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# Souls in Other Selves, and the Immortality of the Body

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(Abstract) Sometimes the soul seems a more precise concept than the body. This lecture goes to a place and time where all kinds of beings (including food plants) have souls and where the bodily basis of life is immortalized through cloning. It comments on the way present-day anthropology brings fresh illumination to what we thought we knew.

My gesture towards the rubric of this lecture is considerably more than honorific.[1] That the memorial set up by Miss Edith Zweybruck specified the immortality of the soul as a topic of contemplation has led to some unanticipated thoughts on matters that one would imagine have already been thought through to exhaustion, if not actually discarded as unfit for present-day thinking.

Imagining the soul as immortal becomes provocative when the soul in question is the archetype of 'soul' in the history of anthropological theory, namely the animist soul as it became known in the late nineteenth century. I refer to Edward Tylor's (1832-1917) landmark publication on religion, Volume II of *Primitive Culture* in 1871. Tylor demonstrated that everywhere people had ideas about souls, whether personal or diffused through notions of ghosts and spirits, and encompassing the animation of all kinds of beings, as though like people, these too had souls. More than that, his thesis was that this apprehension of a vital breath or spirit pervading everything, extensions or projections of what human beings sensed of themselves, was the earliest sign of a religious disposition.[2] It was the basis of later religious development (hence

[1] The Foerster Lecture on the Immortality of the Soul, given annually at the University of California at Berkeley, was established by Edith Zweybruck in 1928. I hope that to those familiar with the vast number of languages and cultures of Melanesia, and with what it means to generalize or to cite instances, the largely synthetic account that follows will not be too abrasive. There are a small number of indicative references; more detail may be found in Strathern 2017, 2019.

[2] *Anima* (Latin) denotes breeze or breath, the principle of animal life as opposed to *animus*, the spiritual principle of life or the soul as a whole, also denoting particular faculties (will, passion, reason,

"primitive" in this sense) and here and there survivals of it could still be found. Thus he both brought animism within the purview of the world's cultures (not his term), and revealed its formative role in what his contemporaries regarded as the higher religions. Tylor's theory had a long life, at least to the end of the nineteenth century.

Now in the course of his extensive elaboration, Tylor does something rather surprising: he suggests that to call the animist soul "immortal" would be to impose later theological formulations onto it. The animist soul is not immortal. Ah! The questions come crowding in. So what is a soul? So what is mortality? And if the soul is not immortal, is nothing immortal? The very doctrine of souls so central to theories of animism is not as straightforward as it might seem.

The argument I eventually make is rather simple, and aspects of it have been articulated many times. But how we get to it perhaps holds a little interest. It's for this reason that I set out various staging posts on the way—at the outset the posts will seem far apart, as though they had nothing to do with one another, but hopefully they will move closer together as we proceed. The overall signpost to our destination comes from Miss Zweybruck. It reads: what might happen if, contra Tylor, we dare ask precisely about the immortality of the animist soul? I shall refer to one of the great regions of the world whose indigenous cosmologies are often described as animist, namely, Melanesia.[3]

**Staging Post 1: The Immortality of Scholarship**

Let me start with a secular, Enlightenment form of immortality, one that certainly is, but is also a little more than, metaphoric. I would not be finding much of interest in this Victorian idea of animism if it were not for its spectacular rebirth in recent anthropological thought. Often remarked upon with some surprise, "animism" now circulates as a respectable term for insight

disposition, impulse) rather than habit (*mens*); both may be translated as soul. In "animism" Tylor was reviving an old term then not often used.

[3] Just as I run with Tyler's notion of a soul, and the epithet Zweybruck gave it, I run with the attribution of "animism" to cosmologies such as those of old Melanesia. I am not defending animism as an analytic, which could only be done from within a constellation of like concepts, as in Descola's encyclopedic project or Ingold's contrast with totemism. See Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture,* trans. Janet Lloyd, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) and Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000).

into the lives and ontologies of certain peoples, as though the very concept were risen from the dead.

What remains dead is much of the evolutionary apparatus of Tylor's thinking, as in the assumption that present day animist practices indicate "lower" echelons of spirituality or in "higher" forms are mere survivals. Indeed, as originally presented, the theory of animism is a bit of an embarrassment. At the same time the notion that animism is best understood as a projection of human experience onto other forms of life continues to be debated. In any event, recent anthropological analysis has converted its awkward primitivism into a dazzling array of tools for thought. So we can read the animist "soul" in other terms—for example, through Nurit Bird-David's relational epistemology; alongside Philippe Descola's interest in the way human interiority is or is not attributed to other beings (animism emerging as one of four possibilities); or with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro on subject positions, animism being less a mental state than a theory of mind.[4] However, rather than offering other terms, and thus transcending the concept of "soul," I want to turn back to it rather than away from it.

In anthropology's ceaseless battle with its own ethnocentrism, one strategy is *not* to avoid the weight and freight of its own (vernacular, theoretical) vocabulary but instead get up close to it, to take it to its limits.[5] So, precisely in order to interrogate the concept, I propose to talk of the animist soul more or less in its Victorian sense. Among many of Tyler's contemporaries, after

[4] Debates concerning animism have taken off in anthropology with renewed interest in how people interact with the beings, including nonhuman and spiritual ones, that populate the world around them, and thus in subjectivity, interiority and the attribution of human capacities to nonhumans. Anthropologists have used it to question many of their own conceptualizations, with much discussion over the radical nature of what that implies. See Nurit Bird-David, "'Animism' Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40, (1999): Supplement, 67-91, Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture,* and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2015).

[5] And intensify (as a mode of extension) what we may understand of the soul. See Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pederson, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 244. Apropos Viveiros de Castro's investment in the terms nature and culture, they write, even if he wants to produce a non-dualist conceptual alternative, "he is all too aware that the only way to do so, paradoxically, is by experimentally reconceptualizing these and other binaries, to bring them into contact with their own 'limit' […] —not, crucially, to 'go beyond' or 'transcend' the binaries, but in order to get still closer to that limit, cultivating ways of conducting one's thinking *within* its conceptual threshold." Holbraad and Pederson, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*, 168, original emphasis. See also Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Rane Willerslev, "An Anthropological Concept of the Concept: Reversibility Among the Siberian Yukaghirs," *JRAI* 13, no. 3 (2007): 527-544.

all, the animist version was a counterpart to the kind of soul *they* thought they had. Of course I have no idea if Miss Zweybruck herself had given much thought to animism. But her assumption about the soul's immortality begs an interesting question about animism's recent reincarnation, or the reincarnation of any theoretical term, for that matter.

Think of the legal axiom that through bequests and such like, a person's will endures beyond their death. In the same way academia embraces a commitment to the future of scholarship that will be carried forward by diverse minds, sometimes giving the impression that the mind thereby endures. Yet just as the will only has a future through the good offices of the heirs, for all that scholars may celebrate the origination of ideas in someone's mind—Tylor's thoughts seemingly being given a new lease of life—those ideas are now embedded within a scholarly apparatus that enjoys a life of its own.[6] They continue in other minds as notions refashioned for other debates. If this continuity is "immortality" of a kind, then, it flourishes through specific acts of regeneration, as when new formulations are acknowledged and recognized as the rebirth of old ones.

As we leave this staging post behind, it is with the suggestion that we have in the scholarly circulation and reinvention of ideas a model of how people's thoughts serve as conduits for the thoughts of others.

**Staging Post 2: Prehistoric Horticulture**

This staging post seems a bit of an outlier. We find ourselves on a Melanesian island in the Pacific ten thousand years ago—not to linger, but staying just long enough to introduce some notable plants. In fact Tylor sent us over here with his remarks on the souls of plants as a doctrine "that lay deep in the intellectual history of South-East Asia," including the Pacific.[7] We now know that exploitation of plants there goes back well beyond this. However ten thousand years is interesting for me as a horizon of an archaeological site in the Mount Hagen area of the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea called Kuk, a few miles from where the first Australians to come to Hagen in 1933 set up camp. That horizon has yielded evidence of artifacts and cultivation features, such as a stone pestle used to prepare yams along with taro

[6] Academic work also entails the transcendence of individual effort in very direct ways, mobilized for instance whenever one formulates this or that scholar's "contribution" to a particular debate or argument.
[7] Edward Burnett Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture, Part II of Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958 [1871]), 59.

seeds and starch granules.[8] Yam and taro were being exploited at the site ten thousand years ago, although undisputed evidence of cultivation in the form of ditching and mounding comes three thousand years later (7,000 BPcal).

The 1930s Australian patrol recorded its amazement at the scale of intensive cultivation it found; since then archaeobotanical work has shown that Papua New Guinea was a local site for the domestication and dispersal of vegetative crops, notably yam and taro, also banana and sugarcane. Kuk is just one place on that large island, but its exceptionally well-documented evidence has led to the excavation being nominated for World Heritage status. There is almost nothing to see. Peering down a trench during the dig, one might have observed landscape features—a ditch, a mound—but little more. The surface is now covered over for conservation.

But then if you raised your eyes, you would see all around root crops very similar to those excavated on the site being grown today. When Europeans first arrived at coastal and hinterland parts of Papua New Guinea, some in the late nineteenth, some in the early twentieth century, either yam or taro tended to predominate as the principal subsistence crop for the peoples they encountered. The principal crop invariably received ritual attention, people claiming plants wouldn't grow without it, and anthropologists have called these cultivars artifacts.[9] Sweet potatoes came along much later. Whereas sweet potatoes grow from vines pushed into the soil, both yam and taro depend on propagation through a portion of the tuber or corm being detached or put aside from what is eaten to form the beginnings of the new plant. Yams undergo a bifurcated cycle of growth, throwing up vines above ground that cause nutrients to be stored underground in the growing tuber, which then shrivels and dies back before the yam is harvested; taro send up thick stalks and leaves above ground, and the corm to be re-planted will have some stalk attached. The bit so planted may sometimes be called the mother or else the father of the child tuber/corm growing underground. Only at harvest is the underground growth made visible.

[8] Jack Golson, Tim Denham, Philip Hughes, Pamela Swadling and John Muke, eds., *Ten Thousand Years of Cultivation at Kuk Swamp in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.* Special issue, *Terra Australis 62* (2017).

[9] Ludovic Coupaye, *Growing Artifacts, Displaying Relationships: Yams, Art and Technology Amongst the Nyamikum Abelam of Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2013).

Let us leave here, then, with some sense of what these root crops might be in Papua New Guinea, since the next staging post is all about taro souls.

**Staging Post 3: Taro Souls**

The ethnobotanist, Françoise Panoff, describes the horticulture of the Maenge of New Britain, off the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea as it was in the 1960s.[10] Classic animism. Indeed, the description could have walked off the pages of Tylor. The cultivators ascribed to taro, their principal food crop, the same theory of the soul that they entertained of themselves. The soul was a kind of second self, a concept Tylor also used, which in the case of people permeated every part of the body and was left behind in food remnants or sitting places.[11] Taro souls were under the control of various deities, Masters of Taro, who had to be coaxed into letting the souls stay attached to the growing plants. Like people's, taro souls may get up and wander away… and taro are quick to take offence if they are not properly cared for. It is the soul of the taro that makes the corm heavy and nutritious—and effort has to be made to keep the souls tethered to the plants or the harvest will be worthless.

Now while each plant will only be nutritious if its soul is present, such souls are refractions of a generic taro soul, and dedicated action is necessary to attract as much soul as possible into the growing taro corm, to make it weighty and thus satisfy hunger. There will be plants whose soul fails to grow, just as there are people on the margins of society whose souls never develop. Taro soul is thus a stock that has to be replenished, but properly replenished exists in perpetuity. A fractal entity, each particular soul is also (the generic) "soul." The same is true of human beings if one thinks of the perpetuity of matrilineal kin groups. The matriclan is at once itself *and* everyone who has been born or will be born. Listen to this Maenge comment on the efforts of patrol officers to take a population census: "Those young masters [white men] are ridiculous with their roll books. Why do they count only the living? […] Don't they know that the living are very few in relation to the dead? If only they could see the doubles of all the dead!"[12] Spirits

[10] Françoise Panoff, *Maenge Gardens: A Study of Maenge Relationship to Domesticates*, ed. Françoise Barbira-Freedman (Marseille: pacific-credo Publications, 2018 [1970]).

[11] The second self was Michel Panoff's preferred phrase. See Michel Panoff, "The Notion of Double Self Among the Maenge," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 77, no. 3 (1968): 275 -295. Among plants, the notion of beings with their own souls similar to human ones is specific to taro.

[12] Panoff, "The Notion of Double Self Among the Maenge," 286.

of the dead travel to the origin places of their matriclans, and whether remembered or forgotten by living persons, they are all part of the present collectivity.[13]

The idea of the soul as part of a collectivity is not peculiar to “matrilineal” kin groups.[14] Hermann Strauss, who was on the staff at the Lutheran mission established in 1934 in the vicinity of the first patrol camp at Mount Hagen, not far from Kuk, observed something very similar of “patrilineal” Hagen. The personal soul is to be understood as a person’s participation in a “life-force and spiritual power” shared with everyone else of the collectivity in question.[15] For as long as they are remembered, deceased persons exist as ancestral ghosts, before turning into moths, as Hageners say. Perhaps it is not the fugitive future of the personal soul to which we should be addressing the question of immortality but the life-force of which any particular soul is a part. Life-force, for want of a better term, has being in the enduring and ever-replenished kinship collectivity where one soul is also the soul of others.

We depart from this staging post noting that such a life-force is not inert but exists through replenishment.

**Staging Post 4: Replacements**

Here is a little detail that may or may not reflect the patchiness of the ethnographic record. Whereas Maenge ideas about *people’s* souls can be echoed across the regions of Papua New Guinea, we cannot say the same of *plant* souls. The evidence of an animist attribution of human-like souls to plants crops—or other living beings—seems much more intermittent.[16] Thus a

13 Panoff, “The Notion of Double Self Among the Maenge,” 284.

14 Although the “matrilineal” Trobriand Islanders are famous for their depiction of the after-life from which former clan members are reborn. See Mark Mosko, *Ways of Baloma: Rethinking Magic and Kinship from the Trobriands* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2017), where *baloma* encompasses both the living soul and the spirits of the dead (elsewhere such entities may be allocated separate categories of existence).

15 Hermann Strauss with Herbert Tischner, *The Mi-culture of the Mount Hagen People, Papua New Guinea*, eds. Gabriele Stürzenhofecker and Andrew Strathern, trans. Brian Shields (Department of Anthropology, University of Pittsburgh: Ethnology Monographs, 1990 [1962]), 99.

16 In some areas, the life-force that animates humans also animates pigs (as in Maenge), and all kinds of food crops, as well as wild creatures. Elsewhere yams (or taro) alone have souls as human beings do, or considerable agnosticism may be expressed, as on the point of whether one can talk of pig souls or not. See Peter Lawrence and Mervyn Meggitt, *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia: Some Religions of Australian New Guinea and the New Hebrides* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965).

recent and extremely detailed account of yam cultivation identifies people's life-force that survives after death in the form of ancestral power, but could find no obvious connection to the growing of plants.[17] Our classic animist study is not, after all, replicated everywhere. But whatever the reason for this intermittency, something even more intriguing comes to light.

Many elements, which in Maenge are held together with ideas about the soul, are found across numerous ethnographic accounts in terms of the person-like characteristics of (certain) plants. Such person-like characteristics animate plants regardless of whether or not they are thought to have souls. Thus, and across diverse instances, yams are sensitive to people's movements; taro and yams both walk about; yams flee gardens when there is a drought; there is something of the primordial plant in every plant; yams have ears or certainly listen to people, as taro also do, and so on. They may be under the control of spirits or have their own sources of animation in the company of their cultivators or in the company of other plants. The constellation of traits varies, but generally the crops do not respond (grow) without kindness and attention. It seems there is a broader and more inclusive sense of the animatory qualities of yams and taro than simply their manifestation in a doctrine of the soul. In other words, these plants are animated in the way persons are without necessarily having souls as persons do. This shifts one's thoughts a bit, and suggests a parallel.

The parallel is that the future rebirth of the personal soul or spirit in other members of a kin group, such as a matri- or patriclan, appears in people's narratives both with or without a specific doctrine about the soul's journeying. There is no one story of rebirth in Papua New Guinea or in Melanesia at large—differences abound. Where death is supposed to lead to reincarnation, in some areas the moment of rebirth is left vague and unspecified, where in others it is envisaged as over a three generation cycle. There may be a diffuse sense that spirits return, or none at all, that is, they just continue their lives as ancestors influencing their descendants. So, on analogy with generalized notions about the animation of plants, I wonder if notions about reincarnation are not equally a particular instance of a more general phenomenon. We might conclude that in the same way as the person-like animation of plants does not require a specific notion of a human-like soul, neither does the reincarnation of persons.

[17] Coupaye, *Growing Artifacts, Displaying Relationships: Yams, Art and Technology Amongst the Nyamikum Abelam of Papua New Guinea*, 166, 253.

The more general phenomenon is a concern with replacement, with the idea that people who die will have a counterpart in specific others.[18] While this may be elaborated as a three-generation process (grandparents and grandchildren being identified with one another), it is also found in a two-generation form (parents and children). It is, among other things, enfolded into marriage rules, as in the claims people have on former in-laws to provide future spouses, which in turn depends on the discreteness (exogamy) of the kin group that sees itself being replenished in this way. This reciprocation and repetition of the social requisites for generation seems to be immortality of a kind.

The dynamic of replacement makes sense of the often fragmentary nature of stories about the after-life. When asked, people's accounts frequently carry on so far, and then trail vaguely off. The point is surely that there is no need for a continuous narrative, as though the soul had a life-history, or for narrational consistency about the soul's return, precisely because replacement is a self-evident process. Yet if this concept of replacement does not require a narrative about what happens to particular personal souls, and their metamorphosis after death, the soul may come back into the picture in another respect, namely as part of the generic life-force. From the perspective of the kin group, matri- or patriclan, replacement is effected through the regeneration of group members and their affinal relations. That implies the collective perpetuation of life-force. Now for that the clan group forever needs conduits, bodily conduits.

One colloquial connotation of replacement (Neo-Melanesian *senis, 'change'*) lies in the Hagen idea that a person recognizes as his or her *senis* a child or some other relative who has a similar body form to his or her own. Nothing to do with inheritance or succession: a simple question of a counterpart 'likeness' in bodily form. But what is the body? We have to turn aside at the next staging post, for an issue so far evaded.

**Staging Post 5: The Animist Body**

We shouldn't be too surprised to find Tylor sitting waiting for us at the bottom of this post. For among the reasons the Victorian thinker gave for rejecting the idea that the animist soul could be described as immortal was that it was not immaterial enough. "The soul, as recognized in the

[18] See Richard Scaglion, "Yam Cycles and Timeless Time in Melanesia," *Ethnology* 38, no. 3 (1999): 211-25 and Jane C. Goodale, *To Sing with Pigs is Human: The Concept of Person in Papua New Guinea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

philosophy of the lower races," he writes, "may be defined as an ethereal surviving being, conceptions of which preceded and led up to the more transcendental theory of the immaterial and immortal soul which forms parts of the theology of higher nations."[19] Indeed he refers to the "ethereal substance" of the animist soul.

Maenge people would be in accord. The soul or double self is said to have a viscous, liquid presence animating at once the inner and outer form of a person. "In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that the whole life cycle of the Maenge is spent in efforts of recovering or keeping both [selves]"[20] While one may be called inner soul and the other outer soul, they can only be held together by that to which they give life, namely the body that after death is no more than an empty husk. Michel Panoff argues that there is nothing mystical here.[21] Counterintuitively for us perhaps, this "double self" is captured in terms neither of spirit nor of substance.[22]

In many respects it seems easier to apprehend the Melanesian soul than to apprehend the Melanesian body. Perhaps we can call the body that which is animated; reciprocally it is also that on which the soul's replenishment depends. For the soul needs a container, a conduit, and what passes though people's bodies is in counterpoint to what passes through spirit bodies. Apropos Maenge taro, in myth food is the excrement of supernatural beings, conveyed by and coming from their bodies (imagined as a python for instance), while people's bodies are equally conduits for the growth and continuity of taro soul.[23] Taro soul is augmented by passing through the bodies of people. More generally, we may say that the soul requires this constant replenishment in the things it animates.

[19] Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture, Part II of Primitive Culture,* 110.

[20] Something similar is expressed as (simply) keeping the soul and the body together, as in Wagner's early description of Daribi. See Roy Wagner, *The Curse of Souw: Principles of Daribi Clan Definition and Alliance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967) and Panoff, "The Notion of Double Self Among the Maenge," 279.

[21] Panoff, "The Notion of Double Self Among the Maenge," 279-80.

[22] The point is hardly new, even if it remains counterintuitive. See Morton Axel Perdesen and Rane Willerslev, "'The Soul of the Body is the Soul': Rethinking the Concept of the Soul through North Asian Ethnography," *Common Knowledge* 18, no. 3 (2012): 270-271.

[23] Françoise Panoff, "Food and Faeces: A Melanesian Rite," *Man* 5, no. 2 (1970): 237-252.

Yet the notion of material substance clings fast to the way anthropologists have described Melanesian conceptualizations of the body. In life, the body appears to be composed of substances that circulate inside and outside—blood, milk and so forth—in relation to other bodies, just as in death people treat it in terms of the difference between flesh that decays and bones that endure. In the language they use, Euro-American anthropologists cannot help giving these aggregations and disaggregations a material cast, as in the very notion of substance itself. But perhaps what we have learnt about the soul will assist here.

I focus on one aspect of life and death, recognizable across parts of Melanesia, including Mount Hagen. There seem parallels between, on the one hand, the personal soul that dissipates (or metamorphoses) after death and the bodily materials that decompose, and, on the other hand, what endures of the bones (for a while) and the continuing identity (for a while) of ancestral spirits. To the Euro-American observer, the body's materiality seems especially evident in the decay and disappearance of the flesh, but perhaps we should pay more attention to that process of decomposition. It is regenerative. Flesh is invariably regarded as returning to the land and contributing to the regeneration of the fertility of the soil. How so? Surely because the vitality its soul gave it (soul permeated the living body) is what is released into the ground. In other words, the very feature that might suggest that the body is material, its capacity for decomposition, is itself a flow of life-force, the basis of fresh growth.

That same material aspect, bodily decay, is also in Euro-American eyes, a sign of mortality. Yet in these Melanesian configurations the constant replenishment or fertilization of the soil seems to me is no less "immortalizing" than the perpetual replacement of persons as members of kin groups and marital alliances. Indeed in many areas there is a direct connection through a clan's identification with its land.[24] And as the soul, now more generically life-force, travels from one container to another, it too is replenished, now growing as a person's body and now growing as fertile soil and the animate bodies—human and non-human—it will produce. Might we, then, in this regard, talk of the immortality of the body?

24 Borut Telban, "Places and Paths in Melanesian landscapes," in *The Melanesian World*, eds. Eric Hirsch and Will Rollason, (London: Routledge, 2019), 487-500.

I turn to notions about the reincarnation of food plants. It is in the treatment of the dead parts of these plants that we find a specific justification for talking about immortality. We shall catch up with Tylor again at the post after next. In the meanwhile, what follows is obviously speculative.

**Staging Post 6: The Immortality of the Body**

As we look around, we can see Kuk again, the archaeological site in Hagen, though from another view. There is not much in the ethnographic record that would speak as directly as I am going to, although there are plenty of signs and pointers. That said, similar reflections have not escaped one or two present day Papua New Guinean academics, notably the archaeologist John Muke, who was closely involved with the nomination of the World Heritage site. He articulated one of the foundations on which the nomination was based: the environs of the site.[25] Visible around Kuk was an "organically evolved landscape" displaying the continuing cultivation of the plants to whose early exploitation the archaeology attested.[26] He also mentioned the perpetual movement of plants and people across clan groups—the value put on finding new gardens for replanting, and (I add) food plants, themselves finding new planters through exchanges between people—a circulation already imagined for thousands of years ago.[27]

The notion of continuing cultivation can be expanded through an observation that the linguist-botanist André Haudricourt made many years ago of yam growing in island Melanesia (New Caledonia).[28] Each plant is a clone of a previous one, the same genetic individual. The taro and yams that Hagen people cultivate are in this sense the same individuals, the clones of, those first plants that were to be cultivated over the millennia. That said, reproduction involving the clonal propagation from one plant to another does not prevent formation of novel hybrids or domesticates. Given Papua New Guinean interest in new food varieties, it is worth adding, in the words of two archaeologists, that although "asexual propagation only allows for somatic mutation in the genome of the new plants, changes to the physical environment can cause

25 In diverse documents, and pers, comm. (2015).

26 John Muke and Tim Denham, "Kuk Phase 8: Heritage Issues to 2008," in *Ten Thousand Years of Cultivation at Kuk Swamp in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea,* Golson, eds. Jack, et al. Special issue, *Terra Australis 62*, (2017), 458-467.

27 Huw Barton and Tim Denham, "Prehistoric Vegeculture and Social Life in Island Southeast Asia and Melanesian" in *Why Cultivate? Anthropological and Archaeological Approaches to Foraging-Farming Transitions in Southeast Asia*, eds. Graeme Barker and Monica Janowksi (McDonald Institute Monograph, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 17-25.

28 André Haudricourt, "Nature et culture dans la civilisation de l'igname: l'origine des clones et des clans," *l'Homme* 4, no. 1 (1964): 93-104.

favorable and lasting [...] changes to clonal phenotypes. […] [And] the movement of these varieties within human spaces would have led naturally to the creation of new varieties."[29] What is locally visible are both the variations that come with obtaining planting material from elsewhere and, in terms of the propagation of each plant, the enduring certainty that like will produce like.

There is evidence that in Melanesian horticulture such propagation was pursued as a matter of choice (seeding being ignored), each new plant taken as a cutting or node from a previous one. In the case of taro, the stalk is detached from the corm to be eaten, with a little bit of the parent corm adhering to it for replanting. For not so distant neighbors of Maenge, another ethnographer of New Britain says outright: the taro stalk is immortal (her term).[30]

> Taro stalks are inherited, traded, imported, and exported. […] When someone said "This is my grandfather's taro," it was clear that it was not only the same variety as the grandfather had planted, but was considered to be the identical plant (stalk) that the grandfather had planted. The taro stalk has an immortality that is taken as a human model.

In some instances the history of a specific variety parallels that of a genealogical descent group, in others of a local group, and in yet others offers a personal history as to who first imported it. Above all the identification of the present planter with his or her predecessor, the one whom he or she has "replaced," is repeated over and again. Both men and women desire replacements; in this society, mutual suicide used to be a remedy for an ungenerative partnership. With the next generation in sight, however, anticipating their replacement also anticipates their death. The same is true of plants. Without going into detail, it is the bit of the corm or tuber that is cut off or otherwise separated from what is to be eaten that provides the nourishment for the new corm or

29 Barton and Denham, "Prehistoric Vegeculture and Social Life in Island Southeast Asia and Melanesian," 18-19, 21.

30 See Goodale, *To Sing with Pigs is Human: The Concept of Person,* 77. As in Maenge, Kaulong taro walk about and have to be induced to come to gardens, which involves coercing their controlling spirit through bespelling the taro stalk as it is planted. (She refers to 'taro' not taro souls.) Taro is singled out here as the only crop that will not grow without magic. Scaglion writes of yams in Abelam: "While individual tubers die, the soul of essence of the yam does not. Just as new tubers are born from old tubers with each yam cycle, the human equivalent, *gwaal* (soul substance, life-force, ancestral spirit), is eternal, although individual persons die." Scaglion, "Yam Cycles and Timeless Time in Melanesia," 222.

tuber that grows in its stead. What is eventually harvested is in effect a "replacement" for the piece that was planted, frequently imagined as a parent, whether father or mother, who dries up, shrivels and dies away.

A small conclusion is in order. We do not need to decide whether the discarded part of the plant and what is growing in its place is soul or substance, not just because of the impossibility of these terms, but because—unlike the kinds of expectations heritage policies often hold—we do not require a doctrine of continuity that would have to trace the past and future of these elements. There is no need to narrativize the soul or have a theory about continuous material regeneration. On the contrary, if we were to ally the botanists' knowledge of vegetative reproduction through cloning with those indigenous actions that ensure perpetual replacement, our attention would be elsewhere. It would be on the repeated breaks with previous generations, repeated cuts, repeated deaths, required for the next generation to spring anew.

Thus among some present-day people at Kuk, where heritage debates might suppose claims about unbroken continuity, the kind of continuity John Muke was pointing to seems closer to an analogy.[31] This is how some Hagen people at least express it. They say they cannot possibly know who it was who cultivated this area millennia ago: but those people's actions and practices were like those of today, and today's people now live there in their stead. What is evident is the replacement, just as appears (I add) in the clan child or plant offspring.

Repeated cuts, repeated deaths: so what is death? We turn up at the penultimate staging post where Tylor's shadow can again be seen, and will stay here a little longer.

**Staging Post 7: Life and Death**

Something Tylor said about the animist soul comes back to mind. Apropos the spiritual aspects of the soul in the "theology of higher nations," he talks of their theory of the immaterial and immortal soul as a transcendental one: the life of the soul surpasses other forms of existence. We may add that the very formulation holds transcendental possibility. A transcendentalist view at once embraces ideas of both transcendence and immanence, while also supposing immanence as its transcended opposite. Thus it can suggest, which is as far as Tylor goes, that there are "lower" beliefs and practices locked in some kind of pre-transcendental state. In that state of

31 Not himself from Hagen but from a nearby area, he was thoroughly conversant with Hagen practice.

affairs, there is no life or power beyond what is already immanent in the mundane world. Whether we go back to the axial age, or to the countless reformations of Christian history, transcendence is the perspective from which immanentism, in whatever form, can emerge as an apparently counter set of axioms and practices.[32]

As to what has to be overcome, in the case of persons, this generally entails some aspect of their being or selfhood. One answer that must have been familiar to Tylor's nineteenth century contemporaries, with those "higher" religions in mind, is obvious: what is overcome is mortality. It follows that if it is the soul that transcends death, then some other part of the person must die, from which comes a particular imagining of the material, mortal "body." Death thus implies a cessation of non-spiritual life, the end of a life course in the present world. That radical disjuncture also requires that one only "dies" once. We'll come back to this.

Not in Tylor's terms but as a legacy of his writing, I want to suggest that the concept of "immanentism" turns out to be unexpectedly helpful. Understood as a mode of existence that resides within or permeates being in the world, it allows me to give a half-turn to the question I started with. At the beginning, I wondered if we might ask about the immortality of the animist soul, Melanesian-speaking. Let me now rephrase that. The question becomes: what would everlasting life for an immanentist existence look like. It carries a corollary: what would death look like?

First, immanentist life. By definition such life is discoverable anywhere, though people may formulate it in different ways for persons, plants or animals. Thus entities Euro-Americans would regard as inanimate, such as features of the landscape, may be addressed as personal beings. As a force of growth or regeneration, "life" is present in the forms things take, in trees that grow, in the flourishing of children, in good health, in the fertility of the soil. It implies an active, positive condition, often additionally secured through invisible but very present beings such as ancestral ghosts, and is made visible in the health and brightness of enduring vitality, the shine on the skin, the success of one's projects. Maenge would say that these things show how much soul one has. Such life is everlasting because people take steps to perpetuate it, not least

32 Joel Robbins, "Transcendence and the Anthropology of Christianity: Language, Change and Individualism," *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 37, no. 2 (2012): 5-23.

by appropriate rituals or cult activity. They intervene to ensure its perpetuation, whether on a routine basis through spells or magic to make things grow, or on an occasional basis by bringing in spirit beings as special concentrations of or dealers in life-force. In other words they immortalize themselves and what sustains them.

One might say that "life" in this sense *is* the immortalizing set of actions that people take in order to perpetuate their existence. One might even say that the only life that can be lived is life everlasting, insofar as the evidence for vitality and thus the flourishing of people is there in the antecedent generations that brought them into being and will exist in the following generations that replace them. Above all, as we saw in the case of the cycling of Maenge taro souls, people do not just draw on such generative capacity as a source of life for themselves, they are also conduits for its perpetuation as it is manifested in the lives of others.[33]

Equally significantly, then, people's actions are important for replenishing this power. Life has to *be* regenerated: people have to plant and they have to procreate. The sense of perpetuation here is possibly closer to that of cloning than of lineality. The Abelam ethnographer already mentioned remarks that clans—collectivities of kin—are regarded as yam tubers emerging from, replacing, one another.[34] Depending where one is in Melanesia, the collectivity could be a set of siblings, or a locality, or a ritual moiety. The point is that there must be forthcoming generations who will be the future channels or conduits of life, like tubers that spring freshly from the soil. This kind of immanentist life does not culminate in a higher order of being, but inheres in the deliberate regeneration of the present order of being to which everything belongs.

So what about immanentist death? You can guess what I am going to say. If life is all around, and everlasting, so too is death all around—and everlasting. It is not the same as life; rather it is the condition of existence that makes people work so hard at being alive. It is what makes life an achievement. In truth, people die all the time—when their souls, their invisible selves, wander away when they are sleeping or get captured by others. Haudricourt tells of an encounter on a dockside in Port Vila, Vanuatu, between two men who imagine they recognize one another; one of them, thinking the other is a long deceased relative, whispers to him, "Are you dead or

[33] The subject, in other registers, of Bonnemère 2018.

[34] Coupaye, *Growing Artifacts, Displaying Relationships: Yams, Art and Technology Amongst the Nyamikum Abelam of Papua New Guinea*, 290.

alive?"[35] Rather than a state of finality, death is an ever-present possibility for a person's invisible self. Indeed, when it is held in a person, life or life-force is under constant attack, whether from malevolent sorcery or malicious enemies, or from ancestral ghosts who withdraw support, or from the caprice of wild spirits.[36] Someone's innards may be eaten by a witch but sewn up again and the victim doesn't know he or she has only a short while left.[37] The very fact that life-force permeates the body also means it is present in exuviae vulnerable to manipulation by death-dealing others.

A person dies once and for all only when their invisible self succumbs to an attack that is irreversible. In other words they can no longer keep their soul (or souls) together with the body (or bodies) as the soul's support: in the language I have been using, they have ceased to be a conduit for the increase of life-force. Like a Maenge taro without its invisible self, the body without a soul cannot survive to nourish others in that form. It is routinely reported that mourning for a person starts once their soul has departed—as soon as there are signs of its departure, the body is bound to drop away. Life continues in other persons.

If life is part of a generic life-force sustained through particular people's actions, so death is part of a death-force. As has been described for Hagen, "Everything that exists can be seen as a transmitter of the forces of life or of death."[38] Death is imagined as a specific agency penetrating the world of human affairs. Here, as reported so frequently across old Melanesia, every irreversible death comes from the malign will of spirits or men, that is, from an attack on the life-force. Thus the aim of sorcery is precisely to destroy the soul of the person to be killed for which one needs something that has been in contact with the person—left over food, discarded garments, or simply a name. (It is possible this way to take revenge for an injury without recourse to fighting.) The ever-present nature of death does not mean it is taken for granted: the transformation of the affliction that people feel to the regeneration of life and relationships through other persons often takes the punishing effort of prolonged mortuary observances.

35 Haudricourt, "Nature et culture dans la civilisation de l'igname: l'origine des clones et des clans."
36 We could say that 'immortality' then becomes all those defenses against such attack as are found in ancestral support, spirit cults, everything to show the flourishing of the soul in the well being of the body. Thus it is the work of 'life' to sustain the perpetuation of the fecundity found in each soul-body, so that future persons can become its continuing container.
37 Knut Rio, "'Witchcraft' and 'Sorcery in Melanesia,'" in *The Melanesian World,* eds. Eric Hirsch and Will Rollason (London: Routledge, 2019), 333-344.
38 Strauss, *The Mi-culture of the Mount Hagen people, Papua New Guinea,* 88.

On analogy with the life that springs anew in a newly growing taro corm or yam tuber, the falling away of the husk that was initially planted as the offspring's mother or father, also seems a regenerative moment. That wasting and decay enables new life, which is itself (the parent) in a transformed state. In this form, death is not a finality to be overcome or transcended; rather it is an instrument of everyday, non-miraculous rebirth.[39]

**Last Staging Post, 8: Souls in Other Selves**

I have obviously trod a very selective path from post to post, among innumerable combinations and permutations in how people frame life and death, have focused on only two kinds of food plants, and while the horizon of ten thousand years ago was introduced partly to put the last sixty or one hundred years into perspective as a very recent epoch, have ignored even more recent ways of life. These qualifications aside, let me reflect on what has emerged about Melanesian immanentism.

It is important to appreciate that the ever-lasting character of both life and death does not imply unbroken continuity or lack of change. To the contrary people's interest in the *replacement* of a life-force, whether in themselves or the crops that are so much of themselves, is also an interest in the *displacement* of one life by another. Gardeners looking for new varieties of yam or taro will abandon old ones. The process of keeping life going is never straightforward, is often hazardous, always requires work, ritual and otherwise. And moving from one moment to the next is disjunctive. The life-force that infuses any particular soul must enter fresh channels.

Perhaps we now have some sense of the immanentist soul for these horticulturalists. While we may appreciate Tylor's healthy skepticism about reading nineteenth-century theological notions into the animism of other cultures, he pursued a relation between the material and immaterial. Indeed, the Victorians overcompensated in their auto-critique. Criticizing the assumption that the soul is invariably a spiritual being, they stressed the materiality of animist notions and the accessibility of the spirit world at large to human needs and desires, overplaying the material and mundane and reserving for themselves a different kind of "spirituality"—a transcendental

[39] In 'the animic ontology,' as Ingold puts it, 'The generation of animate form in any one region [of life] necessarily entails its dissolution in another. Vitality must be surrendered here so that it may be reconstituted there.' See Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill,* 113.

move if there was one. Miss Zweybruck's wonderful rubric concerning immortality has lifted us out of this.

We simply do not need to concern ourselves with the relation between body and soul in terms of materiality and spirituality, the material and immaterial. I threw in a playful aside on the immortality of "the body" just to underline the ambiguities these terms introduce. Let me hasten to add this is not getting rid of a binary for the sake of doing so; on the contrary, there is a powerful binary at play in these immanentist worlds, but it is not this. We have already encountered it at one or two junctures: the contrast between what is seen and what exists unseen. Melanesians are constantly testing what it is they see. "Are you a living man or a dead man?" went the whisper. The unseen is in many registers, from the secrecy that excludes some to whole invisible counter worlds. What is invisible works as a motivating, potentially activating, state of affairs of which visible appearance may or may not offer a cue. In effect, this is a pairing that may be turned inside out. One might say the visible and invisible adhere to each other like Maenge's outer and inner souls.

At the outset I remarked on the kind of the immortality that the circulation of ideas in the academy suggests, not only in the notion that one person's ideas may be reborn as another's, but also that they are purposefully regenerated. Perhaps that makes less strange some of these immanentist notions, despite a different orientation in so many other respects. As to purposeful regeneration, however, let me be explicit about what we might or might not want to keep of Tylor's doctrine of souls. As we have heard, Tylor tied immortality to a notion of an enduring immaterial, spiritual life. In animism, he demonstrated over and again, what might look like a notion of immortality was diminished by not being immaterial enough—thus he wrote, "Granted that the soul survives the death of the body, instance after instance from the records […] shows this soul to be regarded as a mortal being, liable like the body itself to accident and death."[40] In retrospect, we can see that combining immortal and immaterial is simply repeated in its opposite, the identification of the mortal with the material, and it is obtrusive. What we might like to keep is that in talking about "soul" he found a common language with his contemporaries, for all that he wished to disabuse them of misconceptions about the origin of religious thought.

40 Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture, Part II of Primitive Culture,* 108.

The problem of language recurs, is born over and again: an English-speaker cannot talk of soul without its opposite, body, and body is the mortal bit. Take that opposition away, and one's subject matter seems to vanish. So, rather than throwing out the concepts, the anthropologist may set them spinning, as I have tried to do here. I have tethered the account instead to areas of Melanesian horticultural practice, insofar as these provide a specific model for thinking of everlasting life, less perhaps as an immortality frozen at the moment of death than as ceaseless regeneration. If we can identify something it is appropriate to call soul, and refer to its rebirth within a kinship community, it can also be identified in the constant return of fleshly nourishment through the soil and its cultivation. Melanesians themselves draw attention to the lives and deaths of the taro and yams they cultivate.

Long ago Haudricourt offered an apt formula. People are "cultivated" during their lifetime—planted, in Hagen idiom, as Muke attests—and, Haudricourt adds, just as an abandoned garden becomes fallow, they cease to be so at death.[41] Miss Zweybruck's interest in immortality has opened up what it means that such beings are no longer the subject of cultivation: they survive in what is now being cultivated, the life of others.

**A Postscript**

Such an interest in immortality is not irrelevant to the twentieth-century anthropology that flourished after animism had disappeared. There was a long period when aspects of societies that might formerly have been called animistic were studied under the rubrics of categories more compatible with self-acknowledged modern institutions, such as politics, economics, religion. For British Social Anthropologists, such as myself, the 'social turn' that followed Durkheim's transformative formula, religion is society worshipping itself, meant that there was a great swing of interest towards social organization, including the prominence of institutions such as descent groups so-called, that is, the interactions of clans and kin collectivities.[42] This was a notable example of anthropological rejuvenation and demise, for descent groups were subsequently discovered in Melanesia and then discarded. The point to extract is that when they were

[41] Haudricourt, "Nature et culture dans la civilisation de l'igname: l'origine des clones et des clans," 100.

[42] So Durkheim's 'soul' becomes a collective principle incarnated in the individual: it is none other than society within us. See Pedersen and Willerslev, "'The Soul of the Body is the Soul': Rethinking the Concept of the Soul through North Asian Ethnography," 466.

occupying center stage, these constructs made a kind of immortality visible to the anthropologist.

As anthropologists uncovered the powers and circumstances of a markedly “social” life—where, say, political or economic interests were seen to shape religious precepts or kinship obligations—they also brought to attention the dynamics of self-regenerating social formations: perpetual succession, society enduring in its structures, roles reproduced, and so forth. Perhaps those immortal descent groups have since then been too quickly dispatched from anthropological purview. Indeed, one might revisit analyses of the way in which people are or are not caught up in kin groups as a model of self-formation that is also a collective formation, in order to query an axiomatic assumption that ran through the early animist literature. This was the assumption that people’s personal awareness of their experience as sentient beings, projected it was argued onto their environment, is sufficient to account for their apprehensions and ideas. The notion that how people perceive themselves is projected onto other entities normalizes the soul as originating within the individual creativity of human beings. It is no doubt going too far to suggest that people could have given themselves the souls they already recognized in other selves, human or non-human. In any event, that notion of projection has often rendered ineffable the state of affairs encountered in immanentist regimes, and people’s immortalizing work in keeping the whole world going.