



university of
 groningen

faculty of theology and
 religious studies

Death and Liminality

Concepts, Rituals and Iconography

29th & 30th of
 October 2010

Conference at the Faculty of
 Theology and Religious Studies
 University of Groningen

Venue: Oude Boteringestraat 38,
 Court room

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Introduction

Over the last three years a multi-disciplinary research group of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Groningen hosted a series of lectures around the subject of death, with particular emphasis on questions of liminality. The lectures were organised under the motto AD LIMINA MORTIS and focused on three fields within the general research question: concepts, rituals and iconography. The presentations included a broad range of examples. From Christian iconography of death to the liminal practices of the suicide bombers of 9/11; from J.S. Bach's notion of death as 'sleep' to Greek conceptions of the 'soul'; from the ethnography of contemporary Middle Indian secondary funerals to the archaeological investigation of Egyptian ideas and practices of death. With this conference we wish to conclude this series of lectures. We hope that we can shed some new light on the notions, iconography and rituals of liminality in the process of this ultimate transformation.

Peter Berger
Justin Kroesen

Programme

Thursday

19:00 dinner with external guests (optional)

Friday

9:00 Welcome and introduction by Peter Berger and Justin Kroesen

9:15 Keynote lecture by Bruce Kapferer (Bergen)

10:15 coffee

Session 1: Chair: Justin Kroesen

10:45 Antonius Robben (Nijmegen): *Disappearance and Biliminality: Argentina's Mourning of State Terror*

11:30 Pieter Nanninga (Groningen): *The Liminality of Living Martyrdom: Suicide Bombers' Preparations for Paradise*

12:15 Discussion by Jan Bremmer (Groningen)

12:30 lunch

Session 2: Chair: Justin Kroesen

13:30 Thomas Quartier (Nijmegen): *The Liminal Character of Modern Dutch Mourning Rituals*

14:15 Roland Hardenberg (Tübingen): *Three Dimensions of Liminality in the Context of Kyrgyz Death Rituals*

15:00 Discussion by Yme Kuiper (Groningen)

15:15 coffee

Session 3: Chair: Peter Berger

15:45 Jan Bremmer (Groningen): *Soul and Body between Life and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece*

16:30 Thomas Lentes (Münster): *Through the Glasses of Death: Visuality in Late Medieval Ars Moriendi and Memento Mori texts*

17:15 Jan R. Luth (Groningen): *'Death' and 'Soul' in Compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach*

18:00 Discussion by Justin Kroesen (Groningen)

18:15 borrel and dinner

Saturday

Session 4a: Chair: Jan Luth

9:00 Nina Mirnig (Groningen): *Liminality in Shaiva Death Rites: the Twisted Path to Liberation*

9:45 Piers Vitebsky (Cambridge): *Dialogues with the Dead and the Shape of Mourning in Tribal India*

10:30 coffee

Session 4b: Chair: Jan Luth

11:00 Erik de Maaker (Leiden): *Objectifying and Imagining the Dead*

11:45 Peter Berger (Groningen): *Liminal Bodies, Liminal Food. Hindu and Tribal Death Rituals Compared*

12:30 discussion by Alexandra Grieser (Groningen) and Hans Bakker (Groningen)

13:00 lunch

14:00 *The End of Time on medieval church vaults: Excursion to Loppersum and Huizinge*

-17:00

Abstracts (alphabetical order)

Liminal Bodies, Liminal Food: Hindu and Tribal Death Rituals Compared

Peter Berger, Groningen

The question of the relationship between Hindu and tribal religious and social configurations used to be a central conundrum for anthropologists working in India. In recent years this question has become much less popular as the categories 'Hindu' and 'tribe' have been questioned as analytical tools and described as products of colonial history. Their use in contemporary political discourses does not make the situation any easier. Notwithstanding these circumstances, the cultures on the ground do not disappear. Since death rituals are assumed to reveal the key values of a given society and, as Turner has argued, the same can be said with respect to liminal periods in general, a comparison of Hindu and tribal death rituals may be of some value. In doing so the focus here will be on ritual actions surrounding bodies and food, in particular on exchanges of bodies and food. It will be shown that different types of gift-giving are involved, articulating fundamental religious and social differences. Unilateral gift-giving is closely related to ideas of individual sin and liberation, whereas collective symmetrical exchanges articulate social values concerning agnatic continuity and affinal fertility. The last section of this paper discusses the relationship between two analytical concepts, liminality and collective effervescence, arguing that the prominence or absence of experiences of effervescence in contexts of ritual liminality may itself be an important indicator of different social and religious values.

Soul and Body between Life and Death in Archaic and Classical Greece

Jan Bremmer, Groningen/Köln

The twentieth century witnessed a meteoric rise of the sciences of psychiatry and psychology: seemingly, we all wanted to care for our psychê, the Greek word for 'soul', in this world. Yet, in our oldest Greek literature, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, the word psychê has no connection with the psychological side of a person, which is represented by a multitude of terms. In other words, the Greeks may have given us the basis for our terminology, but initially they did not have the concept of a unitary soul that is the main seat of consciousness and emotions but also represents man after death. In my contribution I will try to elaborate this situation in three sections: anthropological (what kind of soul did the early Greeks have?), eschatological (what was the destination of the soul after death?) and ritual (what does the funerary ritual say about the destination of the soul and to what

extent did that ritual reflect the eschatological ideas of the Greeks?). I will concentrate on the archaic and classical periods, that is, on the period of about 800-500 BC, the great era of the Greek city states.

Three Dimensions of Liminality in the context of Kyrgyz Death Rituals

Roland Hardenberg, Tübingen

8 Liminality both as a concept as well as an ethnographic phenomenon figures prominently in anthropological writings on death. On the conceptual level, liminality refers both to an interval within a sequence of events as well as to a particular quality of people, time, space etc. within this special intermission. The most inspiring generalizations such as those of Hertz, van Gennep, Turner or Bloch focus on the interplay between sequence and quality, form and content, syntax and semantics of liminality. In terms of ethnography, liminality is useful as a concept for ordering ritual events and as an analytical tool for making sense of ritualized practices. Due to its importance for conceptualizing, analyzing and describing death practices, liminality and related concepts such as anti-structure, *communitas*, rebounding violence etc. have become standard repertoire in anthropological discussion of funeral and commemoration rituals. Slightly exaggerated one could say that death rituals have become the primary examples for discussing liminality. On the basis of my own ethnographic examples from Kyrgyzstan I would like to challenge this view and show that in this case both separation and liminality are of only minor importance for achieving the desired effects of death rituals. In my interpretation, these rituals turn death into an occasion of creating society without employing long phases of separation and liminality. The dead person and the mourners are not liminal beings but focal points for establishing valued relations between members of the local society. Separation and liminality are seen as the negative sides of what people aim for, in particular when preparing, eating and sharing food.

Through the glasses of death:

Visuality in late medieval Ars moriendi and Memento Mori texts

Thomas Lentjes, Münster

In most late medieval major texts on death and dying – the *Ars moriendi*, the so-called Picture-Ars (*Bilder-Ars*), Savonarola's sermons and Luther's Sermon on preparing of dying–, *visuality* was a crucial category, decisive for the eternal status of all dying individuals. Obviously, the art of dying was to learn how to see. The paper elaborates seeing, the inner eye and strategies of image meditation as a liminal practice. Three points will be discussed: 1. The death struggle as an image debate and a 'Bildersturm'; 2. Shifting the limit of death to the lifetime. The anticipation of death in image meditation, and 3. Dying into an image. The process of dying as an image transformation from individuality to the image of Christ.

'Death' and 'Soul' in Compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach

Jan Luth, Groningen

Texts to the Cantatas, Passions and Organ Works composed by Johann Sebastian Bach reflect some central concepts in thinking about and explaining death among German Lutheran orthodox during the 18th century. In most instances, life in heaven is believed to start with death. For the believer, to be dead means 'to be with Christ', an important reason why death is desired. While the human body rests in its grave, the soul is with Christ in heaven. The body will rest in the grave until Christ will return and wake up the deceased. Death is glorified as the moment in which the soul arrives to reside with Christ at the first stage towards the heavenly meadow after Christ's Second Coming. This means that the soul is already immortal from the very moment that the individual dies. In other instances, another view is expressed, namely that eternity only starts at the moment of resurrection at the End of Time. Here, death is portrayed as a sleep.

Objectifying and Imagining the Dead

Erik de Maaker, Leiden

9 When someone dies, his or her body becomes for the bereaved an object of remembrance. If the corpse is unscathed, it closely resembles the person who the deceased earlier was. In addition, the dead body is believed to relate to that what the deceased has transformed into - a presence of some sort in death, or perhaps in an afterlife. The corpse is an ambiguous object. While cherished for its closeness to the earlier living being, it is feared for not-being alive, for belonging to the realm of death and decay. The deceased is also objectified in objects that used to belong to the deceased, that are produced in memory of him or her, or that are otherwise made to relate to it. For the bereaved, these various objectifications play an important role in how they imagine, position and constitute the deceased. If death creates liminality because of the removal of a person from life, and its subsequent transition into death, how does this liminality reflect towards, and inform, the various objectifications of the deceased? In this paper, I will develop this question in relation to the mortuary rituals of the Garo of upland North East India, and discuss how care for the deceased combines with choices aimed at maximizing prestige.

Liminality in Saiva Death Rites: The Twisted Path to Liberation

Nina Mirnig, Groningen

During the early medieval period the Indian Saiva tradition evolved from a religious movement concerned only with eccentric ascetic practices to a dominant religion that wished to embed itself in the Brahmanical mainstream consisting of householders. In the course of this development the religion's promulgators developed a system of rituals designed to accommodate the ritual needs of this newly engaged clientele, as a result of which

also Saiva post-mortuary rites were introduced. For this purpose, the Brahmanical model of cremation and post-mortuary ancestor worship was adapted and modified to suit the Saiva context. Its introduction required a dramatic re-interpretation of the ritual sequence since it originally enacts notions of the ontological state of the deceased's soul that are fundamentally incongruous with the core Saiva doctrine of ultimate liberation at death. In this paper, I would like to explore the ambiguous concepts of the soul's liminal stage posed by this model of cremation that combines Saiva soteriology with the elaborate Brahmanical believe and ritual system that accompanies the soul on its post-mortem path.

The Liminality of Living Martyrdom: Suicide Bombers' Preparations for Paradise

Pieter Nanninga, Groningen

According to Islamic tradition, the dead have to spend their time in the grave until the Day of Resurrection; a period called *barzakh* (obstacle, separation). Suicide bombers or 'martyrdom seekers' (*istishhadiyun*), however, omit this liminal phase between death and afterlife as well as the accompanying rites of passage, since 'martyrs' are believed to enter Paradise immediately after the moment of death. Yet, in their case, the period before death is strongly ritualized and characterized by a change of status. As 'living martyrs' they distance themselves from earthly life while preparing for the afterlife, and can therefore be considered 'betwixt and between' this world and the next. This paper will explore whether the concept of liminality is fruitful to study suicide bombers' last moments on earth.

The Liminal Character of Modern Dutch Mourning Rituals

Thomas Quartier, Nijmegen

In contemporary mourning rituals, a new form of liminality is created – a new social surrounding for dealing with the gap created by the loss of a significant other within a momentary community. Mourners enter the social realm of being "betwixt and between" together with others again – after a long period of privatisation in modern society. This happens for example at new celebrations of All Souls' Day beyond the scope of Christian Churches on Dutch cemeteries. On such occasions, often created or staged by artists, different kinds of *communitas* are experienced. When it comes to what Victor Turner called "ideological *communitas*" – the normative ideas that he identified in other contexts –, it seems that modern mourning rituals are not very elaborated in the sense of images of life after death and more general concerning transcendence. In this paper, empirical findings from the Netherlands will be presented that in a way contradict this impression: personalised transcendence forms a conceptual framework for the new liminal space of contemporary mourning rituals in the Netherlands. By qualitative and quantitative data we try to elaborate on this concept, relying on fieldwork of several years and a recent survey (2009) among 429 participants at All Souls rituals in the Netherlands.

Disappearance and Biliminality: Argentina's Mourning of State Terror

Antonius Robben, Utrecht

The belief that some of the 10,000-30,000 Argentines who disappeared during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship might still be alive made President Alfonsín install a truth commission in December 1983 to discover their whereabouts. By September 1984, the commission declared that all disappeared were presumed to be dead, thus turning them into mournable victims of state terror. This presentation argues that the commission enacted a secular death ritual whose liminality erupted into Argentine society and made mourning uncontrollable by the state. The commission had challenged the past social order by condemning the repressive regime, gave narrative meaning to the disappearances, treated relatives and disappeared as a distinct group, and eventually transformed searching relatives into bereaved survivors and disappeared into deceased victims. The absence of forensic proof, however, made such status changes unacceptable and turned the disappeared into a new social category that existed between the living and the dead. The truth commission could not conclude the liminal phase into which Argentine society became involved because relatives could not perform the culturally prescribed burial rites, the perpetrators refused to take responsibility for the disappearances, the dead were not recompensed through criminal convictions, and the state failed to orchestrate a national mourning.

Dialogues with the dead and the shape of mourning in Tribal India

Piers Vitebsky, Cambridge

For the Sora of Orissa, all illnesses and deaths are caused by someone close to you who has died with similar symptoms and is now transmitting their suffering to others. Over several years the living gradually persuade the dead, who speak through female shamans in trance, to move from more aggressive to more benign categories of spirit, from agent of morbidity to protecting ancestor. But the three-year sequence of funeral rites is subverted by the frequent occurrence of illness, which is seen as a reversion by a dead person to a previous, more needy stage. The dead are still attached to the living, but in the wrong way. At each stage, both dead and living must justify themselves and argue their position. I interpret the aggression of the recently dead, and the mourner's susceptibility to their attack, as mirroring the mourner's own continuing attachment. Liminality thus creates a huge space for the interplay between ritual structure and the contingent development of personal circumstances and emotions. Transformation of the dead is effected through negotiation and verbal articulacy on both sides, thus also implying a transformation of the living in a sort of joint psychotherapy. If time and data permit, I shall also look at new Baptist funerals among the younger generation. Here, by contrast, liminality seems brief, procedurally unelaborated and poorly conceptualised.

Participants

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