

The Symbolic Nature Of Death Rituals And Gender

Briana Roldan

In recent years, I have found myself entangled with two concepts, death and gender. With death, I have pondered how it happens, why it happens, how to prevent it, how to honor it, and how to love it. Entangled with such a concept, I have arrived at conclusions that helped me understand how inevitable death is and how highly it is valued throughout different cultures. With gender, the livelier concept of the two, I have always questioned its purpose in human interactions, and why it is something to which people seem so attached. It wasn't until my observation of *A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt*, at the Brooklyn Museum, that I realized death, specifically death rituals, and gender are intertwined. Even in our deaths and funerals, the enforcement of gender follows us, the pressure to be male or female entraps our corpses.

This paper aims to draw a comparison between the rituals of death and gender in three distinct parts. First, I will focus on explaining and identifying Key Symbols, as defined by Sherry Ortner, within death rituals and gender, in both Ancient Egypt and America. This section will also include my observation of the exhibit, to explain the relationship between death and gender in Ancient Egypt. Then, I will focus on gender in death rituals, and how death rituals, specifically funerals serve as a rite of passage: a transition from one identity to another, as discussed by Victor Turner. This section will also discuss death rituals and gender as bonding concepts by using Donna Winslow's article "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne Armed Forces and Society" as evidence. Lastly, I will rely on the first two sections, as well as my personal experience, to draw conclusions about death rituals' relationship to gender. All three parts of this paper aim to not only draw attention to the comparison between death rituals and gender, but also to also emphasize the American view on gender, and to further accentuate the subconscious effects of such a view.

Methodology

In order to view gender in a different perspective from both my own and the common American view of two genders, male and female, I decided to begin my observation of gender at the exhibit *A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt*. This exhibit served as a starting point to understand the importance of gender in death rituals, by displaying Ancient Egyptian artifacts that were used in transforming women into men during death rituals. As for my selection criteria, this exhibit focused on a particular set of practices, which interested me because I am unfamiliar with death ritual practices outside of my own American and Hispanic cultural practices and experiences. Observing the exhibit, and reading about the artifacts, allowed me to step out of my comfort zone, the normal areas of research,

gender and sexuality in American society. Viewing gender and sexuality through the lens of Ancient Egyptian death rituals allowed me to link death and gender together, encouraging me to reflect on my current knowledge and experience of death within American society. I will use this knowledge and experience to further my argument and analysis of the correlation between death rituals and gender.

As for my procedures during the observation of the exhibit, I dedicated most of my time to conducting a discursive analysis of the exhibit, which considers the placement of the artifacts and what they may or may not communicate about the exhibit and its essential meaning. I observed the exhibit for approximately two hours, conducting fieldnotes and jottings on the artifacts and their placement. An interesting aspect of the exhibit was how small the space was: the artifacts were placed in a small room off to the very end of the hall, which gives the connotation that it may be less important than other Egyptian artifacts that hold a more significant place in history. I also noticed that many of the artifacts presented were small and seemingly insignificant in comparison to the larger artifacts (masks, mummies, Egyptian armor, etc) presented within the larger floor of the Egyptian exhibit itself. However, this specific exhibit mainly focused on more feminine objects, such as women's clothing, jewelry, cosmetics, and objects that hold spiritual significance, such as the coffin placed in the middle of the small room. My fieldnotes, observations, and brief analysis allowed me to draw the connection between the valued physical appearance, gender, and specific death rituals such as funerals, leading me to conduct further research.

As for ethical concerns in my research and methodology, my procedures and observation did not require any formal or informal interviews as I was a participant observer. At the time of observation of the exhibit, which was in the early morning, there were no other visitors or observers, so I did not conduct any interviews. Therefore, there were no ethical concerns in my research.

Identifying Key Symbols in Death Rituals and Gender

Death rituals and gender may seem to have no correlation to each other at first glance. However, they share common key symbols that are representative of each concept. Key symbols, as defined by Sherry Ortner in her article "On Key Symbols," come in two types, summarizing and elaborating, which exist on a continuum. Ortner goes on to discuss summarizing symbols as "those symbols which are seen as summing up, expressing, representing for the participants in an emotionally powerful and relatively undifferentiated way, what the system means to them. This category is essentially the category of sacred symbols in the broadest sense, and includes all those items which are objects of reverence and/or catalysts of emotion" (Ortner 1341). As an example of this, Ortner uses the American flag, explaining that the flag is definitive of American culture and society because it represents and summarizes freedom, democracy, national superiority, progress, etc (Ortner 1340). An American can see the flag and inherently understand that it represents America. However, this is not the same for elaborating symbols. Elaborating symbols, as Ortner explains, "work in the opposite direction, providing vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others...their key status is indicated primarily by their recurrence in cultural behavior or cultural symbolic systems" (Ortner 1339). In other words, elaborating symbols are not sacred, but

hold a specific connection to an individual's or culture's experience, tending to explain or define how the world works and how people should act within it.

Such symbols can themselves be broken down into two areas, root metaphors and key scenarios. Root metaphors assist in explaining how the world works and can include images, models, or metaphors for experience. For example, the American view of capitalism can be seen as a root metaphor explaining how the world works; the colors red, white, and blue, which are present on the American flag, also work as a root metaphor for patriotism. Key scenarios suggest how people should act within the world, and holds the culture's core values. Ortner exemplifies this through the myth of Horatio Alger, which suggests that, if people work hard enough and partake in capitalism, anyone can be successful despite life obstacles or status.

Key symbols hold extreme significance in the concepts of funerals and gender, especially within the American view of individualism, because they tend to define an individual's identity. For example, a key summarizing symbol in death rituals would be a funeral that honors the deceased person. The number of people who attend, how the ritual is performed, sacred symbols such as a cross in the casket or around the deceased's neck, a priest's recitation of prayers, and overall behavior during the ritual are all summarizing symbols of a funeral: these characteristics sum up, express, and in many cases represent the type of person and life the deceased person led, which can be an emotionally powerful and sacred representation of the deceased person for the people who are a part of the ritual. Elaborating symbols, specifically root metaphors, are also present during death rituals, and are usually essential to the function of the ritual. The colors worn by attendees or the deceased person, as well as other colors displayed, are root metaphors: while they are not sacred, they may represent a certain belief, experience, or cultural orientation. For example, in American funeral practices it is often expected that the attendees wear black clothing, which represents mourning the deceased individual and displays respect for who they were. It is also expected that the deceased person be dressed in more appropriate clothing, according to their gender (i.e. a full suit for a male, and a dress for a woman). These are not literally sacred actions, but they are associated with respect, and often religious belief. When a person attends the funeral in clothing that is not black, it is viewed as disrespectful to the deceased and their family. When the deceased is not dressed in appropriate clothing, it may reflect poorly on their family and who they are. Key symbols, while not explicitly discussed before the performance of a death ritual, are expected to be followed and inherently known in the same way that an American just knows what the American flag represents.

Through my observation of *A Woman's Afterlife*, I discovered that key symbols can also be found within the Ancient Egyptian death ritual of gender transformation, and are not exclusive to American funeral rituals and practices. As I observed the artifacts displayed and gathered information from plaques next to each artifact, I came to understand that the ancient ritual is similar to a funeral. However, in this ritual the deceased person must be a woman and this woman must be transformed into a man, so that she may be granted access into the afterlife. Unlike Americans, the Egyptians believed that men held the beginning of life, and that the fetus grew within a man's body before being transplanted to the woman's body during intercourse. The woman played no part in creating the fetus. Therefore, men were believed to be of higher importance and value to gods in the afterlife. In order for women to be accepted, then, they had to be offered as men to the gods in death.

During the transformation process displayed through the artifacts, clothing, jewelry, music, colors, language, and overall gender appearance functioned as key symbols of this ritual practice, similar to those in American practices. The colors displayed through the exhibit were specific root metaphors for masculinity and femininity as discussed on most of the plaques throughout the exhibit; the woman's coffin on display is a good example of this. The Egyptians believed that, at the beginning of the transformation, the woman's hands and face must be painted red, the color of masculinity. Additionally, she must be dressed in men's clothing in order to be perceived as a man and gain acceptance and transportation by the Sun-God, Re, believed to travel to the world of the dead. This begins the process of gender transformation for the woman, and gives hope that she may conceive a male spirit by the gods, making her male between death and rebirth as a female spirit. Furthermore, the woman's body and coffin are blessed by a spiritual and/or religious priest. They play music, adorn the woman's body with jewelry depicting images of sacred gods and goddesses, and inscribe spells, prayers, and images of gods on the woman's coffin, to encourage acceptance and travel into the afterlife. These actions are all examples of summarizing symbols, which hold a significant and sacred meaning for participants in the ritual and the deceased woman. They are also heavily connected to this gender transformation. Without the gender transformation ritual, these objects and actions may hold no sacred significance at all.

Death Rituals and Gender as a Rite of Passage and Bonding Concept

Let us consider the importance of death rituals and their purpose. More often than not, death rituals serve as a rite of passage for the deceased from one identity, a state of livelihood and consciousness, to another identity, a state of unconsciousness and moving forward into an afterlife. The performance of the death ritual acknowledges, identifies, and encourages this transformation. Victor Turner discusses the rite of passage process in his article "Liminality and Communitas," where he draws on Arnold Van Gennep's three main parts of a rite of a passage. The passage is reproduced in full for clarity:

The first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a "state"), or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the "passenger") are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In the third phase (reaggregation or reincorporation), the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-a-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions. (Turner 94)

In other words, Turner is explaining that a rite of passage carries three essential phases. Phase one, known as the preliminal or Rites of Separation phase, begins the process of stripping the individual of their current identity. This phase separates the

individual from who they are and who they will become. The second phase, the liminal or Transition of Rites phase, is the main focus of Turner's article and signifies a time of the unknown. Here, the individual is between their old identity and their new identity; they hold no significant indications of their old identity or their new identity. The final phase, the post-liminal or the Rites of Incorporation phase, marks the completion of the rite of passage. Here, the individual is accepted into their new culture and identity, gaining a set structure that reflects their new identity.

Considering these phases, it is clear that death rituals serve as a rite of passage for both the deceased person and participants in the ritual, because both parties are undergoing a transformation in identity. For the deceased person, or in the case of Ancient Egyptian culture, the deceased woman, her preliminal phase is at the time of death: she is beginning the process of separation from life as a woman to death as a man. The deceased woman's liminal phase would be when participants in the ritual begin the gender transformation process. During that phase, she is neither female nor male, having no indications of being female because they have stripped from her (i.e her clothing, make up, skin tone, cosmetics, etc.). However, she also has no indication of her male identity, since she has not been laid to rest in the red (masculine) coffin or been dressed masculine clothing. Once the woman has had her body fully painted in red and yellow colors, dressed in male clothing, adorned with masculine jewelry and images of the gods, and placed into a coffin with prayers and spells inscribed on it, she is now in her post-liminal phase. The woman has now been transformed into a male figure; her new identity is now believed to be accepted into the afterlife, her new culture, where she will spend her time adapting to the process of being reborn as a woman to help men once again. This exemplifies how death rituals and the appearance of gender serve as a transition from one identity to another. This can also be said for American funeral practices, where the preliminal and liminal phases are similar and the post liminal phase involves acceptance into the afterlife.

Interestingly enough, participants in death ritual practices such as funerals undergo a similar rite of passage process, where they must adapt to a society or culture without the person they have just laid to rest. As Turner emphasizes, this can be a bonding experience for many people in the same phase. In my experience of funerals, this is a difficult process to undergo. The work of moving from the liminal phase to the post-liminal seems as if it is never over. However, I have learned in my liminal phase that it is easier to move to post-liminal, when I share the similar experience with another person. This act of bonding within the liminal phase through the postliminal phase is what Turner refers to as "communitas." Communitas, as defined by Turner, is "the blend they offer of lowliness and sacredness, of homogeneity and comradeship. We are presented, in such rites, with a moment in and out of time, and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond" (Turner 94-5). He then goes onto categorize communitas in two distinct parts: the first part, a separation between individuals caused by the preliminal phase and society itself, and the second, "which emerges recognizably in the liminal period...of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals" (Turner 96). The concept of communitas is

especially significant to the stages of grief for participants of the death ritual: undergoing a transformation from having a person around all the time to not having them around at all is life-changing. Moreover, when more than one person has this experience, the grievers are more likely to move into the post-liminal phase, creating a social bond because they have experienced a specific trauma together.

Turner presents the rite of passage process, *communitas*, and phase of liminality exceptionally well. Nonetheless, he fails to explain how liminality and *communitas* can cause negative impacts in terms of social bonding. Donna Winslow explores this in her article “Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne Armed Forces and Society.” She emphasizes that social and group bonding can become dangerous through the case of the Canadian Airborne Armed Forces and Society. Winslow notes that participation in a ritual is essential to group bonding, even when one participant does not want to be a part of the ritual. Furthermore, Winslow highlights that, if a participant voices their concern for partaking in the ritual, they may face ostracism and the “double edged sword of group bonding” (Winslow 453). Winslow's concepts can be applied to death rituals and participants in such rituals, since not all bonds created through a rite of passage are positive. Beyond the context of rituals, it can also be easy to be pressured into being something you're not, for example, in the case of gender. It can be more difficult for someone who is transgender to embrace their new identity because they fear ostracism from the male or female gender, family, and friends. This type of fear has been linked to negative health problems such as mental illness, drug and alcohol addictions, and in severe cases, suicide.

Conclusions on the Intertwining of Death Rituals and Gender

Ultimately, death rituals and gender are intertwined in a specific way that may not be present to the naked eye or person simply strolling through an exhibit. Indeed, death and gender are intertwined at the core in the same way that American values are intertwined and enforced through laws, bills and politics. My observation and research has allowed me to become more familiar with this relationship and consider my own transformation from one identity to another, as well as consider my participation in death rituals and my own gender identity. This relationship between death rituals and gender is more interesting than one might think, and I encourage that it be studied more often. Gender and the concept of male or female is drilled into democracy, freedom, and overall American values. I believe we should all reconsider our perspective on death and gender's practices, rituals, and purposes.

Works Cited

Brooklyn Museum. (2016, December 15-present). *A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt*. Brooklyn.

Ortner, Sherry. "On Key Symbols." *American Anthropologist New Series*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (Oct. 1973), pp. 1338-1346.

Turner, Victor. "Liminality and Communitas." *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Cornell University Press. 1996.

Winslow, Donna. "Rites of Passage and Group Bonding in the Canadian Airborne." *Armed Forces and Society*, Spring 1999, Vol. 25 Issue 3, pp. 429-457, 29.