Reinventing Rituals of Death: New Expressions of Private and Public Mourning in Sweden

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ABSTRACT. By way of a discussion of private and public mourning, and the stage in between the two, I will attempt to describe some of the changes that are becoming evident in the way rituals of death are performed in Sweden today – including funerary customs, decorations on graves, public displays of a country in mourning, commemorative places with heaps of flowers building at the scene of a murder or a fatal death, and “Internet cemeteries” and commemorative homepages where you can “eternalize” not only the dead, but also headstones and mourning itself, by online publication.

KEYWORDS: death, mourning, grief, rituals, cemeteries, Internet, distanced participation

INDIVIDUALISED BURIAL CUSTOMS

During a walk through the cemetery one can see toys, photographs, flowers, knick-knacks, drawings and last words from family members on children’s graves. On a young person’s grave, the CDs the teen would have listened to can be found together with the occasional beer bottle left by his or her peers.

It has also become more usual for immigrants and refugees to be buried in their new homeland, bringing funeral traditions from the old country with them, many times using more elaborate decorations of the grave, including plastic flowers, lanterns and ornaments. The gravestone itself may also look different from the generic Swedish stones, for example with photographs etched or inlaid in the stone.

The decorations and stones used for children’s and immigrants’ graves in turn influence the adult Swedish graves, and it does not stop there. Today’s graves can also express life-styles, for example by the use of neo-pagan or feng shui decorations. Relatively new high festivals, such as Halloween, also give rise to the use of new seasonal
decorations by introducing colourful pumpkins on the graves (SOFI 39176, 39372-39375; Klippsamlingen EII).

These more individualised decorations of graves are all part of a change where personal keepsakes are becoming more and more common in the otherwise quite strict cemeteries – despite regulations banning many of the previously mentioned decorations. For regardless of regulations, the staff taking care of the cemeteries have often had a permissive attitude to the decorations. The cemetery workers do not always have the heart to clear away banned decorations and tell grave owners they are not allowed to place soft toys on their child’s grave. They also tend to overlook transgressions when the grave stone carries a foreign name, the name of one of the minorities in Sweden, when it is apparent the person buried in the grave belonged to a specific religious community, or when something out of the ordinary has occurred, as with the grave of Fadime Sahindal, the victim of an honour killing in Uppsala in 2002 (Hugoson 2006). Put together this suggests a perceived widening of the grifefrid (i.e. respect for the funeral peace supposed to surround the burial place).

The new trends are picked up and shown at funerary exhibitions, for despite a certain conservatism, there is a sensitivity to customer demand. Examples of oriental lanterns and Japanese rock gardens are shown, gravestones in the shape of hearts are produced as a counterpart to the more uniform stones, and renowned Swedish glazier and artist Ulrika Hydman-Vallien has been engaged to design new coffins for children (Nordiska trägdårdar 2004; Roman 2008; see also website j under Internet references).

Other changes are taking place as well: the new trends influence the crafts movement and craftsmen make their own grave markers, and one community college is even giving a night course in how to craft your own coffin. The man teaching the course has made a coffin for his mother but, as she is still alive and well, he has put shelves in it and uses it as a CD stand (Svensson 2007; Sandblom 2008). When this paper was delivered orally, conference participants were able to offer parallels. Marion Bowman added that in Somerset, England, customised coffins made out of wicker can be ordered and that they too are initially used as CD stands, and Molly Carter and Amy Whitehead then mentioned the Goth-inspired coffin tables (compare to the word coffee table) where the coffin is used as a coffee table while the person for whom it is intended is still alive.

There is also a revival of early history. New designs for cremation urns are being developed, among them prototypes for heathen version urns, columbaria are coming back in style but in new design, and modern version cairns can also be found, previously used in Scandinavia during the Bronze Age, 1800-550 BCE (see website f; Flykt 2003; Wikeland 2008. For more on Swedish funerary history, see Söderpalm 1994, and Smest 2003).

Economy, environmental awareness and new technology furthers the development: in recent years it has become possible to share gravestones, i.e. to have one side each of a stone for separate graves, saving both money and space, and a new Swedish invention called promession or freeze-drying is being explored as a more ecological alternative to cremation and traditional burials (von Essen 2004; Ennart 2005).

MEMORIAL FLOWER SHRINES

There are also new ways of expressing one’s respect when someone has died unexpectedly: At the scene of a murder or fatal accident one can find flowers, photographs, cards and soft toys, sometimes building up to a giant heap. The first heap of flowers that was noticed on a national level was the one that spontaneously formed out of the thousands of red roses placed at the scene of the murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in Stockholm in 1986. The same thing occurred after sixty-three young people lost their lives in a fire at a disco in Gothenburg in 1998, and again after the murder of Foreign Minister Anna Lind in 2004 (Klippsamlingen EII. SOFI 39129).

There is a historical parallel to the heaps of flowers to be found in the Swedish offerkast, the sacrificial throwing of a twig or stone exercised in order to protect oneself from evil when passing the site of an untimely death; however the heaps of flowers are more closely related to the memorial roadside shrines found in Catholic parts of Europe (Erixon 1988; Belund 1958; SOFI 39378-39379).

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memorials are usually abandoned after the burial when there is a new place to go to (Peterson 2004; Eriksson 2005). With this said, it should be noted that red roses are still placed outside the fine art supply store where Olof Palm was shot and at the NK department store where Anna Lind was knifed down.

The authorities respond in different ways to the rule-breaking that occurs when people express their grief in these new ways: in Uppsala, the city cleaning crews let memorial flowers fade before they clear them away. At NK the flowers placed for Anna Lind were and still are moved from the department store to the church where she is buried (Bill 2005; Jacobsson 2004). The Swedish Road Administration has also been permissive about memorial road shrines as they can function as a warning and thus help road security (Eriksson 2005). However, the County Administrative Board of Lappland were not impressed by the large memorial construction built without permit in memory of a girl who died in a snow-mobile accident; but in the end they too yielded and left the memorial standing (Sjöland 2005; Stafjord 2008). Again the widened perception of the grifjefrid is shown.

OBITUARIES AND MEMENTO MORI TATTOOS

It is hard to say where the line between public and private is drawn, but exploring this threshold area I would like to begin by examining the obituary printed in the paper. Like the graves and gravestones, the obituary too has become more personalised. From the 1890s the stylised black cross was the symbol used in obituaries, but in 1977 a flower was seen for the first time in one of the daily newspapers (Weman Thornell 2004). Since then the variation of symbols has increased, in later years dramatically, as more and more private symbols, drawings and photographs have been used. The symbols can convey information about occupation, interests, what religion or which organisations the deceased belonged to, or the animals and/or flowers he or she liked (Sollbe 2008). The time we live in shows as well; one man got a symbol in the shape of a computer in his obituary (DN 2007).

There is an apparent connection between the symbol used in the obituary and on the gravestone, as the same symbol may be used for both. The image may then be used for other purposes as well: in articles, blogs, and discussion forums one can read about Swedes who have had tattoos made in memory of dead relatives – a trend fuelled by television series such as Miami Ink and LA Ink, reality shows staged in tattoo parlours (TLC). In one case a sister and mother of a young man had his face tattooed on their upper arms – the same image was already engraved on the gravestone (website a). Reviewing the Swedish web pages, it seems to be mainly women who get these memento mori tattoos done, but the cases reviewed are too few to make a definite statement (Klippsamlingen EII).

MEMORIAL WEB PAGES

With the introduction of the Internet the bereaved have found a new forum in which to express their grief, and this is where the boundaries between private and public become truly blurred, as it is possible to eternalise not only the memory of the dead, but the headstones and even grief itself, by online-publication.

There are private web pages made in memory of loved ones, and their deaths are recounted in detail and the mourner’s grief is expressed (Klippsamlingen EII). There is an interesting parallel to be drawn between the writing on these Swedish web pages and the Greek laments, written down on single sheets of paper, that Maria Androlaki describes (in this volume). In other web pages the grave itself has become the centre of attention, as web page owners make photo documentations of their visits to the cemetery, what the grave looks like and how it is decorated as the seasons change (Klippsamlingen EII; see also website c).

The breach from the norm is that these commemorative web pages not only show pictures of what the person looked like in life but, if the web page is dedicated to a deceased newborn, pictures of the corpse may also be posted. This may be because the picture of the dead child is all the family has to remember them by. In these cases the images are often in black and white and/or softened, and the children are often referred to as child angels (Klippsamlingen EII; see also website b). Without going into antiquity and, for example,
memorials are usually abandoned after the burial when there is a new place to go to (Peterson 2004; Eriksson 2005). With this said, it should be noted that red roses are still placed outside the fine art supply store where Olof Palm was shot and at the NK department store where Anna Lind was knifed down.

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Roman funeral customs and depictions of the dead, there is a more recent historic parallel to be found to this: from the mid 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century it was not unusual to have photographs taken of the dead, a form of photographic death-masks. This is a custom that was later abandoned, but has now been reinvented in part (Söderlind 1993: 404-15).

There are also web pages made in memory of several people, for instance the joint web page for the victims of the previously mentioned fire at the disco in Gothenburg (website e), and the one for the hundreds of Swedish tourists who were victims of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004 (website h). However, I have not found a joint web page in memory of the victims that went down with the Estonia in the Baltic Sea in 1994. It seems that happened before Swedes began to use the Internet as a means of expressing their grief.

Memorial pages can also be found among the official authorities' web pages, for example there is a memorial page in honour of Foreign Minister Anna Lind among the Government Offices web pages (website m). However, there is no such page for Prime Minister Olof Palme, again most likely because his murder occurred before the Internet began to be used in this fashion.

The online influence for the memorial web pages is mainly American. On American Internet pages one can find both individual and combined memorial pages and even Internet Cemeteries and online obituaries, and Sweden is not far behind as these Internet cemeteries are being developed in Sweden too (see websites k and o; Wojidkow 2004; TT 2006).

**ONLINE COMMUNITY RESPONSES AND TELEVISION FUNERALS**

Over the years a select few funeral services had been broadcast on television, either as part of the news or, for greater celebrities both Swedish and international, as separate programmes. Still, the use of television as a means of dealing with private grief was yet unexplored, but in 2008 this was about to change. The prelude had occurred a couple of years earlier.

When a ten-year-old boy named Bobby was tortured and left to die by his parental figures in 2006, the gory details of the case were published in the media, leading to public outrage, and the evening paper Expressen together with BRIS (Children’s Rights in Society) organised to have roses sent from the Swedish people to the funeral – over 29,000 of them. Because of the public response it was decided that the church was to be kept open for the public after the private family funeral had ended (websites l; g and d).

Then, in April 2008, a ten-year-old girl named Engla disappeared in Stjärnsund in Sweden. A massive search was initiated and mass media covered the story from every angle. Hundreds of thousands of virtual candles were lit in hope for the girl on the Internet, people could leave messages online, and on Facebook a forum for discussion was opened in support of Engla’s family. Within the week a man suspected of abducting Engla was brought in for questioning by the Police and he soon confessed to kidnapping and murdering the little girl (website n).

After the sad news broke, text messages sent via e-mail, mobile phones and posted on blogs circulated, asking people to light a living candle in the window in memory of Engla at a specific time the following evening. This time the enormous response from the Swedish people prompted the family to ask Swedish Television, the non-commercial state-owned broadcasting station, to teleset the funeral, and somewhat unexpectedly they agreed, as they felt Engla had become a symbol of violence against children. A giant television screen was also put up outside the church so that people who did not get a seat inside the church could follow the service outside, i.e. not unlike what we have previously seen done for celebrities that have passed away (SVT; Klippamlingen EII; see also website i).

Engla’s family wanted all of those who had invested their feelings in the case to feel welcome to take part in the ceremony, but as the public reactions to the murder had grown, so had the public unease. A boundary had been overstepped and, according to surveys made in the evening papers, approximately 80% of the tens of thousands of readers who voted in the poll disliked the idea of the broadcast. Still, some 365,000 viewers followed the televised service when it was broadcast (website n).
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CONCLUSION

The fact that Sweden has been spared from the chaos of war and greater tragedies for so long has left Swedes somewhat unaccustomed and unprepared to deal with death and grief, something that has become more and more apparent over the last ten to fifteen years, and today the rites of death are changing at high speed, a sign that there is a demand for traditions and customs that are more in tune with our time and that are easily accessible.

The most striking trend is of course the distanced participation – the way grief is expressed both individually and en masse through the use of new technology: people creating web pages, writing blogs, posting messages online, engaging via sms, e-mail, and through the media of television, and somewhat surprisingly this distanced participation can still lead to joint manifestations.

Simultaneously the strong individualisation seen in the examples above signals a belief in the individual and that he or she matters, a development that will be interesting to follow, not only when it comes to rituals of death, but in all aspects of ritual.

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References

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Exhibition
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a http://blogg.aftonbladet.se/4360/perma/77407/
b http://groups.msn.com/vendela
c http://hem.bredband.net/salpia/gravpyssel.htm
d http://mobil.svt.se/svt/jsp/Crosslink.jsp?d=22620&a=597147
e http://www.angelfire.com/wy/brandkatastrofen/
f http://www.anmacp.com/
g http://www.dn.se/DNet/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1265&a=543403
h http://www.expressen.se/minnesplatsen
i http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/1.1156520/darforsande-vibeegravningen
j http://www.huddingestenhuggeri.se/default.asp?pid=20
k http://www.inmemory-of.com/
l http://www.nyhetstidningen.se/v1887725.html
m http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/3839
n http://www.sesam.se/nyheter/person/Engla+H%C3%B6glund
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Publications
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e http://www.angelfire.com/wy/brandkatastrofen/
f http://www.anmacp.com/
g http://www.dn.se/DNet/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=1265&a=543403
h http://www.expresen.se/minnesplatsen
i http://www.expresen.se/nyheter/1.1156520/darfor-sande-vi-begravningen
j http://www.huddingestenhuggeri.se/default.asp?pid=20
k http://www.inmemory-of.com/
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m http://www.regeringen.se/sb/d/3839
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Publications
Notes on Contributors

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Frédéric Armoo has been studying Irish folklore and mythology for the last ten years and specialises in the field of Irish folk customs and festivals. His PhD thesis dealt with the Irish festival of Bealtaine – from its Celtic ancient celebration to its modern counterpart. He now teaches in the University of Toulon and is a member of both Babel (University of Toulon, France; EA 2649) and Cecille (University of Lille 3, France) research centres.

Attracta Brownlee is a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Her research focuses on the anthropology of religion, Catholicism and Irish Travellers. She has published articles on healing priests and Knock Shrine.

Jenny Butler is an IRCHSS (Irish Research Council in the Humanities and Social Sciences) Government of Ireland Scholar studying Folklore and Ethnology at University College Cork. Her research interests include folk festivals, new religious movements, supernatural folklore, identity construction in cultural movements and various aspects of popular culture.

Molly Carter has an MA in Folklore from the National Centre for English Cultural Tradition at the University of Sheffield, England, where she is currently engaged in doctoral work on the Perchten and Krampus masking traditions of Austria and Bavaria.

Laurent Sébastien Fournier is a French social anthropologist. He earned his PhD in Montpellier University in 2002 and conducted...
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