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## Dealing with death in contemporary Western culture: A view from afar

Marika Moisseeff

One of democracy's fundamental features is that it allows for the expression, in the public sphere, of different perspectives on issues and events affecting the community. As I will try to show, rituals are one of the means whereby individuals are able to express their emotions publicly on the basis of the distinctive places they occupy with respect to particular events. In order to deal with foreseeable disruptive events affecting particular individuals or groups, such as births or deaths, society makes use of institutionalized rituals that allow those concerned to share these experiences in accepted, conventional ways. On such occasions, those who come together to acknowledge the event in question manifest their feelings as a function of their respective positions (Moisseeff and Houseman forthcoming). In the case of unexpected, exceptionally large-scale events that affect the community as a whole, such as terrorist attacks or natural catastrophes, democratic structures are put to the test. The positions occupied by those involved – immediate victims and their close ones, perpetrators and their close ones, as well as various others – cannot be conflated, and the emotional reactions of these disparate parties, although potentially standing in opposition to each other, must nevertheless be publicly taken into account, even in the absence of institutionalized commemorations.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I will consider institutionalized rituals dealing with individual death in the European past and in other-than-Western cultural contexts, on the one hand, and in the contemporary West, on the other, to propose a comparative perspective for thinking about collective, ritualized but as of yet institutionalized responses to such large-scale disruptive events.

I do so from the standpoint of an anthropologist who has worked in an Aboriginal community in South Australia (Moisseeff 1999, 2017) and who is also a clinician having shared mourning experiences with people from a variety of

cultural backgrounds. I hope this can help us to better understand what is at stake in the aftermath of the sudden, unexpected mass massacres that have occurred these last years in Western countries, the individual and collective reactions they have provoked and the grassroots and official initiatives undertaken in response to them.

Let us first note that although it is often said that in the West death has become 'taboo,'<sup>2</sup> the fact is that it constantly makes news headlines, figures prominently in fictional works and has become a subject of utmost importance in social debates and legislation (e.g. bioethic laws, palliative care and more generally, ends-of-life concerns including access to euthanasia). Similarly, Westerners are regularly incited to work through processes of grieving and remembrance. The 'psys' – psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists and so forth – are the ones who are expected to help people with this work. This development, I have suggested, is directly related to changes in how personal identity is conceived (Moisseff 2012) and to the subsequent delegation of the management of bodies to the medical establishment (Moisseff 2013a, 2016a, 2016b).

Most people in the West today are born and die in hospitals and other medicalized institutions, whereas barely a hundred years ago most were born and died at home. This cannot but have had a major impact on mortuary practices. As documented by ethnographic research, treatments applied to bodies by medical staff are highly ritualized.<sup>3</sup> However, those closest to the deceased are generally allowed to play only a very peripheral role, when they are not excluded out of hand. This gives people the impression that death has been 'deritualized' (e.g. Michaud-Nérard 2007). Moreover, since the end of the nineteenth century, corpses have been increasingly taken in hand by specialized personnel working in spaces from which the profane are banned. Thus, what has been made invisible is not so much death as the decaying body itself. This state of affairs contrasts sharply with what anthropologists observe in other societies, where the corpse's presence is central both to the organization of funerary rites and to the regulation of the emotions of those close to the deceased.<sup>4</sup>

As a framework for a cross-cultural perspective on mourning proceedings, I propose to envisage 'death' as an event involving three types of phenomena: (1) the presence of a corpse, (2) the emotional reactions of those close to the deceased and (3) collective representations of pain, loss and dying. I will try to show that whereas in many societies studied by anthropologists these three types of phenomena tend to be treated together in the course of collective funerary rituals, in contemporary Western societies, they tend to be treated independently of each other in distinct places. This dissociation, I suggest, is

part of the Eliasian 'civilizing process' linked with the emergence of democracy in Western countries.

Anthropologists generally describe those having shared a close intimacy with the deceased as 'mourners': spouses, children, parents, siblings. As Van Gennep noted as early as 1909, mourners, notably the spouse, acquire a special status that situates them between the living and the dead, the deceased in particular. However, unlike the deceased who must at one point relinquish the society of the living to join the community of the dead, those close to the departed must return to the community of the living after having been partially excluded from it for a period generally lasting between one and two years. Often, a distinction is made between primary funerals, that is, mortuary services centred on the corpse, and secondary funerals that, where they exist, can take place months or years later when the deceased is deemed to have become an ancestor.

In order to provide a multifaceted comparative perspective on death and mourning in contemporary Western societies, I start by looking at mortuary rites among the Aboriginal Australians with whom I work.<sup>5</sup> I then turn to a performance of mourning among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea that is in many respects comparable to a secondary funeral, then to a brief account of the lifting of a widow's mourning prohibitions among the Beti of Cameroon and finally to mortuary practices in twentieth-century rural France, before returning to the management of death in the contemporary West.

### Current funerary rites among Aboriginal Australians

In Aboriginal communities I am familiar with, when someone's death is made known, those close to the deceased, the mourners, begin to scream; some of them hit themselves on the head, arms or shoulders, inflicting deep wounds that leave lasting scars. More traditional members of the community set up a camp outside their house – the 'sorry business camp' – where the mourners stay, along with members of their extended family who often come from far away after having been informed by telephone of what they call 'bad luck'. Less traditional mourners remain in their house, but are also immediately joined by members of their extended family many of whom 'camp out' at their place. Those who don't sleep on site come almost every day to spend time with the mourners and to bring food and drink.

These large-scale family reunions are thought to be crucial for the comfort and reassurance family members must provide for each other. Those most affected

by the death expect their close relatives to be united with them in their grief, and, reciprocally, such persons ardently want to show their solidarity concretely by accepting to be emotionally and physically affected and by displaying this.<sup>6</sup>

Old women, who are not among the deceased's close kin and who are responsible for Aboriginal traditions, take on the role of 'weepers' until the body is buried: they lament loudly in chorus in a conventional way when each new person arrives at the sorry business camp or enters the mourners' house. This wailing lasts several minutes during which the newcomer shakes hands with those close to the deceased, sometimes embracing them in a gesture of mutual compassion. Visitors inquire in a low voice about the circumstances of death and the arrangements made, before moving on to other, everyday matters.

The mourners' and visitors' meals, like the organization of the funeral, are handled not by the mourners themselves but by the dead person's in-laws. The day before the burial, neighbours and in-laws prepare a light meal that will follow the burial.

Certain family members prepare a eulogy that will be distributed and preciousely kept. In it, the deceased's family members, living and dead, are mentioned by name, and significant events in his or her life are recalled. Such a eulogy can become an extensive biography, especially in the case of adults who have played an important role in the community. Here is an excerpt showing the importance given to the relational identity of the deceased:

### **Molly Lennon**

Dearly loved daughter of Indulkulta [her mother] (deceased), Edward Lennon (Ted) [her White biological father] (dec.) and Charlie Mara Muka [the Aboriginal father who raised her] (dec.)

Beloved wife of Malcom McKenzie (dec.)

Loving mother of Kenneth, Donald, Angeline, Molly (dec.), Beatrice, Margaret (dec.), Vivianne, Malcom, Heather, Alwyn, Rex, Deirdre and Regina.

Much loved baby sister of Jenny Stewart (dec.), Tom Cramp (dec.), Franck Mike (dec.), Special sister to Ray Lennon (dec.), Ronnie Lennon, Ruby Jones (dec.), Barney Lennon (dec.) & Tom Brady [all are biological or classificatory brothers & sisters]

Dearly loved daughter in-law to Fred and Jessie McKenzie (both dec.)

Much loved mother in law to Margaret, Maudie (dec.), Rex (dec.), Andrew, Johnny, Dorothy, Raymond, Irene, Heinz, Deborah and Leonie [here are listed Molly's children's successive spouses]

Dearly loved Grandmother and Urnda [great grandmother] to all her grandchildren, great grandchildren and great, great grandchildren.

Dearly loved Aunty, Sister, Sister in law and Nanna to all her Luritja/Yankantjatjara and Adnyamathanha families [Aboriginal communities to whom she and her husband were affiliated]  
Loved by all who knew her.

These days, the corpse is entrusted to an undertaker who also organizes the burial. Funeral home staff accept that Aboriginal family members participate in preparing the body (applying make-up, doing the person's hair) and come for lengthy visits with the deceased up until the moment of burial. They also agree to keep the corpse for a much longer period of time than is usual for non-Aboriginal Australians. Indeed, it is important that as many family members as possible be present at the funeral.

On the day of the burial, the mourners dress up in formal clothes, such as black dresses, skirts or pants with white tops. The corpse is exposed in an open casket inside a Christian place of worship chosen by the family. Indeed, as a result of the widespread missionization of the Australian Aboriginal population, present-day Aboriginal funerals always take place, at least in part, according to a Christian liturgy. Upon entering, mourners and weepers gather in front of the coffin. The weepers launch into their laments, whereas female mourners begin to cry loudly, at times screaming, some of them giving the impression of being on the verge of fainting or of wanting to throw themselves into the coffin, while others hold them back. After a time, the celebrant appears, and everyone sits down. The sermon that follows is interspersed with well-known Christian hymns sung by all. Messages from those unable to come are read out loud.

The casket is then sealed, occasioning a new explosion of tears and wailing by the weepers and the mourners. It is carried out not by funeral home personnel but by male members of the deceased's family (sons, nephews, brothers-in-law).

Everyone makes their way to the cemetery in a long slow cortege, on foot or by car. Once there, they walk silently together to the gravesite. As the casket is lowered into the grave screaming and crying erupt once again. The widow, or a sister, or a daughter may seem to faint or to throw herself onto the coffin. It often happens that musicians close to the deceased start playing guitar and singing his or her favourite songs. Finally, each person throws a flower or a handful of earth onto the coffin and shakes the mourners' hands.

After leaving the cemetery, everyone gathers in a community meeting place where small sandwiches, cakes and soft drinks have been set out on tables. Leading up to the burial, participants follow the mourners' emotional lead; however, after this tipping point it is those less close to the deceased who set

the affective tone to which the mourners are called upon to comply. Thus, the atmosphere here is anything but mournful. In striking contrast with what precedes, people laugh, especially about the times they shared with the deceased, and inquire about each other's lives. Even a mother who just buried her son, and who was screaming in pain several minutes earlier, actively participates in these discussions. The oldest women, who usually come prepared with plastic bags, gather as many sandwiches and cakes as they can to bring home.

Several hours later, the group disperses. Mourners and other family members, however, tend to remain together. People begin drinking heavily and arguments soon break out. Indeed, death is an occasion to rekindle family conflicts, and fights of a more or less serious nature can take place. Questions are raised regarding the supernatural causes of the death or the possibility that foul play was involved.

### The ritual entanglement of three types of phenomena

Together, the sorry business camp, the conventional gestures of suffering and compassion, the wounds mourners inflict upon themselves, the weepers' laments, the exposure of the corpse, the clothes worn, the formal succession of the events compose a collective representation of the pain and sorrow brought about by the loss of a family and community member. This shared, public representation is grounded in the fact that those who participate in it undertake complementary actions, in keeping with their respective relationships with the deceased, as relatives, but also for reasons of personal affinity. The participants' performance of these actions gives rise to intimate emotional experiences that they willingly exhibit to others.

These cultural conventions lead those closest to the deceased to externalize their inner emotions. At the same time, those less affected by the death, upon hearing the weepers' laments and witnessing the open expression of suffering associated with bereavement, recall their own dead and experience anew their own feelings of sadness and loss.

Death transforms a person into a cadaver whose weighty, disquieting presence testifies to the end of the relational reciprocity he or she maintained with others. In this type of cultural context, the corpse becomes the centre of attention. Recognition of the radical breach its presence opens up underlies the organization of the funerary performance by grounding it in an ostentatious, emotion-generating exhibition of suffering. The emotions engendered, however,

are not oriented in the same direction for the mourners and for the others. The former are incited to outwardly express their inner pain. The latter, on the contrary, are prompted to get in touch with their own inner sensations of sadness and grief linked to previous experiences. This complementarity allows for an ongoing attunement of the intensities whereby different categories of participants express their respective feelings.

One sees here how these three phenomena – the corpse's presence, the emotional reactions of those close to the deceased and collective representations of death – are closely bound up together.

### The *gisaro* of the Kaluli

The corpse's uncanny nature has the paradoxical effect of making people feel at once the irrevocable absence of the deceased and yet his or her atrocious material presence. Among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, the absent deceased is once again made present during a *gisaro* ritual<sup>7</sup> performed well after the body has been disposed of. This subsequent ritual can be seen as a further form of collective representation of pain and loss, one that is particularly effective in bringing about shared emotional experiences.

The Kaluli are horticulturalists; married couples work together in their gardens. Men of different localities take turns inviting each other to perform *gisaro*. The visitors are invited to sing songs all night long that describe the local landscape and name particular places. The aim of *gisaro* is to arouse among the hosts memories of the specific places in which they worked together with someone now deceased. Through a particularly strong evocation of such a place, a widower, for example, will be put in touch with the pain he feels at the loss of his wife with whom he used to garden at the place in question. Feeling the sadness and anger associated with the loss that the singing revives – and the best singers provoke the most intense emotions – the widower grabs a burning torch and shoves it against the singer's shoulder. The singer remains perfectly calm and impassible, whereas the widower loudly and ostentatiously expresses his grief, snot and tears running down his face.

Mourners inflict burns on the invited singers throughout the night, and in the morning, those who were burnt offer gifts – subsequently used to make body decorations – to those whose sorrow they caused. At a later date, the singers will invite their hosts to their own local community to sing, such that these shared moments of the experience of grief associated with death partake of the exchange

cycles linking different Kaluli groups together. Emotions are reified by wounds inflicted on the singers in exchange for material objects with which the hosts will dress up. These body decorations, like the singers' visible, outside wounds, externalize their hosts' inner, invisible wounds that the singers reopen. As in the Aboriginal case, participants willingly seek to outwardly and conspicuously express their intimate feelings of grief and to be directly affected by the strong emotions of others.

### The destiny of the deceased and his or her close ones

In the societies I have referred to, mourners and the deceased, as Van Gennep has suggested, 'constitute a special society, situated between the world of the living and the world of the dead, from which the living leave more or less quickly according to how closely they are related to the deceased'. It is generally the surviving spouse, that is, the person who most shared a physical intimacy with the deceased, who belongs longest to this special, intermediary world from which he or she can only be ritually delivered.

For example, among the Beti of Southern Cameroon,<sup>8</sup> following her husband's death, a widow must dress up in dark blue or black; she must not wash or cut her hair, or wear jewellery. She cannot take part in village festivities; she adopts a reserved demeanour and should not engage in sexual relations. After a year's time, the entire community participates in the lifting of these prohibitions. The widow is led to a riverbank where she is undressed; her hair is shaved off, and she is immersed in the water where her body is rubbed with purifying barks. Upon leaving the river, she is dressed in new cloths and decorated with new jewellery. She can then reintegrate the community of the living and take up the various activities she had interrupted.

Here, as in other cultural contexts, the procedures applied to the corpse and to those close to the deceased are complementary. They help the mourners to separate themselves from the dead person and help the latter to take leave of the living so as to move on to the afterlife. This is also what still took place in France, until not so long ago when most people were born and died at home.

### Some French mortuary rites of the very recent past

Yvonne Verdier has described the role of the woman 'who made babies' and 'made the dead' in a small Burgundy town up until the 1960s and 1970s. Called

‘the woman-who-helps,’ Marcelline took on these tasks that the family was loath to perform: ‘Indeed, [...] handling the newborn or burying the dead inspired a same dread among those who were close to the person concerned. Faced with a newborn child or with a dead person, the same feeling of panic takes hold; one doesn’t know what to do and one is afraid’ (Verdier 1976: 110). It is worth noting that Marcelline was not paid but thanked in kind with small gifts or services rendered. Here is how she ‘made the dead’:

I’m called as soon as someone dies. You have to wash the dead person, shave him if it’s a man, [and] properly brush his or her hair [...]. Then, I dress him or her in clean cloths [...]. When the deceased is ready, well dressed, a man is needed to place him in a chair while I prepare the bed. A sheet is placed on the bed from which everything has been removed, except the sprung bed base [...]. Next, one puts the deceased back on his or her bed, close their eyes and shut their mouth. One hides their face with a towel or white handkerchief; one crosses their hands over their stomach and places a set of rosary beads along with a sprig of box tree on top. Then they are covered with another white sheet [...]. To place the deceased in the coffin, the top sheet is taken away and the bottom sheet folded over the top of the body.

(*ibid.* 108–9)

Marcelline then closes the shutters and the windows, and covers the mirrors and the television with a cloth for if not, they would forever reflect the dead person’s face. The clocks are stopped until the burial takes place. The night table is covered with a white tablecloth on which is placed a glass of holy water containing a sprig of box tree. A crucifix with a lit candle is placed next to it. Electric lights are turned off; only candlelight is used and no fire is made. A neighbour comes to cook meals, clean the house and milk the cows, for all women’s domestic activities are suspended; the deceased’s female kin must neither cook, wash nor clean.

The body remains exposed like that for three days. ‘Until the burial, there must always be someone with the deceased so that he or she is not alone, but the family doesn’t like staying with them’ (*ibid.* 109). During the day, neighbours visit and sprinkle holy water on the dead person; those wishing to see the deceased one last time lift up the handkerchief. At night, the woman-who-helps organizes a vigil for the neighbours who take shifts during the night. At midnight, she makes coffee and serves brandy.

Here, as in many other societies, procedures pertaining to the corpse and to the mourning process are undertaken by intermediaries who are neither paid nor mourners themselves. However, one cannot but be struck by the relational density and the homey, material intimacy these treatments entail.

## Managing death in contemporary Western societies

By contrast, at present, in most contemporary Western settings, the handling of bodies, from birth to death, is a medical matter, undertaken by anonymous third parties who are remunerated for the functions they fulfil. It is through the intermediary of health organizations, funeral homes and civil registrars that society manages the deaths of individuals. Their corpse is taken in hand by paid professionals, who, away from the mundane world and the public eye, are responsible for providing the dead with a bearable, sanitized demeanour. Concomitantly, in the public sphere in which mortuary ceremonies occur, ritualization is often reduced to a minimum and is highly constrained in terms of both time and space. On these occasions, expressions of mourners' feelings are dictated more by the demands of decorum and reserve than by those of raucous ostentation. Each person is invited to withdraw deep inside himself or herself to commemorate the deceased. Unlike the Australian Aboriginal ethos described earlier, it is as though propriety requires that one not contaminate one's fellow mourners with one's own feelings, and, indeed, everything is organized so that no one is overly tainted by the emotions of others. Joan Didion's well-known account of her own mourning experience following her husband's death nicely captures this expected lack of emotional demonstration, surely linked to what Norbert Elias (1973) has called the distancing 'civilizing process' underlying contemporary individualism. Quoting Gorer (1965) she speaks of 'the imperative to do nothing which might diminish the enjoyment of others' and the current trend in England and the United States 'to treat mourning as morbid self-indulgence, and to give social admiration to the bereaved who hide their grief so fully that no one would guess that anything had happened' (Didion 2005: 60).

The emotional reactions of those close to the deceased are managed at a distance from the abhorrent, unsettling presence of a loved one's physical decay, notably through counselling dispensed by non-relatives who are paid to provide it. These are psy-whatevers who act as mediating third parties between the living and the dead, and who, precisely because they are not intimate with their patients, can become the custodians of their inner feelings. In consultations with them, those close to the deceased disclose the emotions they stifle in the presence of others because of the anxiety and panic this might cause them. Indeed, the exhortation to undertake one's 'grief work' goes hand in hand with the difficulties people face in sharing with close friends or family members, outside of established venues of mediation, the despair they experience in connection with death and loss.

At the same time, human mortality is the object of very large number of collective representations made available through various media, that is, at a remove from the concrete presence of the corpse as a mass of deteriorating flesh. Death is not concealed by the media; on the contrary, it is made omnipresent. It constantly makes headline news and provides the narrative framework for a large number of books, movies, television shows and autobiographical testimonials. The untimely demise of celebrities like Lady Di or Michael Jackson provides another way of collectively commemorating death. In such cases, precisely because the deceased is not someone one is close to, one can give free rein to one's grief without bothering anybody. On the contrary, such occasions can instill a sense of community founded not on kinship ties but on the expression of shared feelings of loss for distant departed whose death suddenly brings them closer. The role played by the airing of TV series such as *Six Feet Under* is of a somewhat attenuated yet similar nature: through this distanced medium, each individual can experience, for themselves, what the death of a loved one might entail, and even share this feeling, in all security, with preferably distant others.

Death is also exhibited in highly disturbing, often violent images, but which are more likely to concern people living in distant lands or during other historical periods: victims of war or mass murders, natural catastrophes and so on. These images reintroduce, but at a safe remove, the dreadful aspects of putrefying bodies and their aptitude to strongly affect us emotionally, something that has been expunged from actual mortuary proceedings. Similarly, as I have proposed elsewhere (Moisseeff 2013b, 2016b), the proliferation of horror movies can be seen as still another way of providing a mediated, relatively safe experience of the wretchedness of the dead body and the strong reactions it elicits.

## Conclusion

I have sought here to highlight certain distinctive features of mortuary practices in contemporary Western societies by contrasting them with funeral rites in other cultural settings. In many cultures, the different phenomena I have identified – the presence of a corpse, the emotional reactions of those close to the deceased and collective representations of death and loss – tend to be treated together. In the contemporary West, they are separated and subject to distinct procedures that are all based on a recourse to distant, third parties who are not relatives but paid professionals. In the former case, an amplified, ostentatious expression of participants' feelings allows for an emotional attunement of the mourners

and those less affected by the loss. In the latter case, funerary proceedings are typically governed by the concern to avoid ostentatious emotional expression so that those occupying different positions with respect to the deceased do not contaminate each other with their respective feelings.

This, however, pertains above all to institutionalized ritual procedures undertaken in response to the disruptive effects of individual death. The commemorative practices occasioned by catastrophic social events like Breivik's massacre in Norway or the 2015 terrorist killings in Paris are both different in nature and in some ways the same. On the one hand, these calamities erupt violently and spectacularly into everyday life in a way that makes them difficult to contain by such well-established ceremonial procedures. On the other hand, like the corpse for those close to the deceased and for community members elsewhere, they impose themselves as singular agencies that arouse unresolved feelings of exceptional intensity, thereby encouraging emotional expression in public spaces from which it has otherwise been carefully expunged. In this regard, the as of yet institutionalized initiatives such catastrophic events give rise to are akin to the conventional funerary performances carried out in other, more exotic settings.

Participants' bodily involvement in these collective mourning and memorial practices encourages them to willingly exhibit their feelings to others. In small-scale societies lacking forms of centralized power comparable to nation states, this particular mode of emotional sharing epitomizes what is at stake in democracy as this notion is commonly understood in the contemporary West: as a process that allows for the public expression of disparate perspectives reflecting the heterogeneity of the various parties that make up society as a whole. In communities typically studied by cultural anthropologists, rituals play precisely this role. Their performance is upheld by public displays of emotion that differ in accordance with the places occupied by various categories of participants within shared networks of (kinship and other) relations. In much the same way, the commemorative practices that emerge in reaction to large-scale socially disruptive events in the West often entail ritualized position-taking involving real or imagined confrontations in which individuals and groups – by means of marches, memorial services, mediatized debates and so on – take outspoken stands for ideas and values they feel have come under siege. Such publicly aired differences of opinion, I suggest, are neither a secondary aspect of these practices, nor are they evidence of social disorder. Rather, they are the ritualized expression of a democratically inspired process of reciprocal adjustment. Like mourners' disparate reactions to the corpse in other cultural traditions, the conflicts raised

by such commemorations can be seen as allowing persons occupying different positions to participate in an emotional attunement in which physical presence, affective expression and shared representations of loss are made to converge. Like canonical mortuary practices and the reconfiguration of relational networks they mediate in non-Western settings, the spontaneous gatherings in reaction to recent terrorist attacks in the West constitute an essential cultural resource in which the expression of divergent perceptions of emotionally affecting disruptive events can contribute to reassembling a shaken democracy.

