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Religion and the social order: disposal of the dead in San Miguel Aguasuelos, Mexico

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Abstract It is argued in this essay that the disposal of the dead in San Miguel Aguasuelos involves a double exequies whereby the body and the soul are disposed separately in two ceremonies that have previously been confused as one. The ceremonies for the body last two days at most and include the wake and the burial. The ceremonies for the soul are more complicated and comprise a “novenario” (nine days of prayers), “cabo de año” (a replica of the “novenario”) and the near national feast of “Todos Santos”. In the wake, burial, and ceremonial meals that accompany funerals, a contrast is manifested between the eagerness of earth to eat corpses, and the care of mourners not to show themselves as human flesh eaters. Funerary rites seem to have developed independently from church and state control as a consequence of the indigenous population having taken advantage of the chronic antagonisms between them.

Key words Double exequies; wild wakes; anthropofagi; “novenario”; “cabo de año”; “Todos Santos”.

Resumen Me propongo mostrar en este ensayo que en la disposición de los muertos en San Miguel Aguasuelos, México tenemos un caso de dobles exequias, por las cuales se dispone, separadamente, del cuerpo y del alma en dos ceremonias, que ordinariamente se confunden en una sola. Las ceremonias para el cuerpo duran normalmente dos días a lo más e incluyen el velorio y el entierro. Las ceremonias para el alma son mucho más complicadas e incluyen el “novenario” (nueve días de oraciones), el “cabo de año”, (una réplica del novenario) y “Todos Santos” (que es casi una fiesta nacional en México). En el velorio, entierro y las comidas ceremoniales que los acompañan, existe un contraste entre la voracidad de la tierra por consumir cadáveres, y el cuidado con que los deudos evitan cualquier acción que pudiera interpretarse en el sentido de que ellos se comen la carne del difunto. Los habitantes de San Miguel, y en general de México, parecen haber desarrollado sus ritos funerarios aprovechándose de los antagonismos per-

manentes entre la Iglesia Católica Romana y el Estado Mexicano, conservando características peculiares y autónomas.

Palabras clave Doble exequias; velorio; antropofagia; novenario; cabo de año; Todos Santos.

Introduction

The disposal of the dead has been treated in Mexican literature as a highly emotional and ritualised ceremonial process. In some descriptions funerary rites are sombre whereas in other cases they are festive. In some cases there are professional mourners, whereas in others ceremonies are accompanied by music.

In another version of the disposal of the dead, a rather popular one, one finds that there is an ambiguous relationship between the living and the dead. This relationship is both one of fear, especially of souls, and, paradoxically, festive in particular with “calaveras”, skeletons whose representations are well known in “Todos Santos” Festivities as are the irreverent rhymes written for the occasion.

In order to make sense of all these apparently contradictory feelings towards death, a rather fine distinction needs to be made between those rites whereby people dispose of the corpse and those whereby one disposes of the souls. They are two quite different rites that in the literature are usually treated as one, which results in a treatment that neither corresponds with the facts or native interpretations.¹

Funerals in San Miguel correspond to a cultural representation of death that derives its content from different sources. Focusing our attention on the wake, one can discover elements of the “wild wake” common in Ireland in the last century and nowadays extinct (Taylor, 1989). Wild wakes are still common in San Miguel and in Mexico at large.

Although most Mexicans declare themselves to be Catholic, the Roman Catholic Church has been unsuccessful in suppressing customs associated with wild wakes, a fact that begs for an explanation when one notices that in Catholic Europe especially in Ireland the Church has been

¹ The distinction between rites for the body and rites for the soul is inspired by Hertz (1960).

successful in their suppression. The explanation of the survival of elements of wild wakes lies at the core of the contemporary rites and their meaning.

Taylor states that wild wakes were common in Europe in the last century until they were repressed and extinguished by the Roman Catholic Church. It is credible that the actual mourning uses of San Miguel are rooted in Mexican Indian and European Traditions. European traditions came mainly with the Spaniards who colonised the country over the course of five centuries. One can also distinguish other sources belonging to other European traditions. For example, “La Nalgada” (The spank) is a popular game commonly played at funerals, which recently became extinct in San Miguel. It is described as a Central European soldier’s game by Hašek (1973: 85) and was probably introduced to Mexico in the middle of the nineteenth century, by the army of Central European soldiers that Maximilian brought with him during his short-lived Mexican Empire.

By the time the Catholic Church reacted against the practice of wild wakes in Europe, it had confronted politically in Mexico by the Liberal Party, which eventually dispossessed it of its landed properties, including the cemeteries, which were placed under civil law. As a result of its involvement in this confrontation, the Church was unable to repress local customs, or customs that it had already repressed in Europe, because of the allegiances it had been forced to make with Indian communities in opposition to the liberal Government. In fact funerary rites seem to have developed quite independently of Church and State intervention. In this power struggle indigenous communities managed to preserve their rites which nowadays constitute a substantial element of their identity.

Due to these historical circumstances, in San Miguel funerary customs, corpses are interred in lay cemeteries instead of the old churchyards, and, if luck intervenes, a Priest may attend the Church ceremonies or give a Mass. In any case, the community has taken advantage of conflicts between Church and State, incorporating elements from all sources in order to assert the ultimate control of the community over their dead members.²

² During the struggles between Church and State, the Liberals thought of themselves as “good Catholics” (Knowlton, 1985: 21). The clashes between Church and State were political, therefore the secularisation of cemeteries was part of their political contention but not the Christian or Indian rites.

Besides preserving their own funerary customs, indigenous communities, have managed, both through the migrations of their members and because of the eclectic nature of their rites, that fulfil multiple purposes and satisfy multiple ideologies, to export their rituals to urban settings. Nowadays, the rites, as performed in San Miguel, and in many other rural communities, are also performed in the cities where they compete with other rituals of disposing of the dead.

I suggest that because funerary rites incorporate a ritual disposal of the corpse as well as a ritual disposal of the soul we are confronted with a case of “double exequies”³. This idea is derived from Hertz’ work (Hertz, 1969), although here there are no double burials. Rites in San Miguel also exhibit fundamental principles of social organisation, some of which are exhibited in the ritual performances that I will describe later on.

I should like to contrast certain differences between the Merino and San Migueleño funerary rites, in order to clarify my argument. For example, whereas among the Merino the putrid matter needs to decay before burial because gods do not like the stench of corpses, in San Miguel, earth is eager to consume the human corpses, creating a strong contrast between the cannibalistic nature of earth with the non-cannibalistic nature of humans in funerary meals.⁴

These features combine with others in Mexico, for example, I have been told that among the Huastecs and Maya the water with which the corpse is washed is used to prepare a ritual meal or “coffee” (González Torres, 1985: 295). This indicates a variety of funerary customs in Mexico which range from the proper double burial of the most prominent Mexican Heroes whose bones are buried in secondary burials in a special shrine called the “Rotonda de los Hombres Ilustres” (The Circle of illustrious Men), to the disappearance of corpses, a common practice that the governments of some Latin American countries use in their genocidal war against

³ There is a set of funerary rites consisting of two exequies: one for the body and one for the soul. One burial: that of the body; and one change of residence: that of the soul. Exequies here correspond to the definition given in the Oxford Dictionary: “Train of followers”.

⁴ I discovered the importance of the earth in Indian Ideology thanks to the fact that Eckart Boege asked me to comment on an unpublished manuscript of his on Mazatec myths. The ideas presented in this paper are a further development of the comments on his article applied to the ethnographic evidence.

their own people. Both in political terms are highly symbolic. The political significance of the double burials of prominent people seem to be obvious, whereas the disappearance of corpses implies that the torture and murder of an individual is followed by the torture of entire communities on account of them being unable to fulfil their funerary rites. This also implies the danger that the soul may take revenge by polluting their communities, households and kindred.

Although certain aspects of San Miguel's funerary rites are particular to the Gulf Coast of Mexico, the care for and fear of the souls can be thought of as a common mesoamerican trait present in funerary rites throughout the whole area.

There are two sets of funerary rites in San Miguel. The first set is dedicated to the body, in which mourning is followed by the exequies and the burial of the corpse. In the second set we have exactly the same structural arrangement with the difference that the ceremonies last nine days followed by a raising of the cross, the exequies of the soul and the transportation of the soul to the cemetery.

There are also significant differences in meaning between the disposal of the body and the disposal of the soul. The mourning of the body implies an act of vigilance (García Valencia, 1984, 1991), whereas the rites for the soul constitute a set of courteous exhortations to convince it to leave the house. The first set is mechanical, whereas in the second one appeals to the will of the soul. The raising of the cross is particular to the second set of rites and has no counterpart in the rites for the body. In both sets of rites there are exequies, which corresponds to the literal meaning of the phrase: "a train of followers". To the actual burial of the body corresponds the placing of the cross on the tomb, although the soul is not buried, it is only placed in the cemetery and the earth has no power over it, as it has over the body. In fact, the earth eats the bodies but not the souls.

San Migueleños and many indigenous and rural Mexicans are confronted in funerary rites with several forces which compete for the control of their dead members: The Church, the State, and the recognised traditional forces that give meaning to their world, particularly the earth, a powerful force that feeds on the corpses. The souls also become powerful forces with which the living reach an agreement, through the rites, whereby their mutual relations are regulated.

The masterful management of the powers involved in the disposal of the dead correspond, I argue, to a peculiar representation of power and hierarchy which to a great extent shape the cultural bases of power, and attitudes of submission and challenges towards authority and hierarchy in San Miguel.

Disposal of the body

San Miguel Aguasuelos is a small peasant village located in the Sierra Madre Oriental, in the State of Veracruz, Mexico. Until recently Totonac was the language generally spoken, but nowadays the inhabitants speak only Spanish, the Mexican National Language.

In 1975 I visited the village for the first time, and I have returned intermittently since then. In January and February of 1993 I witnessed one full funeral and part of another, which provided most of the information presented in this paper. However, these observations are complemented by information collected during several years of my acquaintance with the village.

Velorio

The first of the funerals that I witnessed was for an old man who died in a hospital in Xalapa, from where he was transported to San Miguel following his own wishes, in a funerary limousine. The second funeral was for an old lady who died several weeks after the above-mentioned old man, in the house of her relatives also in Xalapa.

The old man died early in the day, and arrived in San Miguel in the afternoon of the same day, whereas the old lady died late in the evening and was taken to San Miguel late in the day. In the first case the old man had to be interred the next day before or after midday, whereas in the case of the old lady, and in general, when people die late in the day, villagers prefer to inter them on the second day in order to have the corpse for a further day among them.

Behaviour varies according to whether people die at home or in hospital. The old man who died in a hospital was prepared in the same place,

where they simply blocked his orifices and wrapped him in a white sheet fastened with sticky paper. The old lady, on the contrary, because she died at home, was carefully prepared by her relatives and dressed in new clothes.

One and the other forms of dying have different implications for the villagers who prefer to die at home than in hospital. If, for instance, someone dies in hospital, the relatives have to fight the official bureaucracy to recover the bodies, moreover if someone dies after office closing hours, they have to wait until the next day or to make special arrangements in order to recover their corpses. It also implies more expenses for the relatives if someone dies in hospital, whereas if someone dies at home in Xalapa, funerary services can be carried out by specialised people who take care of all the paper work and transport the corpse to the village. Dispute with the state over possession of the corpse sometimes occurs in cases where someone dies outside the village and is taken to hospital. In such situations the wishes and desires of the dead person and his or her relatives are subordinate to the medical bureaucracy and sometimes corruption of civil servants. The dispute is minimal, when someone dies in the village, although all the official paper work must still be completed.

In both the cases studied, once the corpses were recovered, they were transported in a coffin, which was placed on a plank of wood covered with a sheet and supported on bricks in a corner of the main room of the house. Flowers and candles surrounded the coffin. A conventional crucifix was placed on the top of the coffin.

A son in law dressed the old man with new clothes in front of everybody, and the white sheet fastened with sticky paper was removed. New clothes were also scattered inside the coffin on the corpse. The man who dressed the corpse wanted to remove the ear and nose cotton plugs that had been fitted on the corpse but women prevented him from doing so.

There was no need to dress the old lady because she had already been dressed in her house in Xalapa, before being transported to San Miguel.

While all this happened women in the kitchen prepared coffee and “ponche”, which some of the male relatives of the deceased offered to the attendants. Rosaries were said during mourning while groups of men outside the house occupied the pavement and the street. In some groups they played cards (“albures”) and gambled.

At midnight another rosary was said, and at its completion most people left. During the mourning of the old man some of the players and

gamblers stayed outside until late, whereas in the mourning of the old lady her son and many other men stayed up all night drinking and playing cards.

During the whole ceremony it was women who were in charge of deciding when to pray, the sort of drinks to prepare, the clothes in which to dress the corpse, and the general timetable. At large, one could notice some sort of underlying pattern, in spite of the fact that everything seemed to be improvised and the result of sudden or quick decisions.

Efforts were made to find a priest to say a Mass for the old man, but none were available. This was openly discussed among relatives, and other people. Due to Church regulations, a Mass in San Miguel has to be said by a priest from the Parish Church of Naolinco. As none was available, a permit had to be issued in order to look for a priest elsewhere.

By the time of the last Rosary we all knew that there was no priest available and that there would not be a Mass on the next day for the old man. Nobody complained and people were willing to understand and accept the situation. In an open discussion it was also agreed that they would take the corpse to the cemetery on the next day at 11 am. It was said that the corpses had to be interred either before or after noon, because it would be a great sin to bury them at midday. They explained to me, later on, that if they buried the corpse at midday, the earth would eat it rather quickly.⁵ The relatives of the old lady were able to find a priest who would give a Mass for her on the day of her burial.

There is no competition between Church and local customs here because, although the Catholic Rites are thought to be necessary, they are not always performed. Local rites, however, are always performed on their own or in combination with Catholic ones. The Catholic priest in Papantla admitted that members of his family performed the traditional rites and that there was no contradiction between them.

Although there were significant social differences between the two families, I would not like to suggest that this contributed to a priest being available for the one and not for the other. However, a motor car was available for relatives of the dead lady, which perhaps facilitated the search for a priest.

⁵This reminds me of the Median saying "An empty tomb is hungry" (Bloch, 1971: 161).

Entierro

Because I understood that they would take the corpse of the old man the next day at eleven, I arrived a few minutes earlier. But instead, I was invited to breakfast together with other people who had already gathered there. The women of the household had prepared chicken “chileatole” that they offered me together with “tortillas”, coffee and Coca-Cola. In the breakfast offered for the old lady, they killed a pig, with which they prepared “tamales” and “mole” that lasted for the two days of mourning. The meals were also a clear symbol of the social distances between the two families, although I did not notice a conspicuous show of such differences in other forms of behaviour.

In both cases relatives who lived elsewhere attended the funeral. During the breakfast for the old man I had the opportunity to meet a brother and a sister of the deceased. The brother lives in Mexico City, and came to San Miguel, together with his wife, after several years, to attend his brother’s funeral. His sister, a widow who lives in Xalapa left San Miguel when she was only a little girl, and returned to the village to attend her brother’s funeral after almost sixty years of absence. There were also an unmarried son, a widowed daughter and a married grandson from Xalapa with whom the deceased shared residence, as well as a widower son from San Miguel and a married grandson.

None of the siblings or sons took any part in organising or deciding anything about the funeral. On the contrary they only attended, keeping a very low profile. The day of the burial, they decided to go and visit a nearby village that they had not seen for several years, eventually it became too late, and so they spent their time visiting relatives in the village, while people had breakfast in the house.

The daughter of the deceased with whom he had previously shared residence was in charge of the organisation of the funeral. Other women assisted her and her son was the organisational executor. He contacted the priest and reported on his unavailability. He contacted people to prepare the tomb, and he eventually found a man to be the cross “padrino”. He, together with two uncles, helped with the distribution of drinks and provided alcohol for those who wanted it. One of the deceased’s grandsons and his wife contributed to the organisation of the funeral, but not the son himself.

The above-mentioned grandson's wife contributed with a table and chairs for the ritual meals, and helped in the kitchen, while her daughters helped distribute drinks, and one of them cleaned the house after the corpse was taken away.

The organisation of the old lady's funeral was under her son's control, with whom she shared residence. However, her daughter in law had the effective control of the kitchen, although her husband decided about killing a pig for the ceremonial meal. Several grand children of the lady, who live in Xalapa attended the funeral, and a daughter who lives in Catemaco attended all eleven days of ceremonies.

The following description is valid for both funerals. After the ceremonial meal was finished six men carried the coffin of the old man outside the house, the flowers were distributed among those present, whilst some remained in the house, together with the cross that stayed in the place of mourning.

A procession was organised from the house to the Church. Leading the procession was a cross held by a man, followed by the coffin carried by six men, who changed places frequently with other men of the village who were not necessarily relatives of the deceased. Women and men praying and singing followed the coffin. Once we arrived at the Church, the cross was placed at the front by the altar. In front of it was the coffin while men and women sat in the pews along the navel of the Church.

A Rosary was said in the Church, and the procession proceeded towards the cemetery. Meanwhile some men had dug a hole in a tomb that the deceased had built for his wife several years earlier.

The exequies of the old lady's corpse followed more or less the same steps. The description of the burial of the old man illustrates the casual attitudes towards the disposal of the body in San Miguel.

They slid the coffin, along some rods, rather clumsily into the hole that they had opened under the tomb. This operation took them about half an hour. Everything was improvised, the method of sliding the coffin, and the method of closing the hole. A local bricklayer covered the hole of the tomb with bricks and mortar but they could not cover it with earth because it was rather weak and could collapse with the weight. People did not know what to do because they were afraid that pigs from the neighbourhood would come and break it.

After the burial we all went home preceded by the women, who went earlier to prepare the meal. At home a discussion continued about whether

it was wise or not to leave the tomb as unsafe as it was. The bricklayer and the grandson of the deceased decided that a man would go and watch for a couple of hours until the mortar was dry enough, after which they would be able to cover it with earth. That is what they eventually did, and after a couple of hours had passed they went and covered the tomb with earth. On recalling this fact, it sounds strange that they could not go and ask their neighbours to tie up their pigs.

After the meal had finished and the relatives from Mexico City and Xalapa had left, the ceremonies for the body were completed. A cross remained in the place where the body had been mourned, flowers and candles reminding people that the funeral had not yet finished and that the soul of the deceased was still present. From then, nine days had to pass before they could dispose of the soul in a longer ceremony called “novenario”.⁶

There is a strong contrast between the length of time that women spend in preparing the ceremonial meals, and the almost lack of care with which men dispose of the bodies in the tomb.

When the burial of the old lady took place, her daughter in law spent all night preparing the pig for the ceremonial meals, and did not sleep during two nights. Her husband did not sleep because of gambling and drinking all night, however he and his sisters shed some tears for their dead mother, the man in isolation, and the women in front of the rest of the people.

In Papantla, the core centre of the lowland Totonac, I was told that for the burial of old people, relatives could cook chicken and turkey, but that it could only be eaten by people who did not belong to the household⁷. In San Miguel, in older times, meat was not offered during mourning but

⁶ The relatives of the deceased who live elsewhere attend only the funeral, until that corpse is disposed, they usually do not attend the end of the novenario, or the disposal of the soul, which clearly indicates that the disposal of the corpse is a matter for the kindred, while the disposition of the soul is a matter for the household.

⁷ “La comida que mas preparan en los actos fúnebres es el frijol frito con chile, sopa guisada o simplemente se les da café con galletas a los asistentes; en algunas comunidades, no preparan de comida el frijol ya que el frijol es considerado como la tierra que carga el difunto cuando lo sepultan, por tanto no es bueno comerlo. También se acostumbra comer mole de guajolote o de gallina, pero solo cuando muere un adulto muy anciano, esta comida que preparan solo deben comerla los asistentes no familiares del difunto, los de la familia no deben comer de esta comida ya que si lo hacen se dice que están comiendo a su propio difunto” (Cano González, [s.d.]:10).

only bread and coffee because of respect for the corpse, otherwise one could think that they were eating the flesh of the deceased. The same reason was given in Papantla for members of the household not eating meat.

The symbolism and meaning of the meals contrasts with the straightforwardness of the burial of the corpse. It seems that San Migueleños are a lot more cautious in the way they treat the souls of the deceased.

Novenario

Every afternoon, for nine days, starting on the afternoon after the burial takes place, local people or those from elsewhere who remained in the village, gathered in the house where the deceased was being mourned and said a Rosary. There was no ceremonial drinking or eating, neither playing nor gambling.

I have asked some informant about the meaning of these Rosaries and of the novenario in general. Responses have ranged from the very orthodox to quite cynical comments which suggests that the rites are continually elaborated, according perhaps, to different schools of thought, although everybody performs them.

For example, one of the persons questioned, an elderly man, told me that everything related to the dead was based on beliefs, and that there was no particular reason why any ceremonies were performed, apart from the effect of the exertion of social pressures. For example, he believed that the All Saints Ceremony, the near national Mexican feast, is an invention of a clever Spanish merchant who took advantage of Indian beliefs in order to profit from them. He told me of a case of a man who went to live in a Protestant village, where nobody performed the traditional ceremonies, and he also abandoned them himself. Eventually, he and his family returned to San Miguel and decided not to follow the trend of the village, but when he was invited to partake of food and offerings from other houses he felt bad and immediately put up an altar according to the customs of the village.

Another informant, the granddaughter of one of the greatest local curers, who had perhaps a profound knowledge of village practices, told me that in fact, on the last day of the novenario, the soul of the deceased is raised and taken into the cemetery. That implies that the soul remains

in the place of mourning, until it is convinced to leave the house and be transported to the cemetery.

Because the corpse does not need to be convinced to leave the house, ceremonies intended to dispose of it are short and straightforward. The soul, on the contrary, needs to be courteously convinced to leave the house, and to stay in the cemetery. Accordingly the soul is not disposed of in the same way as the corpse.

Following the interpretations quoted above, souls have a will and they can decide to stay or leave their former home. More often than not they decide to leave. Unlike corpses they do not deteriorate in the cemetery, they do not decay and they remain as fearful forces that can attack the living. Therefore, ceremonies also include the special task of setting the rules of contact through which souls may interact with the living from then on.⁸

Unlike the disposal of the body, the disposal of the soul signifies only a change of residence and a new set of rules of interrelation that now encompasses the relation of a particular soul with all the living, whereas before it was related only to its own personal body.

Although the main themes of the rite remain untouched, at least since I have witnessed them, some peripheral events have changed. For example, on the seventh day of the novenario in the house of the old man, I noticed that they placed a sort of canopy on top of the cross, flowers and candles, and they formed a sort of altar on which a cross was lying. The top of the altar had about four steps.

I enquired from some people about this innovation that I had never witnessed before. They told me that it is rather common in neighbouring villages, where they place nine steps leading to the top of the altar. They started imitating the practices of those villages about four years previous, whereas before they used to place the cross on the floor.

The cross lying flat on top of the altar, is the cross that is raised ceremonially on the eighth day of the novenario. This cross is provided by a padrino, an unrelated person chosen by the relatives of the deceased.

Wrongly, I had thought in an earlier paper that a relative could be a cross padrino (García Valencia, 1991). I was told on this occasion, however, that no relative or a person with whom there is a *compadrasgo* link

⁸ In contrast with the Betzileo and Medina (Bloch, 1971:169), funerary rites in San Miguel do not separate the living from the dead in any manner.

could be a padrino. A discussion arose between two women about why it could not be like that, one of them argued rather strongly that to be a cross padrino having a previous link of *compadrasgo* would mean the devolution of the link. The other woman argued the opposite, but gave way eventually to the opinion of the other lady.

Relatives cannot perform certain activities beyond their managerial responsibilities. For example, a daughter of the deceased wanted to clean the room where the mourning took place, but she was prevented from doing so by other women, because, they told her that it would be a big sin to do so. I questioned people about this and their response was that relatives cannot clean the house because if they did, more members of the family would die prematurely. Eventually a great grand daughter of the deceased cleaned the house and nobody minded.

The tradition of preparing special meals on the fourth day of the *novenario* has been lost in San Miguel. In Papantla, it is said that the soul realises that it is dead on the fourth day. On that occasion egg “*tamales*” are prepared and given to the “*rezandera*”. The eggs used on this occasion need to be borrowed from the neighbourhood, cooked at home and given away.⁹ I suggest that this custom is closely related with the disposal of the deceased’s property. In San Miguel the succession to the house ownership is a consequence of the rules of residence, and unquestionably set in the funerary rites of the owner, sponsored ordinarily by the relative with whom he or she resides.

Padrino places the cross on top of the altar during one of the *Rosaries*, anytime before the eighth day of the *novenario*.

Raising of the cross

On the eighth day of the *novenario*, in the case of the two deceased persons, there was a gathering of persons similar to the one at the wake,

⁹ “Con todo lo que hayan juntado le preparan la comida al espíritu a los cuatro días del fallecimiento. Se dice que es malo tomar las cosas de la casa del difunto para prepararle su comida porque resulta que aunque le hagan la ceremonia de los cuatro días al difunto, el espíritu no comerá nada de su casa sino que andará sufriendo hambre allá donde se encuentre; por eso mismo le van a buscar la comida en otras comunidades cercanas para que él pueda comer y no esté pasando hambre; SKIWAYA ‘el que pide para comer’ es un cargo importante que no debe olvidarse nunca” (Cano González, [s.d.]: 120).

with the exception of siblings, who live elsewhere, who do not necessarily attend.¹⁰ People were arranged in the same fashion as in the wake, and coffee and bread were distributed. Most people were local or immediate relatives. There were groups of men outside the house drinking and gambling the same as at the wake. Inside the house groups of children and girls played games, and a guitar was occasionally played.

At about nine a lady started a Rosary during which men kept playing, and after which the wake continued as animated as before. At about eleven another Rosary started which was intended to finish at about mid night.

After the second Rosary was finished, the padrino and his wife came forward in the case of the old man and the madrina and husband in the case of the old lady. Flowers and candles that were by the side of the altar were removed giving room to the padrino or the madrina to approach the altar, where he or she slowly raised a wooden cross covered with flowers. The spouse of the padrino raised a conventional crucifix replicating what her husband did. The spouse of the madrina remained rather aloof and did not take an active part in the ceremony.¹¹

Once they raised the cross, they stood by the side of the altar, and each one of those present came forward, kissed one and then the other cross, handling a candle that was passed from one person to the other. Once this ceremony was over, the crosses were left standing on top of the altar and everybody left, until the next day. Again they decided that they would take the cross to the cemetery at about 11 a.m.

I questioned some informants about who was who in the raising of the cross compadrinasgo. Their explanation was that the compadrinasgo relationship was between the cross padrino and the grandson of the old man, or between padrino and the son of the deceased lady. It was intriguing to know who was the ahijado, the godchild of such a relationship. Everybody agreed that it was the cross. The cross was therefore, the symbol of the living principle of the deceased as much as the attachment of the

¹⁰ In opposition to the Merino, in San Miguel siblings feel a strong need to attend the mourning of the corpse and its burial, they may or may not attend the raising of the cross and its transportation to the cemetery. The economic considerations argued by Bloch work exactly in the opposite way in San Miguel (Bloch, 1971), because siblings prefer to spend money when they attend the burial, but it does not seem to be justifiable to spend it in order to attend the entire novenario and the raising of the cross.

¹¹ I was told that a person of the same gender of the deceased raises the cross.

soul. With this fiction, the soul was presented in a material form, humanly perceived and, therefore, transportable to the cemetery.

On the ninth day of the novenario I approached the house early, before the appointed time. Again I was invited to have breakfast in the company of many other people already sitting at the table. Several rounds of food were offered. Once I finished I went outside to see if arrangements were made to take the cross to the cemetery but there were none. Everyone was concentrated on the ceremonial breakfast with the exception of the grandson of the deceased and the bricklayer.

The deceased's grandson who lives in San Miguel had previously ordered a cross to be made for his grandmother's tomb. He had managed to buy it, but had been unable to place it on the tomb. He took advantage of the fact that his grandfather was going to be buried in the same tomb to deliver and place his cross. Before its placement he washed it in his backyard, while the bricklayer made an appropriate place on top of the tomb to place it. Before the ceremony started they went to the cemetery and placed the mentioned cross.

By the time the mentioned cross was erected most people had finished eating. By one o'clock the padrinos took their respective crosses and led the procession towards the Church. This time all flowers were distributed among those attending, some being left in the Church and some taken to the cemetery, but none were left in the home.¹²

The procession headed towards the Church, everybody singing and praying. Once in the Church, the crosses were placed in front of the altar and everybody sat down. A Rosary was said, after which the procession proceeded towards the cemetery.

Once in the cemetery, the crosses were placed standing on top of the tomb. The tomb was covered with some of the flowers brought from home. People returned to the house where food was still being served.

With the raising of the cross and its transportation to the cemetery, the soul's change of residence was completed, but no reference was made to the cannibalistic nature of earth, because earth does not have any power over the souls. On the contrary, the souls themselves become powerful entities that compete with the earth in other spheres. Accordingly, I did

¹² The cross is also taken to the cemetery before or after noon, but not at noon. I was told that at noon the earth is open.

not find any reference to restrictions on eating meat. It is quite possible that in older times, in San Miguel, regulations existed, similar to those still reported in Papantla about borrowed food.

The meal after the removal of the cross to the cemetery marks the end of the funeral. A year later there is a replica of the “novenario”, called “cabo de año” and every year, during “Todos Santos”, there is also an annual encounter between the living and the dead. In all cases the rules of interaction between the living and the dead are continually renovated, forming these two categories the most important local social categories.

Ritual meals

There are three ritual meals associated with the dead: The mourning meal, the raising of the cross meal, and the Todos Santos meal. These meals mark clearly the efficiency of the rites, although they are not equivalent in meaning.

The two first meals, the mourning and raising of the cross meals, are structurally equivalent because they correspond to two exequies, one of the body and the other of the soul. They are equivalent in content, because it is the same sort of food. However they have different meanings.

During one night when one of the crosses was raised, I engaged in conversation with one of the neighbours. He told me that when he died he would prefer to be buried without anything. I enquired if he meant that he would prefer to be buried naked, but he replied that he preferred to be buried without a coffin, straight in the earth, because in the same way in which we eat from the earth, we should make it easy for the earth to eat us.

The idea of the earth eating the corpses came across twice. Once on the occasion when they explained to me that people cannot be buried at midday because the earth would eat them too quickly, and in the case of the man who wanted to be interred straight into the earth as reported above. In one case people did not want the earth to eat corpses too quickly, whereas in the other case the man wanted to facilitate the earth eating him quickly. In both cases the earth eats bodies.

This idea of the earth eating bodies seems to correspond with ancient mesoamerican ideology, according to which the gods made the body of

humans from maize. Men in the fields cultivate maize, and once humans die their maize-corpse goes to feed the earth in an uninterrupted cycle. According to this ideology there seem also to be two orders of things equally temporal or rather eternal: the material order, or the order of things, and a spiritual order. One is the manifestation of the other. Spiritual order can only be perceived through material forms, and matter is only perceived as a manifestation of the spiritual order.

The ceremonial meal that takes place when the body is buried is clearly contrasted with the fact of the earth eating a corpse, whereas the living still eat from the earth. When this ceremonial meal is performed, the soul is still in the house, but there is no indication whatsoever that it partakes of the meal. Obviously while the earth starts eating the corpse, the living are still eating from the earth, and the soul, according to Papan-teco ideology, is not even aware that its body is dead.

The ritual meal stresses therefore, the cannibalistic nature of earth and the non-cannibalistic nature of humans. However to be a cannibal or not is only a matter of time according to mesoamerican cosmology, because the corn that humans eat, eventually is transformed into their own flesh, which eventually is eaten by the earth. So, humans and their time are located in the middle of an eternally recycling material world.

Women are in charge of most duties in funerals, they provide food for the mourners and direct or organise the prayers. However, the main mourner is the head of the household where the deceased dies. In one of the cases that I witnessed, the old man lived with his widowed daughter and son, and an unmarried son. The head of the household was her widowed daughter who had completed the domestic cycle of her own household. The son of the deceased was unmarried and therefore unfit to be the head of the household. The widowed daughter was in charge of all the mourning ceremonies. When the man was interred his unmarried son took over a sort of stall where the elder man used to sell sweets at the entrance to the State Theatre in Xalapa City. The widow explained that because she was a woman she could not undertake such a task, she remained as the head of her matrifocal household, where she has a small shop under the care of her married son.

In the other case, the deceased old lady already lived with her youngest son in a perfectly traditional arrangement. She had presided over her matrifocal household for several years. Therefore, when she died, her son

was the chief mourner helped by his wife, children and sisters. As in many other cases, although the daughter in law of this lady took responsibility for most of the mourning, the credit went to her husband, because of his position as head of the household, and the son of the deceased.

There does not seem to be any particular sense of women being polluted by death. On the contrary, because the preparation of meals and their distribution seem to be one of the main concerns in the funerals, one can think that women rather strictly control the cannibalistic opposition between earth and humans. And one could also think, that women do not eat, or allow to be eaten the flesh that they produce. This interpretation is absolutely consistent with the privileges of women in defending their offspring and husbands even if it entails violence. Women who resort to violence to defend their husbands or offspring are highly regarded and they are referred to, by some people, as having more “guevos” (testicles) than many men.

The meal that is prepared for the ceremony of taking the cross to the cemetery is not related to the burial of the corpse, but to the exequies of the soul. In this case there is no reason whatsoever to think that the earth eats the souls. Souls only change residence and the earth has no power over them to make them decay. The meaning of this meal is, I suppose, different. It might be more appropriate to consider it as a celebration of the living on the occasion of the potentially dangerous soul finally taking its leave of the household. It is also a domestic and local meal because most relatives who live elsewhere do not attend and there seems to be no special need for them to do so. Most guests are local people together with the members of the household.

In San Miguel there are no memories of the use of borrowed eggs to prepare a ceremonial meal for the soul on the fourth day of the novenario. This ceremonial meal expresses in Papantla an explicit concern for the belongings of the dead, in the sense that nothing belonging to his or her household should be given away. Concern for the belongings of the dead have their clear counterpart in real life.

In San Miguel, for instance, the mourning duties are an expression of the rules of residence and inheritance. For example, in the case of the old lady, who resided with her youngest son, all her personal belongings, as well as her house were incontestably passed down to her son. It is possible that the house where she resided was not even registered under her name

in the public registrars because San Migueleños do not like to do that unless there is a possibility of dispute among several relatives. Therefore that particular meal indicates clearly that her personal belongings and her house were already reserved for her son.

In San Miguel, as stated previously, on the fourth day of the novenario there is no such meal. However one can think that in the meal served on the occasion of the raising of the cross, the rights of ownership over the house and personal belongings of the deceased are asserted by the head of the household and are not disputed by other relatives present or absent. In cases where they are disputed the rules of residence override any other right over the property of houses and personal belongings.

A third ceremonial meal associated with the dead is the one that is arranged for “Todos Santos”. This is a joint celebration between the living and the dead, as the people of the village themselves explicitly state. On this occasion, besides verbal explanations, special offerings for the dead are presented to the altar. People also encourage the attendance of everybody: household members, kin relatives, friends, acquaintances and visitors.

This meal is not concerned with a particular corpse, or with its property, it is concerned with the order of the village constituted by the living and the dead. It coincides with the time of the corn harvest, precisely the material from which the human flesh is formed and which will be consumed by the “non-cannibalistic” humans throughout the year. In this festivity a social order is exhibited in which the souls and the living interact together, according to well established rules, to enjoy their mutual company and a material world continually transformed by human activity which, in the last instance, is a manifestation of a superior spiritual order.

The soul is known with several names, which roughly correspond to the different stages of attachment and detachment between body and soul. The souls of the living (“almas”) are transformed into “shadows” (“sombras”) in the mourning, and the “animas” once the souls of the dead are transported to the cemetery. These “animas” can become wild souls that affect the living or friendly and sympathetic souls that visit the living at their appointed times. Whether they are friendly or unfriendly depend on their compliance to the strict rules of interaction with the living.

The material order enters the human realm through the “milpa” (cornfield), an ambiguous space feared and respected. Feared because it belongs to the wilderness which humans invade. “It is full of ghosts”

the Mazatec” would say (Boege, 1988:138): Respected, because it is the source of human nourishment.

Its counterpart is the cemetery, the source of earth’s nourishment. An equally feared place, through which humans return back to the material order. The “milpa” is the source of human flesh whereas the earth of the cemetery feeds from human flesh.

These two places converge at Todos Santos, the “milpa” providing the new harvest presented at the altar in the form of offerings, whereas the cemetery provides the souls that attend the festivities. At this moment, souls in opposition to their movement from the household to the cemetery, at funerals go from the cemetery to their old households. Also, earth that at funerals is eager to eat human flesh, at this festivity, on the contrary, provides humans with the harvest to renew their flesh.

During Todos Santos it is common for people to eat “pan de muerto” (bread of the dead). This sort of bread is made from wheat flour in the shape of skeletons, corpses (Brandes, 1988: 517), or coffins, which are consumed by humans. Because this sort of bread is part of the offerings placed on the altars, which is eaten, together with other offerings placed there, by visiting souls, one could infer that the souls become a sort of cannibal that eats humans in the form of bread. Moreover, humans themselves eat those human forms in a symbolic display of cannibalistic behaviour. This interpretation would render the Todos Santos Festivity the reverse of funerals.

Moreover, it seems more appropriate to see that eating “pan de muerto” hides further symbolic meanings. Some of the symbolic elements expressed through such bread seem to have an ancient origin similar to that described and interpreted by González as a sort of theophagy of the ancient Mexicas (González Torres, 1985:295). But unlike the ancient mesoamericans, modern images of skeletons or coffins represent human beings and not gods or ancient deities. Following a similar line of thought, one could infer that here we are attending a ceremony worshipping the ancestors. However parents can celebrate the visiting soul of a son or a grandson, although most souls belong to deceased elders. This is a peculiar characteristic of these rites where the generation order of kinship can be altered when a junior can be a cross “compadre” for a senior even if the deceased is a relative, and equally a person can be a host of a junior soul’s relative in the “Todos Santos” Festivities.

Moreover, wheat flower forms the matter of the bread, and not corn, the prototypical human flesh. I rather believe that in a festivity dedicated to celebrating new crops, and the beneficial effects of being on good terms with the souls, the acquisition of extra strength by ingesting some of the powers of the ancient deities would be closer to the root of such rites. Also, by using wheat flower, the matter in which the body of Christ is presented in the Christian Sacraments, to make the bread of the dead, San Migueleños combine two powerful elements drawn from two different traditions.

Conclusion

Funerary ceremonies incorporate elements from several sources and reflect three systems of power: the power of the State, the power of the Church, and the ancient powers of mesoamerican tradition. All these elements related to power have been mixed and combined in the rituals described, in the hope that their accumulated positive powers will make people less vulnerable to the negative aspects of power.

Obviously, ancient beliefs still strongly persist in the rites, although this does not mean that every single informant in the village is conscious of their presence. In the interpretations of informants one notices different degrees of knowledge, either of Catholic or traditional beliefs. Nevertheless, rituals follow an amazingly structured order, especially if one takes into consideration that the inhabitants of San Miguel are not in constant communication with other Totonac Villages. Their main contacts are, as they have been for centuries, with Mestizo, Spanish and Black villages. It is also remarkable that most other communities in the region share in the rites celebrated in San Miguel.

It seems that most inhabitants of the area, regardless of their ethnic origins have all agreed in having a certain number of basic ritual elements combined in different proportions. Apparently the rituals have acquired a life of their own independently of their ancient or recent ideological content.

When I attended the funerals described above, there were people from los Cedros a nearby village where people have more physical European features than in San Miguel, and also a couple of black people from Coyolillo, also a nearby village where most people are said to exhibit

Black corporal features. Everybody took part in the rites together with the San Migueleños, with whom they share compadrasgo ties.

It is quite possible that the display of humans as non-cannibals could be a political statement in two traditions. In the Indian Tradition, because in pre-Hispanic times Totonacs were under the rules of the Aztec Empire, who had a garrison in the nearby village of Acatlan, from where the early inhabitants of San Miguel emigrated to found their current village at the turn or the 17th century, as a result of previous ill treatment.

With the arrival of the Spaniards on the coasts of Veracruz, Totonac Indians immediately gave their political allegiance to them in order to avoid the heavy taxes and the provision of people for sacrifice to the Aztec gods. Eating the flesh of the sacrificed was an important element of Aztec religion, that did not seem to be present among the Totonac. Therefore a non-cannibalistic statement made through the medium of the ritual meal could express a rejection of ancient customs.

In San Miguel and nearby villages priests are expected to do their religious job in the village, but not to interfere in other spheres of their lives. However, Catholic rites, saints and prayers, especially if said in Latin seem to be regarded as having special powers.

The use of the Holy Wafer in Catholic Rites might have contributed to the adoption of wheat flour in making the bread used in “Todos Santos”. In this way the power of an European foodstuff is combined with ancient symbols present in the bread to constitute a more powerful symbol.

The power of the State is recognised because of its repressive agency. Little credit is given, however to politicians in regard to their interest in the well-being of the people. In all cases there seems to be a rather pragmatic attitude towards power and authority.

Churchyards are a Colonial innovation introduced by the Church. The control of cemeteries was eventually contested by the State. Nowadays there is no memory of the churchyard having ever been used to bury corpses, because the new Church was only finished a few years before the cemeteries went under State control. Therefore, the only traditional place to dispose of the corpses known in the Village is the lay cemetery. The cemetery is a liminal place in evident contrast with the notoriously Indian “milpa”.

All these political statements inherent to the rituals possess accumulated meanings resulting from their mutual interaction.

Nowadays, San Migueleños do not give pre-eminence to any of these powers neither the traditional or the newly imposed ones. They use them all to their own advantage. The different powers to which San Migueleños are confronted have all proved to be limited and none of them are sufficient to provide them the adequate protection they need. Therefore, their attitude towards power is an attitude of submission as well as of potential challenge.

This attitude can be summarised in the following case. Once, two children of one of my informants went to visit their mother who was in hospital. They narrated to me latter on, with a mixture of fear and pride, that they had been at midnight to the basement of the hospital where they saw the place where they “slaughter the corpses” (“donde destazan los muertos”). The fact of going to that place at midnight describes their fear, because spirits are more powerful at night, and even more at midnight, and their pride, at the same time, because of having challenged the powers of the spirits, the real reason that made them visit such a place at midnight.

There are innumerable other similar stories in which such an attitude can be clearly found. The most illuminating example though is the attitudes towards “calaveras” and the rhymes written for this occasion. These rhymes are political statements which reduce politicians to skeletons, the acknowledged end of everybody, and then ridicule them.

Saints do not escape these attitudes. In certain parts, though not in San Miguel, saints who refuse to fulfil the expectations of the population are tortured and punished until they produce what is expected from them. And even traditional forces need the help of humans. Recently an old lady from Papantla attended a funeral in Xalapa. After that she volunteered to go to the house of one of the attendants to “cure the earth” because it was ill.

All this demonstrates, following the predilections of mesoamerican ideology, that all known powers are eventually limited, and that through human concourse such powers can be renovated or increased either because those forces feed on humans or because their powers can be increased by humans combining them.

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