of organic and mineral substances. The cult of Santa Muerte has gained popularity in recent decades, not least among drug cartels. The powder was acquired for the museum in 1973 during a trip to Mexico.

- 20 Powder of the dead *Alicornio Vencedor* | Mexico | 1973 | plastic, cardboard, powder | Thomas Meyer, purchased in 1974 | VI 42834b

Such *bongotol* blocks, made from powdered camwood, served several purposes in the funerary rites of members of the Kuba nobility in Central Africa until the 20th century. *bongotol* were produced by women of the bereaved family or came as gifts offered by guests to the funeral. Being objects with special powers, *bongotol* helped the deceased person in transitioning from the human world to the world of spirits. The deceased person was daubed with a thick layer of camwood paste, dressed in several layers of cloth, laid out with *bongotol* as funerary goods, and then buried. This was meant to honour and appease the spirit of the deceased in order for them to pass away in peace and not bring misfortune on the family. The darker and more valuable blocks were not placed in the grave, instead they were gathered and displayed in front of the guests. Following the funeral, these *bongotol* were passed on to other families as gifts, thus making them objects of exchange in a social cycle.

- 21 Two blocks of camwood paste *bongotol* | Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1948 | camwood (*Baphia nitida*) | Collection Hans Himmelheber, purchased in 1948 | III 5631+53

This mortuary board was used by the Jewish community of Biel to ritually wash the deceased body (*tahara*). The grooves allowed the water to run off. The deceased was dressed on the board and then carried to the cemetery. The washing was performed by specialized women (for a deceased woman) or men (for a deceased man) from the community. The Jewish community of Biel was founded in the early 19th century when Jewish men and women were recruited from the Alsace to work in the local watch industry, even before they were officially granted the right to settle in Switzerland. The Biel synagogue was inaugurated in 1884.

- 22 Mortuary board | Biel, Switzerland | end of 19th century | wood | Jewish Community Biel, gifted in 2025 | VI 72558.01

## Returning from the Beyond

The journey to the beyond can only be made once; under normal circumstances, a return is out of the question. However, there are exceptions: Shamans travel to the other world where they communicate with ancestors and spirit beings to seek advice and guidance. In mythology and classical literature, we also come across a number of figures who venture into the beyond before returning unscathed, such as Orpheus, Aeneas, Odysseus, Dante (as first-person narrator) and Bhima, the hero of the Indian epic Mahabharata.

### Bhima Swarga – Bhima's Journey to the Otherworld

Bhima is the second oldest of the five Pandawa brothers in the epic Mahabharata. In Java and Bali, the original Indian epic was amended and further developed. Stories from it are still popular subjects in art today. The episode Bhima Swarga – Bhima's journey to the otherworld – which is only known in Indonesia, is particularly popular in Bali, especially in the form of shadow play during mortuary ceremonies.

Bhima is given the task by his mother Kunti to rescue the souls of his mortal father Pandu and his stepmother Madri from hell. After liberating them from hell, Bhima must ensure that they are granted access to heaven. For this purpose, Bhima must wrestle the elixir of immortality, *tirta amrta*, from the gods of the upper world and pass it on to Pandu and Madri. On the entire venture through the lower and upper worlds, Bhima is accompanied by his loyal companions Twalen and Mredah.

The story centres on Bhima's experiences in hell and heaven. In hell, he and his companions witness the punishments that humans have to endure owing to the sins they committed in life. In a major battle against Yama, god of the underworld, and innumerable demons, Bhima succeeds in liberating the souls of Pandu and Madri. Following this, he must prevail against the gods he encounters in the upperworld. Only Bayu, the god of winds and Bhima's divine father, succeeds in bringing Bhima under his control, upon which he kills Bhima, casting darkness over the entire upper world and bringing everything to a halt. Suddenly, Acintya, the Inconceivable One, appears in a blinding light and brings Bhima back to life. Now even Siwa (Shiva) realizes that he must hand over the elixir of immortality, *tirta amrta*, to Bhima. Back in the world of the living, Pandu and Madri are given the potion to drink during a large feast, enabling them to ascend to the heavens as purified beings.

- 23 Bhima, second oldest of the five Pandawa brothers | shadow play figure | Bali, Indonesia | 20th century | parchment (water buffalo), wood, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 23382
- 24 Twalen, friend and companion of Bhima | shadow play figure | Ida Bagus Asem | Banjar, northern Bali, Indonesia | around 1900 | parchment (water buffalo), wood, vegetable fibre, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 24851
- 25 Mredah (also Merdah), friend and companion of Bhima | shadow play figure | Ida Bagus Asem | Banjar, northern Bali, Indonesia | around 1900 | parchment (water buffalo), wood, vegetable fibre, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 24852
- 26 Yama, god of the underworld | shadow play figure | Jembrana, western Bali, Indonesia | around 1900 | parchment (water buffalo), wood, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 24791

27 Cogormanik, guardian of the underworld's entrance and exit | shadow play figure | Dewa Putu Kidung Latik | Gianyar, Bali, Indonesia | around 1970 | parchment (water buffalo), wood, pigments | Research trip Urs Ramseyer 1972/73, purchased | IIC 17274

28 Bayu, god of the wind and Bhima's divine father | shadow play figure | Ida Bagus Asem | Banjar, northern Bali, Indonesia | around 1900 | parchment (water buffalo), wood, vegetable fibre, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 24844

29 Acintya (Sang Hyang Widhi / Sang Hyang Tunggal) | shadow play figure | Bali, Indonesia | before 1974 | parchment (water buffalo), wood, pigments, gold leaf, vegetable fibre | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 23353

Roof ornament for festivities *ider-ider* with depiction of the punishments in hell from the Bhima Swarga.

Scene 1: Bhima, Twalen and Mredah are given the task by Kunti to rescue Madri and Pandu from the underworld.

Scene 3: The iron cauldron Tambrah Goh Muka, used for boiling anyone who has been excessively lazy, a troublemaker or corrupt in life.

Scene 5: Anyone who received or arranged a cremation that did not match their own status is forced to wear a crown of unbearable weight.

Scenes 6 and 7: People who were unable to reign in their sexuality have their genitals burnt. Those who only pursued material values and neglected human and spiritual values will be bitten in the groin.

30 Roof ornament *ider-ider* | Klungkung, Bali, Indonesia | around 1940 | cotton, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 22717

At centre we recognize Bhima. He's rescuing the souls of Madri and Pandu from the cooking pot. Below the pot, a further example of punishment: Those who do not honour and venerate the ancestors will have their head sawn in two. And at the bottom left: Those who mistreated animals out of pure malice are themselves turned into animals and forced to pull a plough.

31 Painting Bhima Swarga | Made Tubuh | Batuan, Bali, Indonesia | around 1970 | synthetic colours on canvas | Research trip Urs Ramseyer 1975, purchased | IIC 17859

In his painting, Made Bayak makes reference to the famous scene of the cooking pot in which the souls of sinners are left to boil. Herewith he is cautioning his fellow human beings to treat the island of Bali with respect and reverence, otherwise...

32 Painting *Journey of the Souls VIII* | Made Bayak | Bali, Indonesia | 2024 | acrylic paint on canvas | purchased from the artist in 2025 | IIC 25931

33 Bhima as kris wielder with kris | Bali, Indonesia | first half of 20th century | wood, steel, pigments | Werner Rothpletz, gifted from bequest in 1981 | IIC 18870a-c

## Shamans in Siberia

Shamans have been documented in many parts of Siberia and neighbouring regions since around the 16th century. What makes them so special is that they are able to cross the boundary between the world of the living and the world of the deceased by means of ritual and with the aid of their paraphernalia. For this reason, they are often called upon for advice and healing which makes them respected members of their society. At the same

time, however, they are also feared because they are in close contact with the deceased and thus have the power to bring misfortune upon others.

In many parts of Siberia, the beyond is not regarded as a distant place but as a world that exists parallel to the world of the living and constantly influences what goes on here. An imbalance between the two worlds can manifest itself in illness, accidents or general misfortune. In such cases, a shaman is called upon to redress the balance. In rituals, shamans often summon up ancestral spirits that take possession of their body, thus allowing the spirits to communicate with the living. One of the most important items shamans rely on is the drum, which is used to contact the ancestral spirits. The drum serves as a shaman's horse which carries him or her to the otherworld, using the drumstick as a riding crop.

- 34 Shaman's drum *tüŋgür* with drumstick *bulaajach* | Sakha Republic (Yakutia), Russia | 20th century | leather, wood, iron, animal skin | Friederike Alexander, purchased in 1922; previously collection Eugen Alexander | VII 598a+b

Figures in human shape form an essential part of the shamanistic belief system. For one thing, they serve as tutelary objects for certain groups of people, such as hunters, or for individual households. Figures held by shamans often represent helper spirits that support them on their journey to the otherworld and occasionally take possession of their body.

- 35 Anthropomorphic figure *ayami*, representation of an ancestral spirit | Nanai, Amur region, Siberia, Russia | second half of 19th century | wood | Eugen Alexander, purchased in 1919 | VII 432
- 36 Anthropomorphic figure *ayami-čaani*, representation of an ancestral spirit | Nanai, Amur region, Siberia, Russia | second half of 19th century | wood | Eugen Alexander, purchased in 1922 | VII 524

## Open Day

On the Mexican Día de Muertos and the neopagan Samhain, the curtain between this world and the otherworld is at its thinnest. At both festivals, the dead are invited to visit the living.

The living prepare lavish altars with food, drinks, and mementos for their deceased relatives after which they celebrate jointly, share food, and communicate with the deceased until it is time for them to depart again for the other-worldly realm and again to return in the following year.

### Samhain and Wicca

Wicca is the most prominent creed among the neopagan movements. Followers like to call themselves Wicca, too. They claim that their religion is based on the religious practices of pre-Christian Europe and refer to it as the “Old Path”, the “Old Religion”, or Wicca.

Wiccans venerate the divine in the form of a female and a male deity of equal significance. Wicca rituals follow the lunar and solar annual cycles. The eight annual feasts – four lunar and four solar sabbaths – include the following:

Samhain, 31 October to 1 November (New Year and Day of the Dead)

Yule, 21/22 December (Winter solstice)

Imbolc, 1/2 February (Festival of light)

Ostara, 21/22 March (Spring equinox)

Beltane, 30 April to 1 May (Pastoral festival)

Litha, 21/22 June (Summer solstice)

Lughnasadh or Lammas (Harvest feast)

Mabon, 21/22 September (Autumn equinox)

In addition, the annual cycle observes the mythology of the male and female deities. The male deity follows the path of death and rebirth. The female deity in her guise as threefold goddess – youth, motherhood, age – suffers neither death nor rebirth, she is omnipresent.

Samhain marks the neopagan New Year and the festival of the dead. In earlier times, it marked the day of slaughtering the animals and preserving food in preparation for the approaching dark days of winter. It is during this period – the old year is nearing its end, the new year is not yet born – that the curtain between this world and the Other-world wears thin. In the night of 31 October to 1 November, the spirits of the dead are drawn to the Samhain fire and come to dine and feast with friends and family. The living prepare the Meal of the Ancestors and light candles in the window, showing the deceased the way to the table. Together, they bid the old year farewell and welcome in the new one: mistakes and failures are reflected upon and advice sought for the coming year. Samhain is a time of appeasement, divination, and communication with the dead. At the same time, it is a festive occasion for sharing food and drink together and a celebration of life and fertility in the face of the approaching darkness.

37

This Wicca altar to celebrate Samhain features:

Altar cloth (incl. pentagram)

Statues of the Great Goddess and the Horned God (Cernunnos, here as the god of hunting, Herne)

Ritual bell (incl. pentagram)

Chalice (with threefold moon)

Two candle holders with orange candles  
A black candle  
Athame (ritual dagger)  
Magic wand (with owl)  
Pot (with pentagram)  
Altar pentacle  
Set of runes (made of red jasper)  
Two wooden runes *os* (Old English for signal) and *eolh-secg* (Old English for protection)  
Bowl with rose-scented incense  
Bowl with salt  
Persian walnuts  
Book of Shadows  
A personal item belonging to the visitor from the Otherworld (in this case the sarong of a deceased friend)

38 The Meal of the Ancestors here is prepared for three people (two from this world, one from the Otherworld); the set includes:

Three full place sets with food and drink  
Three stools and two ritual robes  
Set of tarot cards (for divination purposes)  
Ouija board (with threefold moon pentagram for communication with the ancestors and spirits)  
Pencils and notes (to note down what of the old year should remain, and what the new year should bring). The notes are burnt afterwards.

Furthermore:

Orange candle in the window showing the deceased the way  
Broom for cleansing the ritual site beforehand

All items on loan from private owner

### **Día de Muertos**

On the occasion of the Mexican Day of the Dead, the living and the souls of the deceased celebrate together. On the night of 31 October, the souls of deceased children are the first to arrive, followed by the souls of the deceased adults on the next night. The living set up altars with offerings in their homes; they are laid out with Cempasúchil flowers and petals to guide the souls to the altar, which is adorned with offerings, personal items, and photographs of the deceased. Salt is used to cleanse and preserve the body, lit candles show the souls the way, and copal or incense help to keep evil at bay and purify the air while favourite foods invite the souls to come and still their hunger and thirst.

### **Altar Created by the Artist Pepe Villegas**

Mexican artist Pepe Villegas lives and works in Tecamachalco in the state of Puebla. He is a representative of the contemporary Mexican art movements *muralismo* and *costumbrismo*. In his murals, altars, and paintings he gives important old customs a new lease of life. Pepe Villegas' works are focussed on preserving and disseminating cultural practices and values that define Mexican identity. The seven steps of the altar represent the seven tiers a soul has to cross before it finds peace. When designing the altar, he also took inspiration from

Aztec *tzompantli*, shrines decorated with the skulls of those who had been sacrificed. He depicts how souls transform into doves on their journey from one world to the next.

- 39 Altar for the Mexican Day of the Dead | Pepe Villegas | 2025 | various materials and five ethnographic artefact groups | commissioned work

For his figure to mark the Day of the Dead, the artist Pedro Linares drew on the Revelation of St John from the New Testament. It first mentions a horseman on a white horse, followed by three more horsemen on a red, a black, and often a green horse. White signifies conquest and victory; red stands for bloodshed and war; black for famine and pest, and the last colour for death and decay. For this Day of the Dead figure, Pedro Linares has painted the riders in colour and placed them on a single horse. It is not known whether he deliberately reversed the order or whether it was changed following transport.

- 40 Day of the Dead figure *Horsemen of the Apocalypse* | Pedro Linares | Mexico | around 1960 | papier mâché, wire, colour, cardboard, tissue paper | Domus, Kornfeld & Co., purchased in 1961; previously collection Valentin Jaquet | IVb 2603

The Day of the Dead is a source of inspiration for many artists in Mexico. Death appears in the form of skeletons, known as *calaveras*, shown doing everyday things like driving a car, riding a bicycle, or working on a job. Death is omnipresent and spares no one, irrespective of profession, wealth, or social status. At the same time, death is often mocked in these depictions.

- 41 Day of the Dead figure *Calavera riding a bicycle* | Mexico | 1960 | papier mâché | Collection Valentin Jaquet, gifted in 2013 | ME 269

- 42 Day of the Dead figure *Death driving a jeep* | Mexico | around 1960 | paper, glue, pigments, metal | Hans Peter His, bequest in 1972/1974; previously collection Valentin Jaquet | H 0783.03

- 43 Day of the Dead figure *Death scene in a hospital* | Mexico | around 1980 | ceramics, pigments, wire | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 11973

During the Day of the Dead, people play the deceased's favourite songs, either at home or at the cemetery. For this they often commission professional musicians, among them Mariachi orchestras and guitar trios, which are particularly popular. The many playlists on Spotify and YouTube underscore the popularity of certain genres of music.

- 44 Day of the Dead figure *Mariachi orchestra* | Mexico | around 1979 | clay, wire, pigments | Collection Valentin Jaquet, gifted in 2013 | ME 1165A-K

## Company

The soul and the deceased person, respectively, usually does not have to travel alone. In many cases they are accompanied or must at least carry certain items on them which is why it is quite common for grave goods to be buried with the deceased for the purpose of providing company on the journey to the beyond. Often this includes jewellery or at least fake jewellery. Musical accompaniment can also serve as a guide for the soul.

Whether hummingbirds, swans or hornbills – animals and other beings may assist the soul in finding its way to the netherworld or provide support when they face an obstacle on the way. In this context, birds often serve as spiritual companions and help the deceased pass from this world to the realm of the beyond.

The mythological mount *hamsa* of the Hindu creator god Brahma stands for wisdom, knowledge, and the ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. The bird resembles a swan or goose and is regarded as a soul's companion during the passing into the spiritual world, thus ending the eternal cycle of rebirth. This large wooden bird was once placed on high poles in front of a temple.

45 Swan *hamsa*, Brahma's mount | Bangkok, Thailand | before 1932 | wood | Fritz Sarasin and Rudolph Iselin, gifted in 1932 | Iib 551

In Borneo, the hornbill is associated with the heavenly sphere. For Iban people the hornbill is a divine messenger, a determiner of fate, a soul's companion, and ancestor, all in one. In the stories and creation myths of other groups, the hornbill is the god of the upper world, that is, the supreme deity. Motifs and images of the hornbill feature on many every-day and ritual items as this carved roof mount and the bamboo container depicting floral and anthropomorphic figures go to show.

46 Hornbill *burong kenyalang* | Iban, Borneo, Malaysia or Indonesia | around 1930 | wood, colour, glass sphere | August Flick, purchased in 1994 | Iic 21387

47 Bamboo vessel with hornbill figure | Siang, Puruk Cahu, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | before 1953 | bamboo, wood, vegetable fibre | Christoph Bigler, gifted in 2015; collected by the missionary Werner Bigler | Iic 22454

“The hornbill Tawá-un accompanies the soul of the recently deceased up to heavenly realm”, the Basel environmentalist Bruno Manser (1954–2005) wrote in his diary in 1988. Bruno Manser lived among the Penan in the rainforest of the Malaysian part of the island of Borneo from 1984 to 1990, studying Penan language, culture and life in the rainforest and documenting fauna and flora. The Bruno Manser Fund, founded in his name, continues his efforts to protect and preserve the natural and cultural environment of the Penan to this day.

48 Diary entries | Bruno Manser | Borneo, Sarawak, Malaysia | 1988 | paper, ink, pencil, crayon | Monika Niederberger-Manser, Ursula Meneghello-Manser, Erich Manser, Peter Manser, Kaspar Müller; gifted in 2021 | Iic 25515.30

Pearl shells accompanied their owners throughout life. They were given to them on the occasion of important events such their own birth, circumcision, or the birth of their first child. They also served as compensation payments in peace agreements. Even in death, they remained by the side of their owners; they were displayed in funerary ceremonies and ultimately buried with the deceased owner.

49 Mother-of-pearl shell *moklong* | Arawe, New Britain, Papua New Guinea | before 1930 | shell, vegetable fibres | Felix Speiser, purchased in 1930 | Vb 8561

In Nagaland, mock jewellery items made of wood were placed in the graves of wealthy individuals. The original, valuable pieces made of ivory, shells, glass beads and the like were passed on to the descendants and so remained in use.

50 Wooden imitation of necklace of a wealthy man made from carnelian beads as well as shells and columellae of the marine snail *Turbinella pyrum* | Ao-Naga, Longkhüm, Nagaland, India | before 1937 | wood, pigments | Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann, purchased in 1937 | I Ib 1147

51 Two wooden imitations of ivory armlets belonging to a wealthy man | Ao-Naga, Longkhüm, Nagaland, India | before 1937 | wood, pigments | Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann, purchased in 1937 | I Ib 1144+45

52 Wooden imitation of a necklace made from boar tusks and carnelian beads belonging to a wealthy man | Ao-Naga, Longkhüm, Nagaland, India | before 1937 | wood, pigments | Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann, purchased in 1937 | I Ib 1146

Among the Hmong, the mouth organ qeej plays a prominent role in funerary rituals. From the moment of a person's death, the musician plays certain melodies continuously for three days and three nights, often accompanied by a double drum. His job is to accompany and protect the deceased person's soul on their journey to the realm of the ancestors. During the ceremony, the qeej encodes sung poems in a secret tonal idiom that only the deceased can understand. In this way, the instrument conveys instructions regarding the journey, helping the soul to overcome obstacles and avoid evil spirits.

53 Mouth organ *qeej* | Mainland Southeast Asia | before 1955 | bamboo, wood, leather, metal (copper-iron alloy), palm leaf | collector unknown, gifted in 1955 | I Ib 1884

In pre-Hispanic Colombia, birds played an important part as helpers to shamans or as companions to humans in different stages of life. They are depicted in ceramics, painted on artefacts, and made of gold or other metals. In Quimbaya culture, the hummingbird accompanied humans on their journey to the world of the ancestors. If they had been treated well, they helped the deceased to find their way. These hummingbirds made of gold probably served as grave goods that ended up on the market after being illegally excavated.

54 Two pieces of jewellery depicting hummingbirds | Quimbaya, Colombia | probably 1st to 7th century | gold | Ernst A. Ritter, bequest in 1968 | IVc 11613+35

In the Kotawaringin region of southwestern Borneo, coffins were built in the shape of a bellied boat. Bow and stern were formed to resemble the head and tail of a *naga* (dragon/serpent). The deceased person was placed in the coffin, head facing Mount Sebaran, the realm of the ancestors. Gong strikes guided the soul on its journey; upon arrival in the beyond, the coffin turned into a boat.

55 Above the window and hall entrance  
Head and tail of a *naga* as bow and stern of a coffin | Tumon, Kotawaringin region, southwest Kalimantan, Indonesia | before 1934 | wood, pigments | Collection Mattheus Vischer-Mylius, gifted in 1934; originally collected by the missionary Luitpold Walter | I Ic 3077+78

## On the Road

At the outset of the journey, people say farewell to the deceased. The latter are laid out either in ceremonial dress or covered completely. Following this, the body is taken to its final resting place – depending on tradition, either after a certain period of time, by way of a detour, after cremation or in many cases directly.

During this stage, masks play a prominent role in many areas – they feature in dances and funerary ceremonies, are placed on graves, even buried together with the deceased.

With the physical body taken care of, the soul, or spirit, faces a journey of its own. It may involve many stages and be fraught with obstacles. Sometimes it has to fend off or defeat evil forces or needs guiding to the beyond with the help of various paraphernalia. If people hold specific beliefs about the journey to the beyond, these are sometimes represented in visual form.

The white, female *okuyi* or *mukuyi* masks were made and used by various groups along the Ogowe River. They performed mainly at funerary ceremonies and, among the Punu, at initiations of young men. The masker wore a costume made of animal skin and raffia fibre and danced on stilts up to two metres in height. The masks represent young, deceased girls. The face depicts the ideal of female beauty, while the white colour in itself is genderless. It stands for the world beyond and the ancestors who still impact on the world of the living.

56 Mask *okuyi* or *mukuyi* | Punu, Gabon | before 1930 | wood, kaolin, black pigments | Hans Stalder, gifted in 1930 | III 7020

The masks known as *luha* among the Tumon people of south-western Kalimantan make their appearance on the day of the funeral. They represent spirit beings who accompany the soul of the deceased from the house of mourning to Mount Sebayon, the final resting place of the dead. Once there, the spirit beings transform into the pets of the deceased. The masks themselves are usually placed on the grave, where they are left to rot.

57 Luha mask *European* | Tumon, Kotawaringin region, southwest Kalimantan, Indonesia | before 1934 | wood, pigments, vegetable fibre, metal | Collection Mattheus Vischer-Mylius, gifted in 1934; collected by the missionary Luitpold Walter | IIc 2991

58 Luha mask *nago* (serpent/dragon, Naga) | Tumon, Kotawaringin region, southwest Kalimantan, Indonesia | before 1931 | wood, pigments, vegetable fibre | Collection Mattheus Vischer-Mylius, gifted in 1931; collected by the missionary Hermann Emil Henking | IIc 2878

59 Luha mask *bamba* (deer) | Tumon, Tapin Bini, Kotawaringin region, southwest Kalimantan, Indonesia | mid-20th century | wood, pigments, vegetable fibre, palm leaf | Collection Werner Friedrich Schneeberger, gifted in 1976 | IIc 18234

In Appenzell, the wooden boards on which a deceased person had been laid out were cut to size and painted after the funeral. Affixed to the outside of the house, they served as a memento of the deceased until the wood weathered away. At the same time, the boards were believed to prevent the deceased person from returning to the world of the living. This board was made for Franz Fässler (1796–1866).

60 Death-board *E-Brett* | Appenzell Innerrhoden, Switzerland | 1866 | wood | Fritz Hoffman-La Roche, gifted in 1906 | VI 904

Depictions of ships are quite common in Indonesia. In the early days, scholars assumed that most of these depictions featured so-called vessels of the dead or soul ships on which the

deceased travelled to the beyond. Recent research paints a more nuanced picture. The lavishly decorated fabrics from southern Sumatra once served as status symbols of noble families and were displayed or worn during festivities. The depicted ships stand for critical shifts from one life stage to the next, symbolizing the transition that lay ahead – including but not exclusively – the journey from this world to the beyond.

61 Festive sarong for women *tapis* with depiction of ship | Lampung region, Southern Sumatra, Indonesia | early 20th century | cotton, warp ikat, silk | Collection Jaap Langewis, purchased in 1966 | IIC 15952

62 Ceremonial cloth / hanging *palepai* with depiction of ship | Lampung region, Southern Sumatra, Indonesia | early 20th century | cotton, brocaded decorative elements | Collection Jaap and Laurens Langewis, purchased in 1956 | IIC 14757

The scroll painting serves as a bridge between this world and the beyond. It is part of a ritual in the course of which a shaman departs from this world to establish contact with the souls of the dead. The picture shows various stages of the deceased's journey to the beyond: the painting opens with various beings gathered around an altar table. It depicts the reception of a divine messenger with his companions on horseback. The deceased person's litter is accompanied by an escort, followed by twelve young women. At the rear, we have a group of deities on their chariots.

63 The dragon bridge of the great Dao | China | 1938 | paper, pigments, hemp cord | Veronika Oesch-Meier, gifted in 1999 | IID 14526

The mask called *mukenga* steps out in a richly-layered costume consisting of raffia fibre and strings of beads. It performs at funerals of members of the royal family, dignitaries, and men of the *mukenga* society in the northern part of the Kuba Empire. Its impressive performance bestows splendour and prestige upon the deceased person. The shape of the mask with its protruding trunk refers to the elephant, the strongest animal around. It expresses the king's status and power.

64 Mask *mukenga* | Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1910 | textile, raffia fibre, pigments, glass beads, cowrie shells, leather, metal | H. Salomon, purchased in 1910 | III 3416

The *giwoyo* mask of the western Pende represents the body of a deceased person in a coffin. The part encircled by raffia fibre signifies the body covered in embroidered raffia cloths. The face with its half-closed eyes is left uncovered, just as is the laid-out corpse. The mask is worn horizontally on the head. It makes its appearance in the bush and in the tall grass at the edge of the village where the souls of the dead linger. Their voices can be heard in the distance when the wind passes through the tall grass.

65 Mask *giwoyo* | Pende, Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1938 | wood, pigments, raffia | Hans Himmelheber, purchased in 1948 | III 9513

Among the Senufo, the *poro* men's secret society is one of the most important institutions. It is in charge of the opulent funerary ceremonies and carries out all ritual performances. Among other things, it separates the body from its life force (*nyui*, i.e. shadow). On the occasion of the funeral, members of the society perform in a variety of masks, combining the features of different animals: wild boar tusks, crocodile or hyena mouths, and buffalo or antelope horns. Often, a hornbill or chameleon is featured on the forehead. The mask *kponyugu*, head of the *poro* society, accompanies the deceased on their transfer from the village of the living to the "village of the dead".

66 Mask *kagba* or *navige* | Senoufo, Côte d'Ivoire | before 2005 | wood, pigments | Collection Hans Röthlingshöfer, bequest in 2005 | III 27514

67 Mask *kponyugu*, head of the *poro* | Senoufo, Côte d'Ivoire | before 1958 | wood, pigments | Elsa Eckert-Voegelin, gifted in 1999; previously collection Lorenz Eckert | III 27142

The collective term *kodal* or *kpeli* refers to mask figures that are not directly involved in ritual tasks, which means they can be seen by women and other non-initiated persons. These masks make their appearance at initiation ceremonies, harvest festivals, and funerals. In the case of funerals, they are worn exclusively by carvers and blacksmiths and enter the scene on the last day of the ceremonies, a welcome distraction and entertainment after the strenuous days marked by ritual duties.

68 Mask *kodal* or *kpeli* | Senoufo, Côte d'Ivoire | before 1930 | wood, pigments | Hans Himmelheber, purchased in 1930 | III 7083

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Akan female potters used to create ceramic heads or even entire sculptures. Their purpose was to commemorate deceased kings and other high-ranking individuals. The representations are overall idealized, but certain decorative scars and hairstyle elements refer to the specific nature of the deceased person. During funeral ceremonies, family relatives used to place the sculptures in a sacred grove next to the cemetery. They formed the focal point of the ceremonies. The commemorative heads reminded the people that the souls of the deceased lived on in a different shape. For their journey to the realm of the ancestors they were offered food and drink.

69 Two commemorative heads *ntiri* | Asante, Mpraeso, Ghana | before 1938 | clay, blackened | Wilhelm Stamm, purchased in 1951 | III 11333+34

The central motif of this shroud is a stupa, a relics shrine, decorated with garlands of flowers. The stupa is a symbol of Buddhahood and thus signifies the end of the eternal cycle of rebirth. The precious materials and inscriptions in Sanskrit and Chinese suggest that this shroud was donated on the occasion of the death of a high-ranking priest, a Tibetan lama.

70 Shroud | Tibet | 19th century | silk, metal (gimp), brocaded decorative elements | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | IId 14194

Among the Merina and Betsileo peoples in the highlands of Madagascar, silk fabrics not only adorned the bodies of the living, but also of the dead. The colour red was associated with heat, blood, life force, and strength, which is why it was reserved for rulers, nobles, ancestors, and ritual paraphernalia. So-called *lambamena*, or “red cloths” are still used today in both the first burial ceremony *fandevenana* and in secondary mortuary ceremonies *famadihana*. Relatives bring such cloths as gifts to the funeral to dress the deceased appropriately. In doing so, they express their care for the future ancestor and, at the same time, help to maintain community-strengthening relationships.

71 Silk cloth *lambamena* | Madagascar | 1887–1890 | silk, pigments, colouring of the warp and weft threads | Niculò Letta, gifted in 2003; former owner Conradin Andeer | III 27456

We have very little reliable information on the production and use of the magnificent ikat cloths from the Kalumpang region of Sulawesi. Only a few pieces survived the internal turmoil following the struggle for Indonesian independence, having been traded to other regions as valuable commodities previously. Originally, they probably served decorative

purposes or figured as status symbols in connection with certain rites of passage. In the anthropological literature, they are also referred to as shrouds.

- 72 Ceremonial cloth / shroud *papori to noling* | Kalumpang region, Highlands of West Sulawesi, Indonesia | probably 19th century | cotton, warp ikat, vegetable dye | Collection Jaap and Laurens Langewis, purchased in 1956 | IIc 14814

The Kuba placed the body of a deceased person, coated in camwood paste, in a red cloth. It was then wrapped in several layers of raffia cloth, similar to the skirts worn by the living. In addition, several layers of raffia cloth and precious fabrics featuring embroidery and appliqués were placed on the body to honour the deceased. The quantity and quality of fabrics were an indication of the deceased's social status and wealth. The displayed fabrics were then placed in the coffin with the body and buried. The efforts the relatives went to aimed at carrying over the identity that the deceased person had enjoyed in life to the world of the ancestors.

- 73 Raffia fabric | Kuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo | before 1938 | raffia, pigments, satin | Hans Himmelheber, purchased in 1948 | III 9524

A fan is used to guide the spirit of the deceased to the beyond. According to Chinese beliefs, death does not mark an end but rather a transition of the spirit to the netherworld. On this journey, the deceased are accompanied by rituals and objects that protect and support them on the way. In return, they grant their descendants health, happiness, and prosperity.

- 74 Fan | China | 20th century | wood, paper | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015 | IID 9448

The amulet is either placed on the grave or in the coffin and burned with the body. It is printed with a blessing to protect the spirit of the deceased from negative influences and misfortune on their path to the next rebirth. The seal suggests that the amulet was procured at the Shimogamo shrine in Kyoto. The amulet is part of the Shinto tradition, which in Japan is closely linked with Buddhist practices.

- 75 Amulet *hoi-gaku* | Kyoto, Japan | 1992 | wood (fir), paper, string, silver and gold foil | Gerhard Baer, purchased in 1994 | IID 11942

## Accompanying the Soul Among the Ngaju of Borneo

In the language of Ngaju priests in southern central Kalimantan, the Earth is referred to as the “river of borrowed life”, meaning that life on Earth is merely lent to us and must be returned upon death. Death, in turn, opens the door to eternal life in the other-worldly village of Lewu Liau, which is located on the seventh tier of heaven. There, paradisiacal conditions prevail, no one has to work, everything is provided for, and everyone lives in wealth like kings and queens.

In order for the deceased to reach Lewu Liau safely, numerous preparations must be carried out with great care. These include a timely first burial after three days, *tantaluk matei*, followed by a secondary funeral, *tiwah*, several years later.

According to Ngaju belief, a human being has four souls: a life soul, *hambaruan*, a bone soul, *liau karahang tulang*, a flesh soul, *liau balawan panjang*, and a breath soul, *panyalumpuk liau*. Upon death, the four souls go different ways.

- The breath soul, *panyalumpuk liau* leaves the body and heads straight for the village of the deceased, Lewu Liau.
- On the occasion of the first burial, the flesh soul, *liau balawan panjang*, is taken to the village of Batang Danum Ruas on the second heavenly tier.
- The life soul *hambaruan* becomes *liau kaharingan* and is guided to the village of Lewu Bukit Nalian Lanting on the third heavenly tier, which is guarded by a woman.
- The bone soul, *liau karahang tulang*, remains in the grave until the secondary funeral.

The secondary funeral, the extensive and most important mortuary feast, *tiwah*, is usually staged years after the first burial. For one thing, the event is very costly and most families have to first gather together the necessary means, for the other, the people wait for all the flesh to have fallen from the bones and become mingled with the earth. In the meantime, the other two souls have been purified in the respective intermediate heavens.

The *tiwah* lasts for 33 days and involves a host of priests in different capacities. With their chants and rituals, they enable and perform all the events in the netherworld throughout the entire *tiwah*.

First, the priests fetch back the two souls, *liau balawan panjang* and *liau kaharingan*, from their heavenly villages with the help of soul boats and escort them to the *tiwah* village. At the same time, they symbolically revive the corpse with their chants, before reuniting the revived corpse with the two retrieved souls.

On the night of the soul's passage, the priests guide the deceased, *liau*, with their chants to the seventh tier of heaven, to the nether-worldly village of Lewu Liau. They receive back their breath soul, *panyalumpuk liau*, making them complete again.

Towards the end of the *tiwah*, the bones are buried in a special ceremony. In the process, the excavated and cleansed bones of the deceased are consigned to the ossuary, *sandung*. During this ceremony, the priests build a bridge from the upper world with their chants. This allows the *liau*, complete and in possession of all their souls, to come to the *tiwah* village and say farewell to their relatives and their own bones.

The *tiwah* concludes with the cleansing and return of the descendants to normal, everyday village life.

Map-like representations and sketches created by Ngaju priests have been known since the early 20th century. They served as mnemonic devices and for the training of young priests. The priests held them in high esteem and used them repeatedly in rituals by placing them in front of them and accompanying the deceased and their souls on their journey through the two worlds by chants based on the drawings.

The map of the upper world, occasionally also referred to *jalan liau*, the path of the deceased, features at the bottom the Earth, that is, the world of humans. Above it is the rainbow that serves as access to the upper world and the various heavenly spheres. At the top, separated by a rectangle ocean, is the realm of the supreme deity, Mahatala.

76 Representation of the upper world | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | first half of 20th century | paper, ink, tusche | Hans Schärer, gifted from bequest in 1949 | IIC 8605e

The underworld is the realm of the deity Djata. On the map of the underworld, the abode of humans is at the top, located on a large river. A deep spot in the river marks the entrance to the underworld. Beneath, the various realms of the underworld and the beings that reside there are shown.

77 Representation of the underworld | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | first half of 20th century | paper, ink, tusche | Hans Schärer, gifted from bequest in 1949 | IIC 8605a

The tree of life, *batang garing*, plays a pivotal role in the creation and emergence of the human world. The tree grows from Mahatala's headdress during the third creation period. A male and a female hornbill destroy the tree of life in a fight and then go on to kill each other; this leads to the emergence of the human race and human world. The tree of life is featured in many representations, often depicted as the totality of the emblems and possessions of the supreme deities. The spear stands for Mahatala and the upper world, the fabric (the cloths in the branches) for Djata and the underworld.

78 Representation of the tree of life *batang garing* | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | first half of 20th century | paper, ink, tusche | Hans Schärer, gifted from bequest in 1949 | IIC 8605h

The hornbill boat, *banama tingang*, is named after its hull in the shape of a hornbill, *tingang*. On the occasion of the primary burial, the priests guide the two souls *liau balawan panjang* and *liau kaharingan* to the intermediate heavenly realm where they remain until the *tiwah*. The boat includes the tree of life, spirit beings that take the souls to the upper world along with offerings, gongs, and food – gifts that are given to souls.

79 Representation of the hornbill boat *banama tingang* | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | paper, tusche, pencil, crayon | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015 | IIC 21998

On their journey, the souls also take with them the “village of the souls”. It represents the home village of the human species Batu Nindan Tarong in the upper world. At the same time, it is a replica of their village at home in the world of humans. It is given to the souls on the occasion of the primary burial and meant to serve as place of residence until it is time for the *tiwah*.

80 Representation of the soul village | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | paper, tusche, pencil, crayon | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015 | IIC 21996

When the deceased are finally taken to the village of the dead, Lewu Liau, during the *tiwah*, the soul village is towed along behind a soul ship.

81 Representation of the hornbill boat *banama tingang* (left) and the soul village (right) with separate caption | Sawang | Ngaju, Kuala Kapuas, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | paper, tusche, pencil, crayon | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015; acquired by the missionary Karl Epple | IIC 21992+93

82 Representation of the hornbill boat *banama tingang* (left) and the soul village (right) | Sawang | Ngaju, Kuala Kapuas, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | wood, pigments | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015; acquired by the missionary Karl Epple | IIC 22044

By means of the dagger boat, *banama rohong*, the priests take the bone soul, *liau karahang*, to the upper world. After the primary burial, the bone soul remains in the grave until it is escorted to the upper world on the occasion of the *tiwah*.

83 Representation of the dagger boat *banama rohong* with separate caption | Sawang | Ngaju, Kuala Kapuas, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | paper, tusche, pencil, crayon | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015; acquired by the missionary Karl Epple | IIC 21994+95

84 Representation of the dagger boat *banama rohong* | Sawang | Ngaju, Kuala Kapuas, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | wood, pigments | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015; acquired by the missionary Karl Epple | IIC 22043

The vehicle known as “soul boat” is a combination of the hornbill (upper world) and the water snake (also called Naga, lower world). It stands for the totality of the cosmos. On the night of the passage of the soul, Tempon Telon, representative of the divine embodied in the chants of the priests, guides the souls and the deceased to the seventh tier of heaven, to the village of Lewu Liau in the beyond. The deceased are reunited with all their souls and admitted to the community of ancestors.

85 Representation of the soul boat (unified hornbill and water snake boat) | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | paper, tusche, pencil, crayon | Collection of the Basel Mission, gifted in 2015 | IIC 21997

In order for the soul boats to land on the banks of the village of the dead, Lewu Liau, they require a landing stage.

86 Representation of the landing stage | Ngaju, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | early 20th century | paper, tusche, ink | Hans Schärer, gifted from bequest in 1949 | IIC 8605g

The drawing depicts a major feast that resembles a *tiwah*. The panorama is reminiscent of a landscape representing the transition from this world to the next, as conveyed and depicted during the *tiwah*. One recognizes details from both worlds. Thus, for instance, the church on the far right is situated on the banks of the river in the beyond, Batang Tala Bulan, the local Kaharingan term for the village of the deceased (Tala Bulan = Lewu Liau / Lewoe Liou).

87 Drawing of a mortuary feast | G. Eikenans | Siang, Puruk Cahu, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | mid-20th century | paper, pencil | Christoph Bigler, gifted in 2015; collected by the missionary Werner Bigler | IIC 22470

88 Pole for tethering a sacrificial animal | Siang, Upper Barito River, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | late 19th /early 20th century | ironwood | Collection Paul Wirz, purchased in 1926 | IIC 2460

## Cleansing the Soul in Bali

According to Hindu belief, the soul is reborn. But before this can happen, it must be liberated from its material husk and cleansed. In Bali, this is a complex process that is carried out in stages and which can go on for months, even years.

As long as the ethereal soul of a deceased person is not freed from their decaying body, it remains an unpredictable spirit with the ability to cause harm. It is only through cremation and the ensuing rituals that the soul is freed from its physical husk and the five material elements (earth, fire, water, air, ether), which are returned to nature.

A major purification ritual referred to as *nyekah*, *mukur* or *maligya*, which lasts for days, concludes the process of transmigration, thus deifying the deceased person who enters the family or clan temple as an ancestral deity. In accordance with its karma, and after multiple steps of cleansing, the purified soul can, later, return to the fold of its former family and be reborn in a new body.

Since cremations are costly, only the wealthiest families have the means for an immediate cremation, that is, without having to do with a temporary burial for the moment. Consequently, the majority of people first bury their deceased on a temporary basis and wait for a collective cremation organized by the respective *banjar* (neighbourhood) and kinship group to ensure that the cremation is carried out fully and correctly.

Immediately after death, the soul of the deceased lingers above the body for some time. To mark its temporary, symbolical abode, an effigy called *sanggah urip* is erected beside the corpse. The relatives present are allowed to grieve during this period, but wailing loudly would disturb the soul and send it on a “slippery path to heaven”.

89 Seat of the soul *sanggah urip* | Bali, Indonesia | mid-20th century | palm leaf, gold foil, paper, wood | Collection Theo Meier, gifted in 1971 | IIC 16820

### The cremation: *pangabenan*, *palebunan*

Preparations get under way when the body of the deceased is laid out at the homestead. If the deceased person has been first buried, the exhumed skeleton or an effigy takes the place of the body. Daily offerings accompany the entire cycle. A “measure” *ukur kepeng* made of cotton threads and punched Chinese coins is placed on the washed body clad in white cloth. It corresponds to the size of the deceased person and warrants that, upon rebirth, all the bones will be in the right place and of the right size.

90 Measure of the deceased person *ukur kepeng* | Bali, Indonesia | before 1927 | cotton threads, punched coins | Collection Paul Wirz, purchased in 1927 | IIC 2535.01-03

Next to the head, the “memory” of the deceased person *angenan* is placed. Normally, the effigy is placed inside a hollowed-out coconut. The egg shell serves as an oil lamp, keeping alive the memory of the deceased person and signifying the presence of their soul.

91 Memory of the deceased person *angenan* | Bali, Indonesia | late 20th century | wood, yarn, egg shell | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 22674

92 Two effigies *angenan*, memory of the deceased person | Bali, Indonesia | 20th century | palm leaf, bamboo, woollen thread | Collection Robert and Cécile Hiltbrand-Grimmeisen, gifted in 2014 | RH 6457.01+02

Next to the dead body, relatives erect the person's "visualization" *pengawak*, a symbol of the body and emblem of the new life after rebirth.

- 93 Two effigies *cendana pengawak* | Ida Bagus Jelantik | Sidemen, eastern Bali, Indonesia | 2003 | textile, gold appliqué, palm leaf, metal, gold and silver foil, bamboo, wood, bead | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017; commissioned work | IIC 22667+68

After being laid out at the homestead, the body is carried to the cremation ground by means of a multi-tiered structure called *bade*. The *bade*, which is reserved for members of the higher castes and lineages, is a symbol of the cosmos and the three worlds that make up the universe.

- 94 Ink painting *Procession to the cremation ground* | unknown artist from Sanur | Sanur, southern Bali, Indonesia | around 1940 | tusche, paper | Collection Ernst Schlager, gift from bequest in 1971 | IIC 16492

The carrying frame *sanan* with the platform *rancangan* resting on it represents the underworld. The tortoise Bedawang constitutes the base, with the world resting on its shell. The two royal serpents Anantabhoga and Basuki wrap themselves around the foundation and prevent it from shaking, in other words, protect Bali from earthquakes. The reverse of the base features the winged head of the demonic Bhoma, the son of the earth goddess Dewi Pertiwi and Wisnu, the god of rain; above is Garuda, the divine messenger and vehicle of Wisnu (Vishnu), who guides the soul to the beyond.

The central tier of the *bade*, symbolizing the middle world, is used to hold the dead body wrapped in white cloth, its bones or an effigy. The goose at the back of the body chamber, *bale balean*, is the vehicle of the goddess Saraswati and symbolizes wisdom, learning, and heavenly purity.

The pagoda-like roofs, *tumpang*, which stand for the upper world, indicate the social status of the deceased. Like the roofs of the *meru* shrines in Balinese temples, they are always arranged in odd numbers on top of one another. Three to five roofs belong to the principal, ancient Balinese clan by the name of Pasek, seven to nine to nobility, and eleven to the kings of Gelgel and their subsequent empires. High-ranking Brahmans are carried on an open lotus throne *padmasana* to the cremation ground.

- 95 Cremation tower *bade* | Wayan Sika and family | Silakarang, southern Bali, Indonesia | 2001 | wood, bamboo, textile, gold imitation foil, pigments, vegetable fibres | commissioned work, 2001 | IIC 21792.01-10

Upon reaching the cremation site, the corpse is transferred to the incineration coffin *patulangan*. For the higher castes and clans, coffins are made in the shape of various mythological animals; their bodies are hollowed out and equipped with a lid. The most popular cremation animals for higher casts, clans and wealthy families include white cows (for Brahmans), black bulls, winged lions, and fish with elephant trunks.

- 96 Incineration coffin *patulangan* | Bali, Indonesia | 1930s | wood, textile, parchment, pigments, vegetable fibre, metallic foil | Freiwilliger Museumsverein Basel, on permanent loan in 1939; collected by Theo Meier | IIC 7360

Numerous offerings accompany the cremation and are also consigned to the flames.

- 97 Death mask for a cremation | Bali, Indonesia | before 1937 | wood, colour, lime | Collection Theo Meier, purchased in 1937 | IIC 6829

98 Death mask for textile offering at the cremation | Bali, Indonesia | before 1950 | wood, pigments | Research trip Alfred Bühler 1949, purchased | IIC 13425

After cremation, the charred remains of the body are separated from the other ash and taken in a procession to a river flowing to the ocean or to the ocean itself where they are scattered.

### **Purification 12 days after cremation: *ngeroras***

After cremation, the soul may be liberated from the body but it is still contaminated by earthly impurities. The rituals that follow are less spectacular in appearance but tend to be costlier and more laborious. Twelve days after cremation, a second *ngeroras* purification should be performed. In this case, effigies replace the body; these are reanimated with water and fire and then dissolved again. Again, the ashes are taken in a tower to the coast or a river flowing to the sea.

99 Effigy *adegan* for *ngeroras* or *mukur* | Bali, Indonesia | mid-20th century | metal, textiles, cotton, palm leaf, paper, clay, wood, semi-precious stone, flower, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017; previously collection Friedrich Seltmann | IIC 22666

100 Two portraits *adegan* for *ngeroras* | Bali, Indonesia | late 20th century | sandalwood, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017 | IIC 22670+71

101 Two effigies *pralingga* for *ngeroras* | Bali, Indonesia | before 1950 | wood, pigments | Research trip Alfred Bühler 1949, purchased | IIC 13475+76

On the occasion of the *ngeroras* ceremony, the descendants write inscriptions bearing the names of the deceased on toddy palm leaves to commemorate them. These are also burnt.

102 Toddy palm leaves for *ngeroras* | Bali, Indonesia | 1960 | rattan, toddy palm leaf, cotton string, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017; previously collection Friedrich Seltmann | IIC 22676

### **The final, extensive purification ceremony: *nyekah*, *mukur* or *maligya***

The final, extensive purification ceremony *nyekah* (also *mukur* or *maligya*) brings a close to the purification of the soul. The ceremony lasts for several days and is usually performed collectively. The rituals commonly commence down at the beach where the ashes from the cremation had been scattered. Once again, the soul is called back, the new effigy burnt, the ashes are collected and consigned to the *sekah* effigy. This is then taken to the sea and committed to the ocean from a boat. This done, the soul is pure and the deceased person ready to take their place as a deified ancestor in the family temple. Now, the soul may be reborn into its circle of kin.

103 Effigy *sekah* for *maligya* | Bali, Indonesia | mid-20th century | wood, palm leaf, blade of grass, flower, paper, cotton, pigments | Collection Werner Gamper, gifted in 2017; previously collection Friedrich Seltmann | IIC 22675

## Interim stop – Bardo

According to Buddhism, birth and death do not represent the beginning and end of existence. Rather, they embody transitional processes of Being. The Tibetan Book of the Dead, *Bardo Thodol*, the book of “Liberation Through Hearing During an Intermediate State”, describes a transformation process *bar do* that lasts for 49 days. It determines whether a deceased person will be able to leave the cycle of rebirth, which is perceived as painful, or whether they will be reborn into another existence. The *bar do* is broken down into three phases, during which the deceased experience different visions. Should these apparitions be recognized as projections of one’s own mind, it may lead to a new, more favourable existence, even to complete liberation from the eternal cycle of rebirths.

Apart from comments on the process of dying, the *Bardo Thodol* also contains instructions regarding the practice of meditation and constitutes the foundation of the Tibetan mortuary ritual. In the West it became known in an adapted version as the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Ideally, Buddhists read the script to prepare for their own passing. If a dying person is unable to read for him or herself, monks will read the text for them at their deathbed. The mortuary rituals continue for the full 49 days.

The *Bardo Thodol* traces back to the tantric master and Buddhist scholar Padmasambhava, who is believed to have lived in the 8th century. He used to conceal tantric texts in caves, lakes, trees, even in the minds of spiritual individuals where they used to remain hidden until the right time of disclosure had come.

104 Manuscript of the *Bardo Thodol (bar-do-thos-grol)* | Tibet | 19th century | hand-made paper, block print | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | IId 14384

The two scroll paintings visualize scenes that the deceased will experience in the intermediate state *bar do* after death. This transformative process runs in three phases: the *bar do* of Dying, the *bar do* of true Being, and the *bar do* of Becoming. In the second phase, the deceased encounter numerous deities accompanied by deafening noise, bright lights and glaring colours. In a sequence of twice seven days, they first meet 42 peaceful gods and subsequently 58 wrathful deities. In order to achieve liberation from the eternal cycle of rebirth, the deceased person cannot flinch upon experiencing the visions and thus be drawn down into one of the six worlds. Instead, they must recognize that the apparitions are nothing more than projections of their own mind that feed off the actions and thoughts from their previous life.

105 Thangka, mandala of the 42 peaceful deities | Tibet | 19th century | textile, silk brocade, linen, glue tempera, leather, metal knob, wooden rods | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | IId 13845

106 Thangka, mandala of the 58 wrathful deities | Tibet | 19th century | textile, silk, linen, glue tempera | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | IId 13846

This scroll painting shows the Wheel of Life. It is a kind of educational picture and explains the cause and effect of human action that determines our present and future existence. At the centre are the three evils of greed, hatred, and ignorance, symbolically represented by rooster, pig, and snake. The six segments represent the six realms of possible rebirth: In the upper half are the realms of the gods, the titans, and humans. In the lower half, the realms of the animals, the spirits of hunger along with the cold and hot hells. The outer circle features events that help to shape human life. The wheel is held by the tutelary

god Yama, the devourer of time. He reminds viewers not to waste away their life but to prepare for the crucial event of death by engaging in spiritual practice.

- 107 Thangka Bhavacakra – Wheel of Existences | Tibet | 19th century | silk, linen, glue tempera | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | Iid 13864

In the centre of the scroll painting, an angry and furious Dharmaraja Yama is seen dancing on a corpse. He is the visionary apparition of a yogi meditating under a tree (to the left) at a Tibetan mortuary site. The wrathful appearance in a sea of flames lends expression to the destructive forces embodied in the spiritual evils of greed, hate, and ignorance which keep humans locked in the eternal cycle of rebirths. The deity has the power to transform these destructive forces into the energy of wisdom.

- 108 Thangka Dharmaraja Yama | Tibet | no date | silk brocade, cotton, linen, glue tempera, metal knobs, wooden rods | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | Iid 13686

Manjushri-Yamantaka is a wrathful manifestation of the Buddhist bodhisattva Manjushri, who is particularly revered in Tibetan Buddhism. He is the embodiment of wisdom and compassion. He takes on a forceful and terrifying guise in the attempt to overcome death and thus the eternal cycle of rebirths.

- 109 Thangka Manjushri-Yamantaka | Tibet | early 18th century | silk brocade, linen, glue tempera, metal knobs, wooden rods | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | Iid 13687

The Western Paradise of the transcendent Buddha Amitabha is called Sukhavati. Many Buddhists in Asia hope to be reborn into this Pure Land in order to escape the eternal, but painful cycle of rebirths for good. Sukhavati is a stopover on the path to supreme enlightenment. Free from all kinds of everyday worry, it promises to be a place where one can devote oneself exclusively to one's own spiritual immersion. This is also why prayers in honour of Buddha Amitabha are often recited at the moment of death by or for the dying.

- 110 Thangka Sukhavati – The Western Paradise of Amitabha | Tibet | 17th century | silk brocade, cotton, linen, glue tempera, metal knobs, wooden rods, leather | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | Iid 13850

Citipati or Dharmapala is a tutelary deity in Tibetan Buddhism. They consist of the unity of two beings: a male and a female skeletal deity dancing wildly with intertwined limbs. Their dance stands for the eternal cycle of death and rebirth; the skeletal appearance is the expression of transience and change. They are encircled by a garland of flames that represents the process of transformation. Citipati is the guardian of the charnel grounds.

- 111 Appliqué-Thangka Citipati | Mongolia | no date | silk brocade, silk, linen, cotton, wood, metal | Collection Richard R. Ernst & Magdalena Ernst-Kielholz, gifted in 2024 | Iid 16041

Depictions of hell were widespread in Mongolia in the 20th century, especially in manuscripts, the so-called *jiruy-tu nom* (picture books). These tell the story of a young monk who went in search for his mother in the various hells. Not only are the individual hells and the punishments therein depicted in great detail, the crimes committed by those being tormented are explained, too. The fabric painting, which probably served as a hanging in a temple, depicts these hellish punishments as imagined in Mongolian Buddhist belief.

- 112 Fabric painting with depiction of hell | Mongolia | no date | silk, pigments | Collection Richard R. Ernst & Magdalena Ernst-Kielholz, gifted in 2024 | Iid 16036

## Arrival and Remembrance

The beyond marks the end of both the path and the journey. But having reached their destination doesn't mean that the deceased are forgotten. On the contrary, we commemorate them, cherish them, and sometimes they even impact on events in the world of the living.

Whether depicted figuratively or graphically, the deceased person remains close to the family in the role as an ancestor and thus part of their lives. On days of remembrance, the descendants often place certain items on their grave or final resting place, or send food, items they treasured in life, even luxury goods to their abode in the beyond for their care and wellbeing in the afterlife.

Among many Naga groups, the graves of prominent people become richly decorated memorials. They commemorate the deeds and standing of the deceased person buried there. The hornbill found as ornament on cloths, houses, and graves stands for loyalty, elegance, and dignity.

- 113 Model of a funerary post with stylized hornbills, moon, and tobacco pipe | Sangtam-Naga, Chare, Tuensang district, Nagaland, India | early 20th century | wood, pigments | Collection Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann, purchased in 1937 | Iib 1192

Among the Konso people of Ethiopia, wooden sculptures known as *waka* are commissioned for respected men that have passed away. *waka* stand for qualities such as intelligence, courage, bravery, fearlessness, and adeptness. They are raised publicly during an elaborate mortuary ceremony accompanied by songs praising the deeds and merits of the deceased. Through this act a deceased person is transformed into an ancestor whose task it becomes to safeguard the wellbeing and prosperity of his group. *waka* are erected along roads, at crossings, on public squares or at tomb sites on fields and in groves. Over time, the sculpture's features and edges begin to fade away until, after three or four generations, not only the wood disintegrates, collective memory, too, begins to dwindle.

- 114 Wooden sculpture *waka* | Konso, Ethiopia | before 1977 | wood | F. Bourgogne, purchased in 1977 | III 21327

Such elaborately carved *malangan* figures feature in ceremonies that go by the same name. They often take months or even years of preparation. Although the ceremonies are always staged in honour of one or usually several deceased individuals, they are not merely mortuary feasts but also serve other societal functions such as the payment of debts or the settling of disputes. The figures reflect the wealth of the clan of the deceased who commissioned the carvings and organized the feast. Afterwards, the figures were burnt or simply left to rot, thus allowing the successor to assume his role as new clan leader. Today, the carvings are usually preserved in the hope of supporting the artistic work of local carvers.

- 115 *malangan* figure | Medina, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea | before 1931 | wood, snail shells, pigments | Research trip Alfred Bühler 1931, purchased | Vb 10561

- 116 *malangan* figure | New Ireland, Papua New Guinea | before 1887 | wood, hair, snail shells, pigments | Carl and Johann Rudolf Geigy, gifted in 1887 | Vb 75

The narrow, wooden memorial boards called *toba* in Japanese are used in Buddhist remembrance rituals. They are adorned by monks with good wishes and symbols of good fortune and placed on or near the grave of a deceased by relatives each year.

The wood for this *toba* came from the Black Forest and was worked by the sawmill Echtele in Nordrach, Germany. The company was founded in 1890 and began specializing in niche markets and high-quality woods in the 1990s. For roughly the past twenty years, it has been producing *toba* blanks from silver fir for three Japanese companies. Every week, a shipping container loaded with roughly 40,000 *toba* blanks is sent to Japan, amounting roughly to 1.8 to 2 million memorial boards annually. The boards have to be of highest quality, that is, knot-free and with a uniform, straightforward grain, meaning that the growth rings have to be unbroken in the longitudinal cut of the wood. This is a crucial feature for Japanese customers as unbroken lines signify an unbroken life.

117 *toba* memorial board | Nordrach, Germany & Hitachi, Ibaraki, Japan | 2025 | wood (silver fir), pigments | Sägewerk Echtele KG and Hitachiko Mokuzai Soko K.K., gifted in 2025 | Iid 17000.01

In Judaism, so-called *Yahrzeit* candles are lit on the anniversary of the death of close relatives. The dates are based on the Jewish calendar and are noted on memorial calendars. *Yahrzeit* candles are lit at sunset and should remain burning for twenty-four hours. Similar candles are lit on *Yom HaShoah*, the day of remembrance for the victims of the Shoah.

118 *Yahrzeit* candle | Jerusalem, Israel | around 1980 | sheet metal, stearin, paper | Joseph Schadur, purchased in 1984 | VI 5913

The light emanating from the lantern house was intended to commemorate the deceased and protect them from evil forces. The grey sandstone, shaped like a small chapel, and the glass door protected the flame burning inside, making sure that the light would shine for as long as possible.

119 *Lantern* house | Basel, Switzerland | 19th century | sandstone, glass, metal | Brockenhaus Basel, purchased in 1911 | VI 4780

This stupa preserves the memory of the death of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and his complete extinguishment. After death, the Buddha's ashes and possessions were distributed across a range of burial mounds which later served as a blueprint for the stupa. In the case of this stupa, the square reliquary chamber rests on a round base. It is topped by a long spire with a crown. The step-like shape is evocative of the steps leading to the definite end of the cycle of rebirths. The lotus flower at the top stands for spiritual purity.

120 Cult sculpture *Mahaparinirvana Stupa* | Tibet | 16th century | yellow metal | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | Iid 14061

Decorated pastry like this was placed on the graves of the deceased. On days commemorating the dead, it is not uncommon in Serbia to bring along food and drink to the cemetery. The food is then shared among the living or placed on the graves.

121 Pastry | Pozarevac, Serbia | around 1966 | pastry, sugar coating | Ethnographic Museum Belgrade, purchased in 1966 | VI 34941

Votive plaques made of unfired clay are referred to as *tsha tsha* in Tibet. They are formed with help of wooden or metal moulds and are often painted or gilded after drying in the

sun. The manufacture of votive offerings is accompanied by prayers and considered spiritually meritorious. The plaques are to be found on altars, in monasteries, and at sacred sites. It is quite common for the ashes of a deceased person to be mixed

in with the clay. Placing these offerings at spiritually charged sites is considered beneficial for the deceased.

- 122 *tsha tsha* mould with imprint | Tibet | no date | metal, wood, clay, gypsum, pigments | Collection Gerd-Wolfgang Essen, purchased in 1998 | IId 14156

Chinese joss paper used for venerating the ancestors mimes regular banknotes. However, the face value of these banknotes is often highly exaggerated. These offerings, also known as hell money, were burnt in honour of the deceased and to appease them. If the offerings were substantial, the ancestors would bestow happiness and prosperity on their descendants. Conversely, a series of family misfortunes is seen as a sign of displeasure on the part of the deceased, who feel they are not being adequately cared for.

- 123 Joss paper | Singapore | around 2010 | paper, plastic foil | Stephanie Lovász, purchased in 2010 | IId 14949+951

Offerings of food and drink are an integral part of ancestor worship. In addition to fruit and alcohol, the offerings also include the deceased's favourite foods, in paper of course, including chocolate, pastries, and pralines.

- 124 Paper model of various sweets | Singapore | around 2010 | | paper, cardboard, plastic foil | Stephanie Lovász, purchased in 2010 | IId 14955

The deceased are also honoured with all the things that brought them joy in life. Chinese ancestor worship habitually takes into account the preferences and gender of the deceased. While male ancestors are usually gifted with cigarettes, cameras, and toy cars made of paper, the women are handed jewellery, cosmetics, clothes and luxury accessories – in paper, of course – through the sacrificial flames.

- 125 Paper model of a jewellery set | Singapore | around 2010 | paper, cardboard, plastic foil | Stephanie Lovász, purchased in 2010 | IId 14953

- 126 Paper handbag (imitation of a Burberry handbag) | Singapore | around 2010 | cardboard | Stephanie Lovász, purchased in 2010 | IId 14958

- 127 Paper model of a set of cigarettes | Singapore | around 2010 | paper, cardboard, plastic foil | Stephanie Lovász, purchased in 2010 | IId 14952

- 128 Paper model of an electronic set | Singapore | around 2010 | paper, cardboard, plastic foil | Stephanie Lovász, purchased in 2010 | IId 14954

The Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all have a concept of the Last Judgement. In Islam, this is linked to the idea that death marks the end of life and that the deceased return to Allah after death. The cloth picture depicts this moment: all humans, including martyrs, step before God and await the decision as to whether their path leads to the heavenly spheres or to hell.

- 129 *qalamqar* | Hasan-i Fakhkhari | Isfahan, Iran | around 1900 | cotton, cloth painting | Werenfels-Fonds, gifted in 1996 | IId 2973

On the island of Nias, ancestral figures and altars relate to noble and wealthy families. They represent important but long-deceased, male forefathers. The necklaces, earrings and headdresses worn by the figures denote their status and origin. They occupied a special place in the home and served as vessels for the souls of the deceased. Their presence warranted protection for both family and house.

- 130 Altar with ancestral figure *daru daru* | Hilizihono, Nias, Indonesia | before 1927 | wood | Collection Paul Wirz, purchased in 1927 | IIC 2597a+b
- 131 Ancestor figure *siraha salawa* | Nias, Indonesia | before 1906 | wood | Collection Gustav Schneider, purchased in 1906 | IIC 1170
- 132 A pair of ancestral figures *ana deo* | Ende, Flores, Indonesia | 1935 | wood, glass | Research trip Alfred Bühler 1935, purchased | IIC 3405+06

This print was produced in large runs and used in particular as a memento to children who had died young. The template was created by Wilhelm von Kaulbach around 1865 as an illustration to Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale *The Angel* which opens with the words: "Every time a good child dies, an angel of God comes down to earth, takes the dead child in his arms, spreads his large white wings and picks a handful of flowers, which he carries up to God so that they blossom even more beautifully than they do on Earth." Later the picture was published under the title *Eternal Home*.

- 133 Lithography *To God* | Emmishofen, Thurgau, Switzerland | around 1900 | paper, chromo lithography | Theo Gantner, purchased in 1977 | VI 46603

To honour deceased members of ruling families, the Mahafaly people of Madagascar erected impressive tomb structures. Each tomb consists of a stone sculpture which is topped by up to thirty, richly carved funerary poles called *aloalo*. Their purpose is to commemorate the deceased. At the same time, they serve as messengers that create a link to the realm of the dead. They are treated with utmost respect because they also watch over the lives of a deceased's descendants.

- 134 *aloalo* funerary pole | Mahafaly, Madagascar | before 1938 | wood, pigments | Hans Peter, purchased in 1939 | III 9023

Memorial figures constitute an important part of mortuary ceremonies in Kalimantan. These figures often display distinct features of the deceased person being honoured and indicate their rank in society. Seated figures are typical of the Bahau people along the Mahakam River and neighbouring groups. After the ceremony, the figures remain in front of a family's dwelling house for the purpose of protection while slowly weathering away.

- 135 Memorial figure | Lawangan, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | before 1987 | wood, pigments | Freiwilliger Museumsverein Basel, deposited on permanent loan in 1987; previous owner Anne Morley | IIC 20273

In northwestern New Guinea, the deceased were commemorated in the shape of small wooden ancestor figures called *korwar*. Little is known about these *korwar* because, following colonization, they were no longer produced. The figures were not carved for everyone; instead, they were the prerogative of certain family and clan leaders. Placed in the house of the respective family, they were an integral part of the lives of the descendants. They were consulted upon important occasions.

- 136 *korwar* figure | Lower Mamberano River, Papua, Indonesia | before 1913 | wood | Fritz Wilhelm Riegenbach, purchased in 1913 | Vb 1760

On the occasion of the large mortuary feasts practised by many societies in Kalimantan, the mortal remains of deceased family members are excavated, cleansed, and ceremoniously conferred to an ossuary, either in front of a dwelling house or at the edge of the village, where the bones find their final resting place while the soul is guided to the eternal village in the afterlife.

- 137 Ossuary in the shape of a dragon used for ritual secondary burial | Ot Danum / Limbai, central Kalimantan, Indonesia | 20th century | wood, pigments | August Flick, purchased in 1994 | IIC 21419.01-06

On the sacrificial pole from Leti, the deified founder of the clan, *aitihere*, is enthroned behind a sacrificial bowl. The figure serves as an abode for his soul. Each day, his descendants place an offering of betelnut, rice, meat, and egg in the bowl in the hope that their ancestor will continue to watch over their worldly doings and see to their wellbeing. In the event of sickness, crop failure or natural disaster, the ancestor would receive additional offerings. In the old days, every household had a smaller figure in or in front of their house. Large and richly decorated figures were the privilege of noble and wealthy families.

- 138 Sacrificial pole *iene* with figure of clan founder | Leti, Moluccas, Indonesia | before 1982 | wood | Emile Deletaille, purchased in 1982 | IIC 19868a-e

Mask costumes were used in the context of funerary rites for deceased leaders during which maskers performed as representatives of the deceased. Beard and headdress were made of plaited fibres incorporating human hair from male mourners. During the mourning period, the bereaved let their hair grow with the upcoming event in mind. The feather coat is adorned with black and brown pigeon feathers and reached down to the dancers' knees. The identity of the masker was kept strictly secret.

- 139 Mask costume | Hienghiene, New Caledonia-Kanaky, France | before 1913 | wood, feathers, hair, fibres, pigments, oils | Fritz Sarasin, gifted in 1913 | Vb 2389

### The artist Eddie Hara on “Death” and the “Path to the Beyond”

“To me personally I think dying is kinda journey to the other world. A happy ending from all this complicated chaos life. I rather don't want to believe in such hell and heaven stuff. I believe the journey will be pleasant, peaceful, some part could be scary, fun, exciting, sad (of saying goodbye to the loved ones), and free of haters' voices or thoughts!”

- 140 *See You on the Other Side* | Eddie Hara | 2025 | acrylic paint and three ethnographic artefacts on wall | ca. 3,5 x 7 m | commissioned work

The three ethnographic artefacts:

- Left Ancestral face *boho-na-bwete* | Kota-Mahongwe, Gabon | before 1955 | wood, metal, copper wire, iron alloy | Ernst and Annemarie Vischer-Wadler, bequest in 1995 | III 26693

Among the Kato-Mahongwa people of Equatorial Africa, extended families honoured the most important ancestors with the help of relics as far as the mid-20th century. The relics were stored in baskets or bark containers in the house of the family head. Attached to the lid of the reliquary was a sculpture that guarded its contents.

- Middle Luha mask *hantu rayo* (Great Spirit) | Kudangan, Kotawaringin region, Southwest Kalimantan, Indonesia | before 1934 | wood, pigments | Collection Mattheus Vischer-Mylius, gifted in 1934; originally collected by the missionary Johann Georg Baier | IIC 2992

The masks known as *luha* among the Tumon people of south-western Kalimantan make their appearance on the day of the funeral. They represent spirit beings who accompany the soul of the deceased from the house of mourning to Mount Sebayon, the final resting place of the dead. Once there, the spirit beings transform into the pets of the deceased.

Right Ancestral figure | Babar, Indonesia | first half of 20th century| wood, mother-of-pearl |  
Research trip Alfred Bühler 1949, exchange with the former Museum Batavia | IIC 14220

## Arts & Sciences

### Arnold Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*

The Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901) created five versions of his painting *Isle of the Dead* between 1880 and 1886. The painting became one of his most famous works and a leading exponent of Symbolism. Of the original five versions, four still exist, namely in museums in Basel, New York City, Berlin, and Leipzig.

The painting has inspired many a musician and composer. There are numerous musical works based on Böcklin's *Isle of the Dead*. Probably one of the best-known is Sergei Rachmaninoff's (1873–1943) symphonic poem *The Isle of the Dead* (Op. 29, 1909).

You will find a selection of further recordings at the listening station.

Here we show a reproduction of the third version of *Isle of the Dead* of 1883. Today, it is held by the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin.

### Neuroscience – Near-Death Experiences – Dying Process

Near-death experiences (NDEs) refer to life-changing incidents that often occur close to death, for example, in connection with cardiac arrest, injuries to the brain or major surgery. Occasionally they also happen in non-life-threatening situations such as a brief loss of consciousness, during meditation, or after taking certain drugs. NDEs are both unique and rich in individual details. What they all have in common is a so-called “core experience”: recurring elements such as feelings of extreme peace and happiness in roughly 90 per cent of cases, or fear among 10 per cent of those affected; altered perception of time, vision of a dark tunnel with a bright light at the end, or out-of-body experiences. NDEs occur regardless of origin, culture or religion. What exactly triggers them is still unclear. However, neuroscientists assume that near-death experiences are sparked off by processes in the brain. The most significant measurable electrical change in the brain during the process of dying comes in the shape of a major wave of neural discharges, similar to what patients experience during a stroke. These discharge waves are examined in intensive care patients as they signal the onset of a new stroke in real time, enabling early targeted treatment even in comatose patients (Dreier AG Charité & Woitzik AG Charité/University of Oldenburg).

**Thank you for returning this handout after use!**

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