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Muerte, ritual funerario y luto en Euskal Herria

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This essay is a timely contribution to an area of study not only of significance in Basque anthropology but also in contemporary social debate. It is a fitting sequel to Iñaki Olaizola's doctoral thesis, centred on the controversial issue of euthanasia and published just three years earlier by the same publisher, with the title *Transformaciones en el proceso de morir. La eutanasia, una cuestión en debate en la sociedad vasca*. Hence it is appropriate and understandable that Olaizola should continue to pursue the theme of transformations in the process of dying, this time dividing his research into three related areas of enquiry. In the first he expounds upon individuals' approach to death and their desires with regard to the rituals to be practiced when they die; in the second, he explores changes in religious funerary rites and innovations in secular rituals; in the third and final section he looks at the way people mourn in the twenty-first century Basque Country.

As the author sets out in the introduction, he addresses "the process of dying" through its different phases and distinguishes between two different approaches: first, the traditional (dominated by the notion of transcendence, in relation to the understanding of on the one hand, the nature of the body and soul and, on the other, of the belief in an afterlife); second, the biographical (based on immanence, a biological process and the idea of social – rather than spiritual – transcendence). The latter is the result of an increasing emphasis on the individual and one's right to decide not only how to live but how to die, so that one's death and the way it is dealt with reflects the way a person has lived their life.

This is immensely interesting in the evolution of both Basque society and anthropology since one of the seminal works on death in the Basque Country is William Douglass's "Death in Muréлага" in which he explored the way traditional society revolved around the complex rituals and relationships surrounding death, concluding that death was a social issue which overlooked the individual, so that it had more to do with the survivors than with the deceased. Rather than lament the loss of tradition or consider the change a blow to Basque society, Olaizola presents us with the diversity and dynamism of contemporary life, questioning the idea that contemporary rituals are less complex than the traditional: he argues that the increased importance of individual wishes amounts to a greater variety – and hence complexity – of rituals.

This complexity is present in the opinions and experiences voiced by the multitude of informants who people this book, displaying a wide variety of beliefs, ideas and emotions in relation to their own or others' deaths. The author challenges the old adage of death the leveller showing that the practices surrounding an individual's death continue to reflect their family structure and social network, manifest in end of life choices and funerary rituals. Applying an anthropological methodology of observation and analysis, Olaizola has travelled the length and breadth of the Basque Country to talk to an array of informants, visit funeral parlours and attend funerals, reading pages of death announcements and obituaries, poring over the intricacies of the legislation on burials and land at sea. However, despite this broad network of informants, there is little information about the informants, their profiles or how they

were selected; sometimes the author allows them to speak too much for themselves and does not sufficiently explain their words nor intervene in the analysis of their discourse. Nevertheless, often we get a sense of the deceased and the relationship of author or speaker to that person, bringing both immediacy and intimacy to a book which conveys the emotion which is never far from the surface when dealing with death.

At the same time, readers are encouraged to confront their own views on death. Each section is framed within a simple interrogative and ends with a series of questions which could serve as the basis for individual perusal or collective discussion. Indisputably this is a work which provides the basis for reflexion amongst those whom the author sets out to address: those who wish to think about and decide upon what will become of their bodies when they die. It is not that he sets out to bring about a change of opinion or behaviour but rather to record transformations taking place, insisting that ritual practices surrounding death should reflect social demand but not be imposed on those who do not wish for them.

The first part of the book asks "How would you like to die?" and picks up on some of the themes of Olaizola's thesis: the experiences of sickness and dependency, the approach of death and death itself, and then attitudes towards voluntary death, gathering in personal accounts, the health system and the law, and leading into the current debate on euthanasia in Basque society and the concept of a dignified death.

The second and most extensive part of the book, introduces the core theme of the essay with the question "How would you like to be buried?" which necessarily links thoughts on death and the afterlife with notions of spirituality and corporeality which influence peoples' attitudes towards the disposal of a corpse and the choice of burial or cremation.

He documents the incipient practice of writing a living will to lay down one's end of life wishes for medical care and the management of one's death and signals the social and historical value of such documents, interpreted as a sign of a more democratic society in which individuals can have a say in how they want their death to be handled. He also points to some of the problems posed for those charged with implementing them, problems of both an economic and practical nature when it comes to transporting corpses or ashes to favoured resting places. These preferences are also fraught with legal complications surrounding the disposal of human remains either in the sea or in the mountains, two favourite choices in this country where people are particularly attached to or inspired by evocative and outstanding places of natural beauty. Olaizola's incursion into the maritime administration which demands an unrealistic study of the burial project to be undertaken, involving details of the sea bed and the biodegradability of the remains to be confined to the waters, shows the abyss separating law and practice which continues on the margins of what he deems ludicrous legalities.

As the author surveys the alternatives open to us when deciding on how we want to be buried, he turns his attention to the funerary industry and gives an illuminating account of the management of death, outlining the service providers, their prices and practices. He shows the sector to be monopolized by a few firms who enjoy an easy market since customers are not usually too inclined to shop around, hence change in the services offered comes from outside the sector rather than the market setting the pace. For example, there is a section on new ways of communicating death which analyses the possibilities offered by internet of announcing someone has died, publicizing details of the funeral and even hiring the services of a funeral parlour, an emergent area of practice detected by the researcher and one which would merit more detailed examination in future research, exploring the way these new methods are taken up by customers and interpreted by those who both contract and consume such services.

The communication of death is an interesting area of analysis and one worthy of note in the Basque Country where the publication of announcements in the local papers has always intrigued me for its immense popularity and exorbitant prices. It is an intensely social practice both to publish and to read the announcements, part of many people's daily routine and conversations, a vehicle of the social networks of support and solidarity which are activated at death. This essay sheds new light on changing attitudes towards the publica-

tion of death announcements as well as insights into individuals' feelings towards how they wish their death to be made known.

Another aspect which I have found particularly interesting in the way death is conducted in the Basque Country is the funeral parlour. Whilst the informants of this essay express mostly negative opinions about the *tanatorio*, coming from a British cultural background where death was dealt with clinically, discretely and often in extreme privacy, I have always appreciated the social dimension of the funeral parlour which seems to provide a halfway house between laying out a corpse at home and receiving people there and the void left by the body being bustled out from a hospital bed to the impersonal chill of the morgue. The parlour had always seemed to me to be an appropriate place to pay one's last respects, to say goodbye, to gather with the family members on a more neutral ground and so it was of great interest that I read Olaizola's interpretation of the funeral parlours and multi-faith chapels as non-places. The use of Marc Augé's term of non-places to describe the super-modernity of certain spaces is applied to the non-descript rooms hired out to the mourners, devoid of specific symbols, in a minimalist design meant to cater for all, but which ultimately leaves them bereft of meaning. The author compares the funeral parlours to the cemeteries which he considers to be "anthropological places", vested with ancestral significance which survives even where religious meaning is lost.

One of the author's concerns is to re-invest funerary rituals with significance, finding meaningful places beyond an old-fashioned church or an aseptic hall, or inventing new terms to replace the euphemistic mortuary idioms with a more prosaic language, and practices suited to a more secular way of doing things. The anthropological interpretation of ritual is fundamental here and ample reference to Victor Turner illustrates the link between social process and ritual practice. At times, however, it would seem the author shies from going into too much theoretical depth, as understandably the emphasis is on creating a text which is not too academic to make it appealing and readable, but also means that some of the potentially useful theoretical tools are glossed over. A clearer sense of this relationship would have made a good bridging tool for the changing relationship plotted between some sectors of society's approach to death and the variety of funerary rituals emerging.

In the third and final section, the question posed is "How to manage mourning?", exploring the social and personal dimensions of experiencing the death of someone dear, and looking at the ways we remember them. This section is fascinating in the accounts it brings but as the writer himself confesses, it could be the stuff of another book. In fact, I personally would have preferred three separate essays as so many questions are posed that more time and space would have improved the final product from the point of view of both researcher and reader. Additionally, there are so many practical ideas and pieces of advice - from the example of a secular funeral ceremony to the proposal of construction of a schooner for ceremonial sea burials - that a manual could be put together with the wealth of information contained in this essay, extracting the sections on legalities, proposals for alternative rituals and questions for debate (indeed I believe they would have been more instructive if placed in an annex after the main body of the essay for easier reference).

Nonetheless, the vast amount of information which is detailed throughout the essay is most impressive and this makes the essay an obligatory reference for all those interested in how to manage death, dying, burial and mourning. Olaizola shows himself once more to be a researcher clearly committed to his cause, truly concerned with need for planned institutional change in response to the modifications in people's attitudes and choices. He is very much present in his writing and it is a presence which gains confidence as the essay advances. He is tuned in to his potential readers and often pre-empting objections, answering the questions forming in the reader's mind, but constantly inviting us to take an active interest in death, not as something that merely happens to us, but something we can indeed have a say in.

Margaret Bullen