

Dealing with Death – New Approaches versus Ancient Traditions

Ina Magel

Nowadays most taboos which existed decades ago in societies all over the world seem to be abolished. Especially for young people there are barely topics which cannot be addressed in a small talk. However, there is one subject which still remains delicate for old and young: Death. Even though death itself is universal, mortuary customs, such as funeral and remembrance rites, have persistently changed throughout centuries and decades. While ancient traditions usually followed a strict pattern, today there seems to be no limit to the form of new rituals.

In this context, on 23rd November 2013, the French-German channel “arte TV“ dedicated its broadcast “yourope“ to this topic presenting “New approaches to death” (arte TV, 2013). One of the examples showed the so-called “Death cafés“ - an increasing trend in Europe, intending to discuss death while drinking a cup of coffee and eating a piece of cake. The more shocking variant was demonstrated by a group of young people having a “Cannibal Cocktail“ - a drink mixed with the ashes of their late friend. To mark the anniversary of death, the lesbian community the deceased belonged to, and other friends organized a remembrance party. In the beginning, some of them performed a sado-maso-style show. Later on, a ritual was held in a skype conference in which a “witch” from Mexico presented her menstruation blood. Finally, the guests passed around the “Cannibal cocktail” from which everyone took a gulp. Only the girlfriend of the deceased refused.

In the face of these cases, the essay will question the necessity of such new approaches to death by contrasting them with selected examples of customs and rituals in the European cultural hemisphere.

The following article seeks to analyze the phenomena of death by approaching different research fields. The universal character of death allows an interdisciplinary and a quasi-general investigation of the topic. However, going back to the example of “Yourope”, the article will target those two aspects in the first instance: “Youth” and “Europe”. The geographic scope will take into account the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) as well as their neighbors Ancient Germany and Ancient Rus’. In spite of several differences due to the influence of diverse cultures, these neighboring countries have already shown many similarities during their coexistence in Pagan times (see for instance Banck) and later all became Christian states. An insight into specific rituals of those countries will provide descriptive examples for the evolution of European cultures where traditions seem to lose their importance in the last decades, and their neighbor Russia that currently finds itself between tradition and modernization. The final goal will be to put those aspects into relation and give an outlook for the possible role of traditions in future and their input to younger generations.

Battles, Ships and Burials in North European Paganism

Before we examine particular Pagan death rituals in Nordic and Northern cultures, we should first agree on some general quasi-universal Pagan beliefs on life and death. According to the anthropology of mortuary rites which outlines the universal and the particular (Metcalf/Huntington, 10), we can find a variety of Pagan beliefs which are considered universal. Generally, Pagan culture and traditions were based on the belief in the afterworld. It was assumed that family ties would never be torn apart unless they have already done so in life. Usually, connections between former family members would remain even after death (Todd, 80). In this context it has been of utmost necessity to make this contact pleasant and to avoid a damaging influence of the dead on the living. Consequently, it was the task of the living family members to comfort a dead relative in his afterlife.

According to that understanding, Nordic peoples had developed a complex system of burial customs in the Ancient times. In the first centuries A.D. when emigrations of peoples had widely occurred, many communalities between Germanic and Ancient Scandinavian peoples can be observed (Moellenberg, 1, 148). For instance, the Old Norse language - classified as North Germanic - as well as the runic writing system (Price, 253, 254) are indicators for intersections between Germanic and Scandinavian tribes. For this reason it is important to look at the Germanic culture and its rituals which could be found in many Northern regions.

For ancient Germanic tribes, life was a permanent battle with no exception to afterlife. When a Germanic warrior died, he was believed to pass a long journey to *Valhalla* – the hall of the death. Therefore, the dead were usually provided with shoes (Hasenfratz, 70). Other grave goods like weapons, jewelry, furniture or even horses were given (Simek, 191, 193), so the departed could fight his battle in the afterworld. In those times, it was already common to sing songs of lament which were individually composed for the deceased. Originally, cremation was the most typical procedure in Germania while inhumation emerged in the 1st century BC and was widely spread in Southern Sweden (Todd, 80). Germanics used to burn their dead on the grave hill (*Grabhuegel*) – a common burial place which also played a major role in Scandinavia, especially in Norway and Sweden. An important Germanic procedure after burial was the heritage meal (*Erbmahl*) where the heirs made their promises to the legator. His presence at the procession was arranged by placing a plate for him on the table (Nehring, 27). Such rituals demonstrate the connection between the dead and the living.

For the reason of blurred borderlines between peoples in the early ages, major analogies between the Germanic and Scandinavian cultures – the latter was predominately shaped by the Viking Era - can be encountered.

Even before the Viking Age (793–1066 century A.D.), first inhumation graves in Denmark, Sweden and lower Vistula region can be found and traced back to the 1st century (Todd, 80). However, the predominant Scandinavian practice – the ship or boat burial – emerged in the time of the Vikings (Simek, 192, 194). Here again we see clearly the interpretation of death as a journey, or rather a departure to another world (Simek, 194). Like Ancient Germans, Vikings used to equip their dead with rich grave goods like jewelry and weapons (Moellenberg, 150). The meaning of death as journey was underlined by horse burials, which had been representative for Iceland. They show the importance of a transport animal the departed seemed to be in need of (Loumand, 130). Another ritual which is comparable to the Germanic heritage meal, has existed in Norse countries as well: The heritage beer (*erfioel*) traditionally has been drank after a funeral and has represented the initiation ceremony of the heir (Boyer, 310). Such ritual elements describe death as a shared experience and once again they demonstrate the eternal link between the living and the dead. In Ancient Finnish traditions these bonds played an important role as the living had assisted the dead on their journey with sacred poetry. The epic approach to death in a bittersweet perception is well characterized by Finnish folklore with its traditional death lullabies (Pentikäinen).

Ritual chants and a 40-Day journey in Ancient Rus'

Traditions of Ancient Rus' nowadays can be widely applied to the modern states of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine.

Here the preparation for death used to begin after the marriage of the children which primarily included sewing the clothes for the funeral. Before leaving the world, all ties were supposed to be cut, e.g. promises, grief or curses and the world must have been begged for forgiveness. For instance, from the chronicles of Yaroslav Osmomysl, the head of the former Principality Halych (Kievan Rus'), we learn how he asked his "fathers and brothers" for forgiveness of his sins after a serious disease occurred in 1187 (Ipat'evskaya letopis', 656).

In Ancient Rus' the head of the family was traditionally buried under the house he had built which created the cult of the house ghost – a form of ancestral worship in Russia (Haase, 1939: 125). However, in Northern Russia, like Scandinavia, ship burials were common as well. At funerals, lament songs were sung (Zelenin, 355). Sometimes, the singer used to wear the clothes of the dead person. This custom, according to the ancient belief, made the dead feel warm in the afterworld (Nikitina). However, as soon as the first soil was thrown on the grave, lament had to stop. Otherwise it was assumed that the departed would "lie in tears". After the funeral, the house had to be cleaned - a first step to the removal of traces of the deceased (Nikitina).

During the first 40 days after the burial, it was the time for the living to say farewell to the dead. Of course, this did not mean that the deceased was forgotten later. Ancient Russians assumed that even after death each soul kept most of theirth desires, especially for food. Thus, numerous rituals, for instance remembrance meals, were practiced. On the 40th day after death, family members of the deceased used to prepare a ladder-shaped honey cake (*lesenka*) as a symbol of the rise to heaven. Usually, the ladder was placed on a bench between the gates. Then, the deceased was lamented and afterwards the cake was eaten (Zelenin, 356). A very ancient tradition which is hardly practiced nowadays is a ritual singing. This special form of chant had the function to "tell news" which the living had to bring to the dead.

Christian Society – Requiem for the Dead

The first Christian mortuary and remembrance rituals can be traced back to the 4th century B.C. when Christendom became the state religion in the Occident (v. Brueck, 154). In their beginning, Christian rites were closely linked to pagan traditions, so that many analogies can be observed (Rist, 67, 68). The main belief of Christian afterlife was that the souls of the deceased first passed through purgatory – the state of purification. Afterwards they were faced with the sins of their lifetime in hell, before they could finally reach heaven (Melton, 24). Thus, the prior duty of the living was to support the soul on that journey. According to this, early Christians used to sing songs in the name of the deceased, praying for their salvation. It was not yet the period of liturgies, but relicts of pagan commemoration like remembrance meals (*refrigerium*) - rituals in which the living celebrated with the death (v. Brueck, 156). Later, the intercessory prayer emerged which the living said for the departed. A reference can be found in the Second Epistle to Timothy (New Testament, 2Ti 1:3, 1:4): “*I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day, longing to see you, even as I recall your tears, so that I may be filled with joy.*” In 1048 B.C., the 2nd November became the official remembrance day which today in Western societies is known as “All Souls Day”. This day is celebrated in churches with special liturgies and intercession prayers to commemorate all faithful departed. Originally, it was supposed to assist the souls in purgatory (Melton, 24). In Latin America it is known as the *Días de los Muertos* and is celebrated in a colorful manner (ibid.). Later in the Middle Ages, approximately in the 13th century, a clerical tradition emerged which also enjoys a great popularity nowadays: the performing of a *Requiem* (v. Brueck, 174). As a Requiem we can define the mass for the dead as well as a special composition (e.g. Mozart’s Requiem in D minor). Its meaning is to honor the departed and to pray for their salvation and peace of soul. The initial phrase of the liturgy “*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine*” means “Grant them eternal rest, O Lord”. In this case, “eternal rest” does not refer to the grave, but the eternal life in heaven as Christian funeral masses uphold the idea resurrection (Bieger).

Russian Orthodox Traditions – Christianity with Pagan influence

In its traditions the Orthodox Church is generally close to the Catholic Church. Liturgies, intercessory prayers or remembrance meals are known and still practiced in the Orthodox community. However, it must be noted that Pagan traditions in Russian culture could survive through the centuries due to the fact that inquisition in Russia was not as powerful as in Europe.

Generally, each Saturday is dedicated to the commemoration of the deceased. Even during the Great Lent when individual memorial liturgies are limited, a number of special remembrance days can be observed, such as the Saturday of Theodor Tyron, one of the Great Martyrs. On this day, Orthodox Christians prepare a *kut’ya*, a mash of wheat grains, honey and other herbal ingredients (Steindorff, 58). This ritual meal symbolizes the eternal life (wheat) and the sweetness of paradise (honey).

An important remembrance feast which is celebrated by the Orthodox Church each year in the 2nd week after Eastern is the so-called *Radonitsa*. With its Pagan origin, this feast clearly illustrates how Pagan and Christian traditions often go hand in hand in Russian Orthodoxy (Steindorff, 69). The day before *Radonitsa* Northern Russians use to heat the *banya* (Russian sauna) where the dead can wash themselves (Zelenin, 357). On *Radonitsa* Day, Orthodox Christians traditionally go to church and bring along food, e.g. Easter eggs, bread, pancakes (*bliny*) for the deceased celebrating the joy of Eastern with the dead. It is also common to visit graves and bring along food and drinks. On this occasion most people talk to the deceased, tell them news, or ask for advice (Zelenin, 357). An important remembrance day in autumn is the Demetrius (Parental) Saturday. Its origins can be traced back to 1380 AD as *Dmitri Donskoj* commemorated his soldiers after the battle against the Tatars at the *Kulikovo field*. Later it became an official remembrance day for all Orthodox Christians (Kalinskii, 306). On Demetrius Saturday, like on most Orthodox memorial days, people go to church and write letters with the names of the deceased to be read at the liturgy for the salvation of their souls. Afterwards, people visit the graves of the dead and commemorate them with ritual food and a reunion of relatives and near ones.

Anonymous funerals and digital gravestones in the 21st century

Having presented some ancient mortuary and remembrance rituals in selected cultures and ages, it is necessary to look at the situation in the 21st century. While ancient rituals traditionally followed a strict pattern, it seems to be much more difficult to find the “red thread” which goes through the variety of rituals nowadays. Even speaking of “rituals” is not always suitable these days. The main reason for that is the increasing popularity of anonymous ceremonies. These types of funerals are characterized by minimalistic procedures, for instance, graves without a gravestone, or a cross only (v. Brueck, 192).

On the other hand, a rising interest for individually designed funerals can be observed in modern society. The organizers of these funerals do not wish to follow official procedures and schedules, but their own ideas. For instance, the Netherlands offer many options for such funeral procedures. Many funeral parlors offer dinners in the time of the cremation of the deceased, some also concerts and others even laser shows (Fischer, 54). Given the technical progress of the last years, even the following new trend has emerged: digital gravestones with QR-codes (See qrmemorials.com). Usually, this code leads to an individually created web page for the deceased with personal information like texts, photographs or movies. In consequence of the mentioned technical progress, more and more people organize commemoration with the help of web pages. One of the arguments for such means is that a bigger number of people can be reached virtually and geographical distances can be overcome (Haverinen, 118). Additionally, some of these pages still provide services like sale of teddy bears or jewelry (ibid., 75). This way virtual and real-life commemoration can be combined.

A Challenge for the Modern Society

The previous analysis has shown that in spite of the universality of death itself, the understanding and approaches to it have changed throughout the centuries. While early societies regarded death as a process of transition to another world, the modern society in Europe hardly believes in life after death. Even though many singular spiritual movements still exist and emerge today, the modern lifestyle with its speed and the predominant idea of “making the most of now” is mostly inconsistent with the ancient approach to reincarnation or the Christian approach to an eternal life after death (Hallam/Hockey, 18; Appadurai, 84). Moreover, the scientific and medical progress even tempts to exclude death from our existence (Baumann; Walter, 12,13). Different interpretations of the nature of death lead to different mortuary and remembrance rites and even the question of their necessity as such. In their Pagan origin, and later Christian tradition, mortuary rites served to support the soul on its journey to the afterworld – a belief which can rarely be encountered in modern Western society. Deriving from that, remembrance rites had the task to tame a dead person’s spirit and to ease their lives in the afterworld. Today such rituals are losing their importance.

However, the loss of a certain tradition, for instance a “mourning etiquette” which had been known in a society before, often leads to a general avoidance of such important matters as mourning (Walter, 18).

Nevertheless, especially young people seem to be in search of individual rituals as shown in the example of the “Cannibal cocktail”, so that a possible explanation of this paradox may be the gap between forgotten traditions and everyone’s necessity of dealing with death sooner or later.

In the light of the traditions based on the wisdom of our ancestors, new ways like the example mentioned seem rather strange. However, in this case we should not ignore the fact that other cultures are indeed familiar with such proceedings. For instance, a funerary cannibalism exists in the culture of the amazons, since they used to eat the corpses of their relatives (Conklin, 75). So it cannot be claimed globally that these kinds of rituals are created artificially. However, when we speak about Europe - or “Yourope” like *arte* did - we leave the cultural context. In ancient Nordic and Northern societies, mortuary rites followed other procedures to support the deceased on their way to the afterworld while remembrance rites intended to soothe their souls and to assure a peaceful coexistence of the living and the dead. Remembrance meals are also known here, but not in the way and with the meaning of cannibalistic rites.

Today we do not only see death as a cut and try to exclude it from other existence on earth, but also look for individual ways to deal with this topic. Having analyzed particular ancient traditions which go back to the roots of our ancestors, we have seen some interesting ways to understand and deal with death. The incorporation of such traditions in our modern society, for example, remembrance meals or ritual singing, depends on each person’s individual ideas and beliefs, but seems, however, not unrealistic. In fact, we have seen that ancient traditions

actually intended to explain the meaning of death and to answer questions to this effect. This point is of utmost importance for young people who are constantly in search of guides and explanations.

If we see graveyards as a mirror of society (Haverinen, 30) with its culture and values, we can draw the conclusion that nowadays young people live in a society which offers a lot of opportunities, but, however, often lacks of a common understanding of certain phenomena.

In our 21st century, “Death cafés” offer a modern platform to discuss such phenomena as exemplified by the topic of approaches to death. The idea is to talk openly about personal conceptions and feelings referring to this subject in spite of its complexity. Therefore, the reference to ancient traditions which young people often never heard of, would be a suitable basis for shedding light on the darkness and possibly even for finding solace.

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