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REVIEW

Understanding Departure: Diversity of Perspectives on Death in Societies and Religions

Entender la Partida: Diversidad de Perspectivas sobre la Muerte en Sociedades y Religiones

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ABSTRACT

For biomedicine, "death is the irreversible loss of the capacity and content of the consciousness that provides the essential attributes of the human being and that integrate the functioning of the organism as a whole". Until well into the 19th century, the organ that determined a person's death was the heart. If the heart stopped beating, death had won the battle; however, with the advance of medicine, other signs are considered to declare a person dead. Among these biological signs are the cessation of brain function, breathing, blood circulation and when the heart stops beating. Doctors affirm that a brain-dead person manifests the absence of movements, repeated grimaces, incessant blinking, not responding to light and not breathing independently. To conclude with this essay, we must recognize the importance for us as health professionals who evidence death in our daily lives to be aware of the concept of death since this allows us to articulate the attitudes that are socially assumed in front of it and in general, with the social game; and, at the same time, how this practice favours that awareness and know how different cultures, societies and religions face death, in order to be able to be nurses with an intercultural vision about death.

Keywords: Diversity; Death; Culture; Society; Community.

RESUMEN

Para la biomedicina, "la muerte es la pérdida irreversible de la capacidad y el contenido de la conciencia que proporcionan los atributos esenciales del ser humano y que integran el funcionamiento del organismo en su conjunto". Hasta bien entrado el siglo XIX, el órgano que determinaba la muerte de una persona era el corazón. Si el corazón dejaba de latir, la muerte había ganado la batalla; sin embargo, con el avance de la medicina, se consideran otros signos para declarar muerta a una persona. Entre estos signos biológicos están el cese de la función cerebral, la respiración, la circulación sanguínea y cuando el corazón deja de latir. Los médicos afirman que una persona con muerte cerebral manifiesta la ausencia de movimientos, muecas repetidas, parpadeo incesante, no responde a la luz y no respira de forma independiente. Para concluir con este ensayo, debemos reconocer la importancia que tiene para nosotros como profesionales de la salud que evidenciamos la muerte en nuestro día a día, conocer el concepto de muerte ya que esto nos permite articular las actitudes que socialmente se asumen frente a ella y en general, con el juego social; y, al mismo tiempo, cómo esta práctica favorece esa toma de conciencia y conocer cómo las diferentes culturas, sociedades y religiones enfrentan la muerte, para poder ser enfermeras con una visión intercultural sobre la muerte.

Palabras clave: Diversidad; Muerte; Cultura; Sociedad; Comunidad.

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INTRODUCTION

In the following essay, we will discuss the concept of death and the historical conceptions we find about it; we will comment on the importance of anthropology applied to this concept.[1]

In addition, we will address the importance of culture and traditions when facing death, a situation that differs significantly between the position of individuals from "traditional societies or cultures" and individuals from "modern cultures" since the former assimilate death in a better way, accepting the fact, due to the implementation of different funeral rites.[2] These will depend a lot on the culture or religion to which they are inserted, and how, on the other hand, for "modern cultures" there is a tendency to deny the subject of death due to the discrediting they have on issues of culture and religion, and how the latter, not having a belief system affects them when dealing with a loss.[3]

Likewise, we will expose different funeral rituals that occur in some Latin American countries, emphasizing Ecuador, Colombia, and Bolivia, where some are more similar to pre-Hispanic practices and others have African influence, which will give us cause to briefly develop some rituals of sub-Saharan Africa that seemed to us very rich and diverse in culture.[4,5]

DEVELOPMENT

Death

For biomedicine, "death is the irreversible loss of the capacity and content of the consciousness that provides the essential attributes of the human being and that integrate the functioning of the organism as a whole".[6] Until well into the 19th century, the organ that determined a person's death was the heart. If the heart stopped beating, death had won the battle; however, with the advance of medicine, other signs are considered to declare a person dead.[1,7] Among these biological signs are the cessation of brain function, breathing, blood circulation and when the heart stops beating. Doctors affirm that a brain-dead person manifests the absence of movements, repeated grimaces, incessant blinking, not responding to light and not breathing independently.[8]

However, beyond the explanations given by biomedicine about what happens in the body, the biological and physiological functions of the body have cultural and historical contents and meanings that human beings have established about what it means to die.[9]

Historical conceptions about death

The medical attributions that have sought to explain death have fallen short of the diverse representations and attitudes that human beings have built around it. It is necessary to remember, for example, the Neanderthal man who painted his dead in red ochre, tied their feet, and buried them with their belongings.[10] Customs, myths, ceremonies and rites have revealed the socio-cultural and historical dimensions of the phenomenon of death throughout history. Thus, in ancient Sumer, for example, it was believed that upon death, a person was divided into body and soul and that the soul tragically went to a cold and desolate underworld. Centuries later, the Egyptians and the Greeks continued to maintain this idea of the separation of body and soul at the moment of death.[4,11] The Egyptians were capable of giving everything to reach eternal life in body and soul, and the Greeks manifested two things around the subject of death: the first one that stopped feeling at death and the second one that at death, one was transformed and continued living in the afterlife.[12]

The Middle Ages in Europe were mainly marked by a more accurate awareness of death due, among other things, to epidemics, wars and migrations from the countryside to the cities. In this period, both pagans and Christians responded to death. For Christians, life after death involves heaven as a reward for actions performed during life. For Muslims, on the other hand, death is the defeat that places human beings in front of the abyss and, simultaneously, is the triumph of Allah. For Islam, "life goes second by second, and death sooner or later will meet everyone".[13] As can be seen, the worldviews and attitudes of human beings towards death are different, and so are the symbolic representations that each culture has made of it.

As far as the conceptions of death in the West are concerned, and once again taking giant leaps in time and space, Philippe Ariés affirms that death and the sensibility of Western people in this respect have gone through five stages.

"The first stage, which lasted until the 14th century and which refers to the domesticated death where death was lived with familiarity, the second stage, which would be the death of me and which would occur during the 15th - 18th centuries and which coincides with the discovery of individuality. The third stage which is the death of the you and would be located in the eighteenth century during romanticism, and which refers to the atrocious and inhuman drama of the loved one. The fourth stage that has to do with death in solitude where the individual has hope of medicine and the fifth stage that would occur in late modernity and has to do with the unnamable death where just talking about it is a matter of shame and therefore all the attitudes of Western human beings revolve around the disappearance of death".[14]

Anthropology and death

From its origins, anthropology has been interested in studying the conceptions and practices surrounding death in different cultures. Theoretical developments around this topic have served to speculate on the role of death and dreams in the origin of religion, for example (Frazer 1993 and Tylor 1981 cited in Cipolletti and Langdon, 1992: 3). Other theoretical tendencies have circumscribed death within the theme of health and illness of populations. And even archaeology has been interested in funerary practices in many societies from the tangible evidence of burials. On the other hand, within anthropology, a specialization has emerged that refers exclusively to death and the complex symbolisms and conceptions it implies.

As far as the ethnography of death in specific cultures is concerned, according to Cipolletti and Langdon, this is a recent practice within anthropology. The presence of researchers in funerary rituals within different cultural systems, especially in Latin America,

has been present perhaps since the middle of the last century.[7,9]

Funerary rites

Authors such as Louis Vincent Thomas (1989) and Philippe Ariès (2000) propose differences in the acceptance or denial of death by societies and that these differences are evident in the use or not of funerary symbols and rites. Thomas insists that it is the traditional societies that have a better acceptance of death since his analysis revealed that acceptance can be observed in the complexity and value given to these rites within the social dynamics: "The primitive accepts death because for him death does not exist; it is nothing more than a step, a moment in the life cycle and, therefore, a cultural fact".[15] There is a tendency to deny death, which the author explains by alluding to the slow desacralization of funeral rites or their disappearance. In some contributions of his work on the corpse, Thomas presents detailed reports of how thanatopraxy, in current societies, has more of a hygienic function than a symbolic function. Meanwhile, in other contexts, the issue of hygiene seems to be more of a pretext or an attempt to rationalize the numinous. Thus, he states that "thanatopraxy does no more than take up the principle of traditional duty and arrangements for the dead, using the resources of technology".[15,16]

Despite social changes and the advances of science, it is tough for the individuals of a community to detach themselves from their cultural legacy. Thomas states, "The cultural past is paramount in shaping mentalities, even if it is eclipsed by a new ideology that breaks with tradition". Although it is clear that rites have undergone variations, these changes are only adaptations whose function continues to be the same: to deny death or phenomena considered close to it, such as illness or old age. Thus, pathological medicine seeks to lengthen life expectancy, and aesthetic medicine seeks to erase the signs of old age associated with the proximity of death.[17]

The Christian worldview is a clear example of these beliefs. According to it, an incarnated God must go through the process of death to be resurrected, that is, in Christian language, to attain immortality. The myth, then, brings believers the hope of life beyond death. However, the studies of several researchers on the topics of thanatology as death. The Right Hand by Robert Hertz (1990), The Meanings of Death by John Bowker (1996) and Life After Death by Arnold Toynbee (1981), among others, let us know that in different societies and cultures, there have been and are myths and beliefs about life beyond death; also, that their funeral rites show symbols of life equivalent to those of the Catholic rite.

When it is stated that culture is a "means" developed to transcend death, it is being installed between two issues: the reality of dying and, on the other hand, the emotions it generates.

It could be affirmed by Eugenia Villa that "the fear of death is cultural and, therefore, socially learned. The intensity of fear varies with the cultural system, the religious belief, the historical moment [...]". For this reason, we can find substantial differences between how death is assumed by the so-called "traditional" and "modern" societies. In the former, it is assumed with a certain acceptance of the fact, supported by religious or mythical ideas of an afterlife and the proximity to the sacred, ideas that seem to provide a sure guarantee of survival, the hope of a paradise, a world of the dead or with the gods. In most of these societies, there is the idea of immortality, which means life after death. Meanwhile, in modern societies, the increase of individualism - proportional to the abandonment of religious or sacred ideas - implies the sharpening of the rejection of death, which is displaced by science and technology.[18]

In these more secular societies, the idea of immortality - taking Morin's concept (1994) - is more applicable, referring to a state in which the organism feels it can live indefinitely, that is, that it will not go through the process of dying.[19]

Thus, traditional societies accept death because they think of accessing it as a new life. In contrast, current societies try to avoid it because they have lost the idea of an afterlife, although they do not accept their mortality. Through a cultural fact, we try to face death and what it generates in people individually and collectively. That fact is the funeral rite.[20]

Suppose it is thought that the death of a person causes chaos in the social, family and individual dynamics and that the rite is associated with the order and adaptation between men, their world and their gods. In that case, it becomes evident why a rite is needed to conjure the effects of losing a loved one and a community member. The function that the rite would fulfil would be to diminish the harmful effects that a change in the individual and social life of people who have lost a loved one could bring.

Death becomes, for humans, an incomprehensible fact. At this point, the rite has importance because it enters to fill with its symbols and representations of the voids brought by the phenomenon of death. Through its set of ideas, beliefs, representations and symbols, the rite manages to make explicit for the community matters that otherwise need inexhaustible reasoning to understand them.

Beliefs within their dynamics do not need reasoning; they are not explained: for the individuals immersed in the rite, the practice and the bonds created by it are enough. Indeed, the funeral rite not only seeks to maintain the social balance but also to help the emotional aspect of the survivors, which is almost always affected by the loss. The rite also intervenes in the psychic and individual. In this sense, Pedro Gómez points out that "What is proposed -the rite- is, then, to overcome the resistance offered to man by his thought; so that the experience of anxiety expresses a second intention, a more or less unconscious logical conflict, which gives rise to fear and in whose resolution or restructuring the rite intervenes".[21]

Next, we will detail some funerary practices and religious beliefs of Latin American countries. However, we will also cross the Atlantic Ocean to enter the African culture and gradually learn about the different processes people face about death and how they help them face this. We will also expose a unique technique that was used in Ancient Egypt and that also occurred in ancient society in Chile:

In Ecuador, funeral rituals are celebrated during the festivities of the finds, considered the most critical date to honour the dead. Two central elements stand out during these festivities: the colada morada and the guaguas de pan considered Cultural Heritage in Tradition. The colada morada is prepared with fruit syrups, black corn and aromatic herbs. On the other hand, the "guaguas de pan"

(bread guaguas) are attractive because they shape children's figures and are offered as food for the souls living in the afterlife. In the indigenous people of Cotacachi, this time is known as "wacha carry" or the "offering of the orphans".

Death also takes on a special meaning in the funeral practices of the Afro-descendants of Esmeraldas. For them, it is essential to manipulate the afterlife and maintain a connection with deceased loved ones. In the case of deceased children, most ceremonies focus on musical pieces called garrulous and expressions of joy that wish for their well-being in the afterlife. These practices are also considered part of the Cultural Heritage of the Finados Tradition.[22]

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, two outstanding examples of funeral conceptions and practices are those of the Secoya and Siona peoples. These cultures believe in the continuity of life after death and the connection between the living and the dead. For them, funeral rituals are a way of maintaining this connection and ensuring the peace of mind of the deceased in the afterlife. These practices reflect the importance of funeral rituals in Ecuadorian culture and their role in maintaining memory and respect for the dead.

In South America, specifically in Colombia, the Afro-Colombians of the Baudo have as funeral practices to build large altars and in them, after placing the deceased person who was previously bathed with herbs, they decorate it with a series of things such as a crucifix, paper flowers, natural flowers, black butterflies, painted skulls. On the wings of the butterfly made with cloth, two isosceles triangles are formed, which, like the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian altars, symbolize the axe of Changó and, along with that, the presence of the Orisha of the region. Depending on the place, according to José Fernando Serrano, and specifically in the funerals of Palenque de San Basilio in Cartagena and Alto Baudo, it is also observed that the survivors have the practice of reproaching the deceased for his departure. On the other hand, towards the south of Colombia, in the Department of Nariño, it is believed that life and death are indissoluble, and the ritual practices around this cosmovision are pre-Hispanic. That is to say that a deep integration between the living and the dead is manifested through food and drink.[23]

While in Bolivia, the Aymara circumscribe their funeral rites to the agricultural cycle relating the beings that inhabit the manga Pacha and prepare the food that in life like the current deceased.

The importance of funeral rituals in sub-Saharan Africa has surprised by its diversity of rituals. The internal evolution of traditional African religions, religions of the terroir, has led to the emergence of more elaborate cultural forms around the ancestors of prestige, intermediaries between the human world and the invisible universe. Today, mortuary rituals have not been modified, nor has the belief in ancestors and reincarnation been wholly eclipsed. The phenomena linked to modernity transformed the funeral rituals, particularly the rural exodus and emigration to distant places.

In most funeral rituals observed in Africa, there is evidence of the maintenance of ties between the dead and their environment. Even as a corpse, he continues to belong to the family.

This is reflected, to begin with, in a representation intended to symbolize the presence of the deceased among his family, especially in the moments following the death. The lineage members gather to drink, eat and sing praises to the deceased, which is a way of prolonging his or her existence in this world. Indeed, it often happens, especially among the Mossi of Burkina Faso, that a relative of the deceased, preferably a woman, wears the deceased's clothes and imitates his gestures and manner of speaking. The children of the deceased call him "father" and their wives "husband".

Among the Diola of Senegal, the dead must be presented at their funeral: dressed in their most beautiful clothes, seated in their customary chair and tied to it, hand raised as if greeting the crowd, and then carried on their shoulders to the place of burial, while musicians and dancers play and evolve very animated around the procession, thus defying the tragic dimension of death and finishing giving an epic and triumphant colouring to the funeral procession.[24]

Familiarity with the dead can continue long after death through an intimate relationship with the corpses. The best-known case is that of the Merina of the highlands of Madagascar; the "Famadihana" is practised in Madagascar, a West African country, which consists of digging up the dead, replacing the clothes with which they were buried, for silk clothes, The dead are placed on the shoulders of the dancers, who throw them into the air and carry them in a wild parade through the streets of the village. This ritual ends by wrapping the remains of the dead in new white cloth, and the used ones are distributed among the women as it is believed to have fertilizing powers.[25]

The dominant ethnic group, the Merina, who live in the Highlands and are considered descendants of the first settlers who arrived by canoe from the distant Malay Peninsula, bury their dead in family pantheons built on their land. On the other hand, the Bara, a tribe of zebu herders who live in the desert plains of the south of the island, create coffins of wood or metal, and they are introduced in a natural cave of Isalo, whose mouth is covered with stones. With this, it is believed that when the flesh rots, the soul is installed.

Both rites have almost identical characteristics. This act takes place between June and October. It is then that the process of exhumation of the corpses begins. The relatives of the deceased receive congratulations instead of condolences, and they surround themselves with the bones of the dead, placing themselves at the same table where they eat. After the meal, the relatives move to the rhythm of the place's music, carrying their deceased's bones. Before saying goodbye, they go around the grave seven times and pay attention to the words of the master of ceremonies.[26]

With these rituals, the aim is to strengthen the internal ties of the group of the living through communion with the dead, who are, more than ever, the bond that unites the family.

Ancestor worship and reincarnation in Africa

The family bond maintained beyond death is reactivated through the belief that every child who comes into the world is the bearer of the soul of one of his or her ancestors. Such an idea follows the logic of the primacy of the group over the individual, a logic associated with the denial of death as a definitive rupture. However, the belief in reincarnation does not constitute the basis of a

philosophy on the becoming of the being at the end of his successive existences, as in the great Asian religions. The notion of destiny is non-existent in traditional African religious thought, probably because it is closely linked to the notion of the individual. Not all the personality of the disappeared person reincarnates in his descendants, but only a fragment. The notion of the soul does not conceive it as one and indivisible; it is composed of several autonomous parts, which allows us to associate the belief in reincarnation with the cult of the ancestors and the devotion to a creator principle, lord of the universe. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, what is reborn in the uterine lineage is the "blood", while the "male principle" is reunited with the ancestors and the "soul" returns to the Creator.

If there were a notion that could explain such a predominant representation of death in sub-Saharan societies, it would be that of "immortality", which James Frazer (1913) defined as the "prolongation of life for an indefinite, but not necessarily eternal, period". Life is first prolonged through the ancestor stage, conceived as the highest stage par excellence. Consequently, death becomes the ultimate rite of passage-transition, the culminating point of a prestigious ascent; through it, one passes from the elder stage, already conceived as highly gratifying, to the ancestor stage, in which the summit of prestige is reached. The staging of the passage to the ancestor stage can be done after the funeral ceremony. Such is the case among the Dogon of Mali, where every two or three years, a ritual called "Dama" takes place to incite the soul of the dead, deceased and buried several months before to leave the world of the living to go to the country of the ancestors. During the ritual, a jar full of beer is placed at the village exit and kicked down by a deceased relative to indicate that the dead person can no longer eat or drink and must leave the world of the living. Afterwards, the mask-men dance for three days to show him the way to the other world, where he must dwell.[27]

Once he has become an ancestor, the deceased is the object of certain cult practices, which are associated with praises, prayers and sacrifices on the part of his descendants. Some ancestors, founders of prestigious clans or lineages, are progressively deified; others, in the case of syncretic constructions with a monotheistic religion, become preferred intermediaries between human beings and the Creator God.

Funerary rites in Ancient Egypt

Let us take a concrete example: the figure of the Pharaoh: he was of divine origin, and when he died, his body was handed over to the embalmers, priests, who were located outside the village and were in charge of preparing the body of the deceased for the final destination. The body was deposited on a stone table, and these embalmers covered their faces with masks, allusive to the gods, who began to recite a series of rituals. Then, one of them would cut with a knife (usually made of obsidian) on the deceased's body, and they would chase him around the table, throwing stones at him. Thus began the ritual, which was nothing more or less than an autopsy:

1. The body was emptied, the organs were removed except for the brain (which was removed after liquefying it through a nostril and discarded since the brain was not considered significant), and the organs were deposited in a series of six vessels, with the faces of the gods and their respective names, with a series of salts that caused them to be dissected.
2. The already emptied body was submerged in a formula of salts from the desert, the main one of the salt of natron. After over a month, the body was dissected, losing humidity, including the bones, muscles and tendons tanned.
3. A series of flax shavings and fibres were introduced, and inside, the organs were replaced by a series of amulets, often made of jade or semiprecious stones in the shape of different protective gods.

The body was smeared with resin-based ointments and then bandaged, leaving it as a mummy. Then, a series of prayers were made with the cross of eternity in the mouth of the mummy so that the spirit would return it to the body. Afterwards, the mummy was placed in an anthropomorphic sarcophagus, and its material could vary from palm, wood, gold, stone or several of them, one inside the other.[15]

However, these embalming techniques also occurred in some cultures of Latin American countries, for example, in Chile, where the Chinchorro. This culture remained isolated for thousands of years (from ca. 9000 b.p. to ca. 7000 b.p.) without establishing contacts with other neighbouring prehistoric groups that could have contributed technical, artistic and ideological elements that influenced their cultural development. The transfer of this type of information would explain why the funerary complexity originated in the north of Chile and not, for example, on the coast of Peru. The finding of a high number of deceased of low age, naturally preserved due to the dryness of the Atacama Desert, would have triggered, as a social response to calm the collective pain, the development of embalming techniques.[28]

Although these techniques were discontinued, this was related to the arrival of Altiplanic groups that introduced the first agricultural practices in the valleys and profound changes in the life habits of the Chinchorro. Interestingly, around 5000 B.C., changes in embalming techniques were perceived, with the appearance of "red mummies" of less complicated elaboration. Then, the red mummies disappeared, and individual burials replaced collective burials.

There is no doubt that the embalming techniques employed by the Chinchorro achieved remarkable results, the expression of which must have required skills that could have involved special training, the formation of professionals, a consequent division of labour and perhaps even the establishment of social strata as occurred in Egypt. The critical fact that only some of the bodies were embalmed is not primarily discussed in the reviewed works and supports this idea.[29]

We believe that the very early development of embalming techniques and the fact that we can describe the process as the transformation of lifeless bodies into art objects, which is one of the cultural characteristics of the Chinchorro, anthropological-social, archaeological and paleoclimatological, revealed that the early appearance of embalming techniques would have been linked to better climatic conditions and greater abundance of water resources. These changes would have led to a demographic increase that determined the emergence of social complexity.[30] As part of this process, innovators developed embalming techniques stimulated

by visualizing naturally preserved bodies around them. Less creative conspecifics then acquired these procedures through social learning. Finally, Santoro et al. (2012) emphasized that the development of Chinchorro social complexity, including embalming techniques, was influenced by natural constraints imposed by the unique climatic conditions prevailing during the Early Archaic in the Atacama Desert. The information supporting some models formulated to explain the development of embalming techniques is based partly on assumptions whose realism is not disputed, calling into question their scientific validity.[30]

New Orleans Jazz Band

A unique ritual found in the United States is the funeral procession accompanied by a jazz band, which takes place in New Orleans in, Louisiana. Jazz music is ubiquitous in this city, so many families usually make a procession with the coffin from their home to the cemetery accompanied by a band that starts playing sad songs but then changes to play more and more cheerful and festive songs.[31,32] One of the essential characters in New Orleans funerals is the "Grand Marshal" who led the procession. His posture must be with his head held solemnly; wearing a black tuxedo, white gloves and a black hat, he must lead the band with restraint to the cemetery and back in the same way. In this way, they turn the sadness of death into a celebration of the person's life. This tradition dates back to the arrival of slave ships from West Africa in 1719, bringing with them their traditions.[33]

The Towers of Silence are funeral buildings of the Zoroastrian religion, mainly in Bombay, India. This religion considers the human corpse as an impure element, so it is forbidden to allow them to contaminate the classical elements of earth and fire.[34] For this reason, the bodies are taken to the towers of silence, where vultures consume their flesh. Once the bones take the white colour, by the sun and wind intervention, they are thrown into the ossuary in the central part of the building.[35]

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude with this essay, we must recognize the importance for us as health professionals who evidence death in our daily lives to be aware of the concept of death since this allows us to articulate the attitudes that are socially assumed in front of it and in general, with the social game; and, at the same time, how this practice favours that awareness and know how different cultures, societies and religions face death, in order to be able to be nurses with an intercultural vision about death.

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