

DIMENSIONS OF DEATH: THEORIES AND PRAXIS (Study on the Human Sociological and psychological aspects of Mortuary rituals)

Dr. Razzeko Delley

Assistant Professor Department of English, Jomin Tayeng Government Model Degree College, Jemi Notko Roing.
Roing, Arunachal Pradesh, 792110.
Email: razzeko@gmail.com

Abstract: *Humans since ages have altered the elements of nature for their purposes but death still remains beyond their control and therefore, still difficult to define. The obscure and complex nature of death has given rise to various beliefs and customs as well as various notions about mortality and the afterlife. This paper attempts to understand the social and psychological dimensions of the death ritual. Among humans death ritual is the most solemn of all rituals. While studying the social dimension of death the researcher has based his studies on theories propounded by Hertz, Durkheim and Van Gannep.*

Key words: *Death, Society, Grief, Rites of passage, Community, Therapeutic.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

Death is a universal and inevitable phenomenon for all living beings; an inescapable final episode of the life course. Death scientifically occurs due to the collapsing of a biological living structure. Humans as corporal biological embodied beings are shaped and structured into an inevitable sequence of birth, life and death: cells expire, vital care organs fail and the biological body stops working.

Humans since ages have altered the elements of nature for their purposes but death still remains beyond their control and therefore, still difficult to define. The obscure and complex nature of death has given rise to various beliefs and customs as well as various notions about mortality and the afterlife. These beliefs and customs are observed by the living and believed by them to be taken part by the dead. The impact on the deceased is unknown but the roles of living are more comprehensible. The living people, according to Bonnano and Kaltman¹ are the ones who face and endure the universal loss of human life. The mass participation of people in the death of an individual makes an event a social one.

Although, death occurs due to the biological condition of an individual the events after its occurrence are significantly bound and interwoven into a social relationship and the culture of a particular society. The reason for the transformation of an individual event into a social ritual happens according to Kelleher², is because, humans are emotional beings and their understanding of death is not just confined to the biological horizon but is instead tied into existential reflection, social norms and personal relationships. And this makes dying not only a biological process but also a social process.

Despite death being universal, the social dealing of the dead varies according to the culture and time frame. All societies have got their customs, norms and beliefs in approaching death. Though there may be diverse approaches, according to Parkes³, almost all involve a core understanding of spiritual beliefs, rituals, expectations and etiquette.

In psychological terms, death is equated to a crisis as it is a stressor that compels an individual to respond and adapt in some way, or try to get strategies to cope with its impact. According to Bento⁴; there are several ways in which people try to find means to overcome the various impact of death. Grief for Firis is a universal and normal and healthy way to express bereavement. Though many elements are universal, there are also aspects of death which are culture-specific.

Death does not end the process but gives birth to new norms. Derrida (1993), through deconstruction theory questions the idea of the existence of tight and clear delineation and the border between life and death. In his theory, Derrida claims that the ideas concerning death are bound into different cultures and are variable which changes across

¹ Toward an integrative perspective on bereavement' in *Psychological Bulletin*, 125(6), 760-776 (1999)

² *A Social History of Dying* (2007)

³ 'Grief as an illness' in *New Society* (April 9), 11 (1972)

⁴ 'When the show must go on: Disenfranchised grief in Organisation' in *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 9, 35-44. (1994)

time and history. Death, he observes is a state of being that is neither fully social nor fully biological but exists in the fusion and inter-relationship of the two. This aspect of death as proposed by Derrida makes it, not only a simple state of the `non-life` in the biological body. However, these boundaries are, instead processes, which exist amongst other processes, embedded into biology, society, culture and time.

This work attempts to interpret the social and cultural dimensions of the death ritual. Among humans death ritual is the most solemn of all rituals. While studying the social dimension of death the researcher has based his studies on theories propounded by Hertz⁵, Durkheim⁶ and Van Gennep⁷.

Durkheim in his Functionalist Sociology explains that humans require and develop rituals and ceremonies to mark all the important transitions in their life and death is no exception. The reason for this step according to Durkheim and other anthropologists is that humans tend to create boundaries between different stages of life to order, manage and understand the progress and expiration of human existence. However, these boundaries are situational and depend on socio-cultural context.

Robert Hertz, Arnold Van Gennep and Redcliff Brown⁸, all have termed the death as an agent of social disruption as it temporarily destabilizes society. Death as a disruptive force according to Van Gennep needs to be regulated and controlled for social stability. This control and regulation are exercised through the death ritual and this ritual as a means regulates and maintains social stability regardless of recurring changes. Therefore, as a ritual, the death ritual is converted into a social rather than biological or individual phenomenon which is felicitated by the absence of social cohesion and security.

Robert Hertz explains that death as a social phenomenon is driven by dual and painful processes of mental disintegration and synthesis. It is only when this process is completed; that society will find its peace and recover and therefore triumph over death. The whole process brings a profound change in the relationship between the mortal remains of the dead and his soul with the living mourners. This transformation process takes place in three phases: disintegration, transition, and integration.

Hertz arrived at this theoretical conclusion by focusing his study on death from the biological body to the moral obligations that concern the treatment of the dead. For him, the corpse is not only a biological entity but also a social one. Therefore, the moral aspect and not the hygienic dimension should be considered while interpreting the death ritual. To illustrate his sociological and theoretical understanding of funerary rites, Hertz argues that, the death rite is a process consisting of two complementary notions: that death signifies a lasting procedure and that, it is also a transition. Society above all, is concerned with itself and its main motive is the continuity of social structure and social process after the loss of a member, therefore the society's collective consciousness, through the death ritual changes the status of a person from a living member to a departed member of the society. In this process, there is a release and reintegration interpreted through 'a general type' in which the state of the body and the identity of the death are related (1960; 44). Like Van Gennep, Hertz considers death as a transition which transfers an individual from one domain to another. This transition like birth is also embodied by mystical qualities attending upon the danger of status change. This process according to Hertz is a complementary notion because death is not instantaneous but subject to events in time, and death is not only destruction but also transition. Against this theory, Hertz interprets the death ritual as a result of consequences among the living for the actual state of the death (1960; 51). Death ritual is an obligation for the living and after its solemnization, the dark period marked by death elapses and a new era is ushered in. Through his theory, Hertz formulates to look at the death ritual as a more sociological than a psychological form of discourse. However, he also draws attention to the painful psychological process of separating the dead from the consciousness of the living. Their bonding with death is not severed in a day, the memories and images linger among the living. This aspect makes death a social phenomenon that has the elements of disintegration and synthesis.

Further, Hertz claims that the funeral rites affect the dead, the soul and the survivors. The identity of the dead undergoes changes during the ritual process among the survivors. Hertz here implies that death eliminates the social being grafted upon the physical individual (1960; 77). With the death of an individual, society loses him much more than a unit. 'It is stricken in the very principle of life; in the faith, it has itself' (1960; 78). Death, therefore, in this context can be viewed as a form of sacrilege, one involving violence, energy or negative social force: something that is functioning against society.

Arnold Van Gennep (1960) in his theory of 'Rites of Passage' proposes and considers death ritual one among the other rites of passage, like birth, puberty, and marriage which becomes the subject of elaborate ritual to mark the elevation of the persons from one stage to another. Gennep (1960) divides death-related rites which according to him,

⁵ *Death and the Right Hand* (1960)

⁶ *Suicide* (1952).

⁷ *The Rites of Passage* (1960)

⁸ *The Andaman islander's*(1964 [1922])

is elevation ritual into three distinct phases: the first preliminary phase characterized by rites of separation which isolates the corpses and mourners from society, second; rites of transition, which takes place during the liminal phase, marking the passage from the world of the living to the afterlife. And finally, there are the post-liminal rites of incorporation to mark both the passage of the soul to the world of the dead and the return of the mourners to the bosom of society. And the whole mourning ritual comes to an end after the restoration of social order and therefore, society is expected to return to normalcy.

The funeral ritual as a whole in various forms facilitates a structure for the reaffirmation of social values and bonding for the passage of the dead from one social order to another. These rituals are the manifestation of social reintegration and continuity.

2. SIGNIFICANCE AND THE SCOPE OF THE DEATH RITUAL :

When a person dies, family members' friends and neighbors respond to the occasion in a socially structured patterned way. The relatives and family members follow strict cultural guidelines to treat and dispose of the deceased body. Milton Cohen⁹ considers death ritual like other human behaviour; an expression of cultural blueprint, of attitude, values, and ideals passed down traditionally from generations which an individual learns as a member of society. The study of death rituals, therefore, provides rich data on the social and cultural behavior of a society.

Mortuary behaviour can be traced back as early as half a million years ago to the 'Peking man' (Cohen). Neanderthals, the predecessors of Europeans followed well-patterned death rituals which can be traced back some 110,000 years ago. Wallace (1966), while explaining the death ritual of Neanderthals observes that they practised a well-patterned burial system. The evidence of their belief in the afterlife can be traced from the grave goods which consisted of everyday materials. A similar mode of cave burials adopted by another human ancestor, *Homonaledis* were discovered in South Africa's Rising Star caves recently.

Much more archaeological evidence was discovered in Iraq and Southern Europe. A prehistoric human remain excavated by archaeologists in Iraq had traces of pollen flowers on it. Probably the corpse was covered with flowers. The Cro-Magnons, successors to the Neanderthals occupied Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean littoral from about 40,000 to 10,000 years ago, they buried their dead bodies in the mouth of the caves with the grave goods.

The probable mortuary rituals of *Homonaledi* discovered recently in South Africa's Rising Star Cave, prehistoric monument Stonehenge in Wiltshire which was built around 3000 B.C, Egyptian pyramids and Chinese terracotta warriors are proof of the elaborate and profound mortuary ritual followed by humans since time immemorial.

In the later years, the prehistoric rituals laid the foundation for more structured and documented funeral customs and beliefs as exhibited in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Both books are manuals for the dead as well as living people.

Egyptian Book of the Dead is regarded by many as the earliest literature dealing with the dying and the afterlife. The writings date back to 3000 B.C., and originally started from hieroglyphs, the book is translated as; 'The Book of coming forth by day'; or; 'The Book of Emerging Forth into the light'. The book contains around 200 Spells which are meant to help and guide the soul to overcome the dangers and obstacles while journeying to the nether world. It also describes the way and landscape of the netherworld which the soul would journey through, the gods and hostile creatures that they would encumber before reaching the final and most complex stage of 'weighing of heart' judgment to decide on the conduct of a person.

It is part of funerary texts which includes pyramid texts and coffin texts. These spells were not written down in a single age but were added to the text over time. Some spells are considered as old as 3000 BC and some are said to be composed and added in the 11th and 12th centuries B.C. The book is based on the ideas of the Egyptian religious belief system that attributes the cosmos consisting of the Earth (world of the living), the sky and the netherworld (world of the dead). The Egyptians' believed that the netherworld was a dangerous place in which the soul needs to travel by foot, by boat or through the air in different physical forms. The spells in the book empowered the soul to control its body and overcome the dangers. The spells even enabled them to transform themselves into animals or plants according to their need and convenience through the 'transformation spells'.

In the final stage of the journey, the gods reviewed the dead person's conduct during their life and examined whether the soul deserves to enter into the afterlife or not.

The book also illustrates different ideas about the afterlife and diverse dwelling places of the soul according to their conduct during their lifetime. Among them, the most attractive place is to dwell in the field of reeds where no one gets hungry.

Generally, these spells were written on papyrus rolls and placed on a tomb or wrapped with Mummy Wrappings.

⁹ *Death Ritual: Anthropological Perspectives* (2002)

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is a similar funerary text among Tibetans. The book in the Tibetan language is called *Bardo Thodol* which is translated as 'liberation upon hearing in the intermediate state', or 'liberation upon hearing in the after-death place'. The book is attributed to Padma-Sambhawa, the ancient Indian yogi mystic who is also credited with spreading Buddhism in Tibet. According to the Tibetan Tradition, the book was written in the 8th century B.C. like its Egyptian counterpart, it is a guide for the dead soul. It illustrates the detailed journey of the soul after death. The whole quest is reported through a mediator, the meditation practitioner called *Delogs*. The book concerns itself with what the human must expect from death, by doing so the book also covertly preaches about the conduct of an individual in day-to-day life.

The book also is a significant narrative with a vivid description of the soul's journey, the places, the spirits, demons etc., which one must encounter during the passage. The detailed report is narrated by the *delogs* as they can send their soul to the intermediate state of the dead.

The book can also be regarded as a manual for the livings as its purpose is to enable people to realize their true nature in the afterlife. It also endeavours to explain the Buddhist concept of life that, life and death are inseparable. Death becomes just a continuation of the life process in this Universe.

Similarly among the Hindus, *Garuda Purana* is a sacred text that deals with the concept of life after death, the journey of the soul, death and its aftermath, rebirth or reincarnation. The second section of the text, also known as *Uttara Khanda* and *Pretakalpa*, includes chapters on funeral rites and life after death. *Garuda Purana* is in the form of a dialogue between *Garuda* the Divine King of Birds and Lord *Vishnu*. Later, *Garuda* recites the same to Sage *Kashyapa*. The book contains about 19000 slokas and is classified as *Saattvika Purana*.

Among the 16 *Samskaaras* prescribed in Hindu Dharma, the last one called *Anthyeshthi samskara* is related to funeral rites and other ceremonies. This *samskara* is exclusively and exhaustively covered in *Garuda Purana*. The *Purana* also covers descriptions of the Nether worlds - *Yama-Loka* and various kinds of *Naraka Lokas* (Hell). It explains the experiences of the Soul when it leaves the body and the cycle of countless births the Soul takes. The book also dwells in detail on the Law of Karma, Fruits of Karma (action); Moksha (Salvation) and various types of punishments for the sins committed during lifetime.

This section of the work examines the significance and scope of the death ritual through various dimensions.

3. THE FUNCTION OF THE DEATH RITUAL :

Like every ritual, death-related rituals have a profound purpose and play a significant role in society. *Kilonzo and Hogan*¹⁰ (1999) identify the psychological function of the death ritual for the grieving family. Moreover, despite mysteries surrounding death, it is an accepted phenomenon which every individual must pass through. *Kublerros* (1975) argue that the awareness of death is a basic human condition that gives significance to living. When their near and dear ones die, people engage in a socially patterned reaction in an attempt to find meaning in the event of inevitable loss. According to *Radzilani* (2010), this specific behaviour or activity during someone's death groups individuals and fosters community bonding.

Therefore, similarly, I would like to look at *Idu Mishmi* death ritual as a significant medium which exhibits a sociocultural setup as well as customs which interweave their everyday life aspirations and conducts.

Making Change Manageable

According to *Kilonzo and Hogan*, rituals related to death address significant issues after an individual's death. It facilitates adjustments to the present change. The ritual also changes the role and status of the deceased and resolves the community tension resulting from the death. It also absolves the previous losses and relocates the dead into new roles and statuses in the community. Through this ritual, a wife becomes a widow, a husband become a widower, children become orphan etc. With the enforcement of a new role and status, an individual observes socially prescribed taboos and maintains a dress code. Among the *Idu Mishmis*, widows and widowers both observe taboos for 10 months. The taboos prescribe various social conduct and strict dietary restrictions.

Death, according to *Gumede*¹¹ (1990) is an aggressor which disrupts the social equilibrium. To overcome these social imbalances, the society follows sanctioned rites and ceremonies and thereafter, restores the social equilibrium. *Rando* (1993) also asserts that rituals in most cases are employed in relinquishing of relationship and transitioning to a new role.

¹⁰ 'Traditional African mourning rituals are abridged in response to the AIDS epidemic: Implications for mental health'. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 36(3), 259-283(1999)

¹¹ *Traditional Healers: A Medical Doctor's perspective*

Therapeutic to the Bereaved

Death acts as an aggressor and inflicts pain as well as trauma on the survivors. The social vacuum created by death is huge and traumatic. Ritual is the medium through which the healing process starts. According to Walsh and Goldrick (1991), the funeral ritual is the starting point of healing. Similarly, Kilonzo and Hogan (1999) consider the traditional mourning ritual as having a deep and profound psychological function which provides an opportunity for the expression and purgation of severe emotions. All the symbolic behaviour like people joining the mourning process, expressing support and sharing grief, expressing condolences and assisting mourners to deal with the loss functions as a catalyst in overcoming grief.

The supportive discourse during the mourning ritual strengthens the family and social bonding. Among the Idu Mishmis, the funeral ritual lasts for 5 days. All the villagers as well as the relatives gather for 5 days to show respect to the departed soul and express solidarity with the mourning family.

Construction of Community Identity

According to Radzilani¹², the funeral ritual manifests how people identify with their culture, and religion and also with the deceased. Rituals are the institutions through which a member owes one's allegiance to a community identity. The rituals create a sense of community among the participants which results in the reaffirmation of group identities. According to Dlukulu¹³, the identity forging involves a dialectical relationship between an individual and society as it is anchored in a particular social context or in a specific set of social relations and as a result, we become a particular form of socialization.

For Howells¹⁴ funeral ceremonies affirm our periodic oath of allegiance to the flag and solidarity with a group. They function as a vehicle in unifying the members of society by reminding them of common commitment.

Radcliffe Browne (1964) also regards the death ritual as a collective expression of feelings appropriate to the situation. The Individuals through their common expression of emotion express commitment to each other as well as to society and society thereby affirming the social bonding of a community.

Similarly, Taylor¹⁵ (1871) states that the rituals represent a symbolic affirmation of values employing culturally standardized utterances and actions which have a specific function in a given community or culture.

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¹³ Black Urban Widows: Their experiences of and coping with bereavement in a transitional society(2010)

¹⁴ *The Heathens: Primitive Man and His Religions* (1966)

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Author's Biography

Dr. Razzeko Delley resides at Roing Arunachal Pradesh, India. Presently he is working as Assistant Professor of English at Jomin Tayeng Government Model Degree College Roing. Email: razzeko@gmail.com