

Introduction

Peter Berger

“I had lost my father. But at the same time, I had also found him. As long as I kept these pictures before my eyes, as long as I continued to study them with my complete attention, it was as though he were still alive, even in death. Or if not alive, at least not dead. Or rather, somehow suspended, locked in a universe that had nothing to do with death, in which death could never make an entrance.”

—Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

“**S**ure as death.” This idiom refers to the quality of inevitability of a certain phenomenon. In this sense, certainly, death is a sure thing. However, beside the fact that as humans we all share the condition of a limited lifespan, beyond the datum of inescapable annihilation at some point in our lives, death remains distressingly ambiguous: “uncertainty . . . surrounds death” (Bloch and Parry 1982: 17). We do not know when we will die, or how, or where, let alone are we able to be sure of what follows death or what the exact status of a deceased person is. This ambivalence is brought out clearly in the scene referred to in the above quote from Paul Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (1982: 14). A son (the author himself) is contemplating old photographs of his recently deceased father. Life and death seem intertwined, but oddly so, not in any way one could be sure of. Auster suggests different renditions of this entanglement of life and death and the “or,” and “or rather” indicate the irreducible uncertainty of the situation. The ambiguities surrounding death are ultimate in two senses: they refer to the end of a lifetime and they are so elementary. This volume deals with various manifestations of such ultimate ambiguities.

Paradoxically perhaps, the elementary aspect of ambiguity can also be framed as being its vital aspect. The fundamental ambiguities concerning death—and, as such, life—are not only extremely generative of ideas, practices, and social relationships, but also of paradoxes and contradictions. Hence, many scholars have claimed that death has been pivotal in

producing human cultural and religious forms. Bronislaw Malinowski ([1948] 1974: 47), for example, claimed that “[o]f all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of the greatest importance.” Moreover, not only is death considered to be crucial in generating religion; religion is also said to be *about* death, and death rituals are understood to be *about* society and culture. Regarding the former claim, Edmund Leach (1976: 71) argued that the “central doctrine of all religion is the denial that death implies the automatic annihilation of the individual self.” In connection to the cultural meanings of death, Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf (1979: 2) wrote that, in all societies, “the issue of death throws into relief the most important cultural values by which people live their lives and evaluate their experiences.” The contributions collected in this volume all testify to this communicative and creative power of death, in particular with reference to its inherent ambiguities.

As its main characteristic, the notion of ambiguity evokes the concept of liminality. Actors, objects, spaces, and times may have a quality of indeterminacy, or, as Victor Turner (1967) described it, a quality of being “betwixt and between.” Not only does death share this quality of in-betweenness and ambiguity, but it can also be said to be paradigmatic of liminality. This is also shown in the fact that symbolisms of liminality very often draw on the imagery of death. Many anthropologists have described how novices have to “die” in order to be “reborn” in a new form of social existence. As such, it is astonishing that no anthropological study I know of deals with liminality explicitly in the context of death. The excellent contributions of Bloch and Parry (1980) or Humphreys and King (1981), for instance, do not consider the aspect of liminality in any specific way.

Though the situations and qualities of liminality are discussed in every chapter of this volume, it is not Turner’s concept of liminality that is necessarily at stake. When thinking about liminality, Turner’s work is obviously highly relevant, and several contributions explicitly deal with his work; however, this volume should not be misunderstood as a collection of test cases of his ideas. As is well known, Robert Hertz ([1907] 1960) was the first to deal extensively with the “intermediary” period found in death rituals that also involve a “secondary burial.” He stressed that death should be understood as a process (rather than as an event) in the course of which the collective representation of death changes in connection with societal dynamics. In particular, he drew attention to the correspondence between the changing status of the soul, the body of the deceased, and the survivors. In connection to their intermediary status, Hertz (e.g., [1907] 1960: 36f) clearly formulated the prevalent qualities of marginality, impurity, anxiety, restlessness, and confusion typical of liminality. As many contributions to this volume show, Hertz’s ideas still prove to be fertile

ground in attempts at understanding death as a social and intellectual phenomenon.

Turner, strangely, does not refer to Hertz's crucial contribution in his key works on liminality; instead he makes the work of Arnold van Gennep ([1909] 1960) his main starting point. The latter's threefold scheme of rites of passage—the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation—has become commonplace in the humanities and social sciences. With reference to funerals, van Gennep makes some relevant general observations. While the rites of transition are often of very long “duration and complexity” (1960: 146), the rituals of incorporation are even more significant. Apparently, humans are very concerned about the final status and place of the dead, and, if these are not properly buried, the spirits of the dead remain liminal and are usually considered to be vengeful and dangerous (160). From the perspective of the living, death rituals are considered as a—at times, heavy—duty, but also as a fundamental right. The deprivation of this right by those in power has led to resistance in antiquity as well as in recent history. The famous case of Sophocles shows how unacceptable Creon's verdict not to bury Polyneices was to Antigone, who challenged the king's authority in order to pay her last respects to her brother. Creon's twofold outrage—to disregard what is sacred to the gods and to kill Polyneices a second time—had drastic divine consequences (see also Bremmer in this volume). Another example of the intolerability of enduring the uncertainty and liminality of the dead, or presumed dead, is provided by Argentina's recent history as discussed by Ton Robben (this volume). The military government obviously underestimated the potential and determination of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who were bereft of their sons and of any knowledge of their whereabouts, another unbearable form of ultimate ambiguity.

The concept of liminality, as developed by Turner on the basis of van Gennep's work, has been applied to all kinds of contexts in very diverse disciplinary frameworks. Being so widely employed has not always contributed to the sharpness and, hence, the usefulness of liminality as an analytical tool. Of course, Turner himself contributed to the dilution of the concept as he applied it to various situations himself and created a cousin of liminality, namely, the “liminoid” that “resembles without being identical with the ‘liminal’” (Turner 1982: 32, emphasis in the original). While the liminal, Turner says, refers to ritual contexts in so-called tribal societies, with a stress on collectivity, seriousness, and obligation (also the disorder and license being prescribed), he describes as liminoid genres of modern art, literature, and science that emphasize individuality, play, and optionality (1982: 42f, 53f). What both have in common is their potential to challenge and temporarily set aside normative structures.

In my view, Turner's most important ideas concerning liminality are contained in his early writings, especially in "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" (1967). During the liminal period in rites of passage, transitional beings are both not yet and no longer classified, and from this ambiguity springs its creative impact, liminality being "a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (1967: 97). Thus, on the one hand, society and the "factors of existence" (1967: 106) are made the object of reflection, and imagination is let loose so that there is a chance of new ideas emerging. On the other hand, neophytes undergoing the ritual experience new forms of relationships among themselves, a community of equal individuals outside the normative social structure, something Turner later came to call "communitas" (1969: ch. 3). However, this potentiality is limited and restricted, and usually the status quo of society is reconfirmed and its key values reemphasized. After all, the function of the ritual process was to bring about a transformation in the status of particular persons and reconstitute society in so doing. This is the functional aspect of Turner's early contributions. As I read Turner, both aspects of liminality—the ideational and the social—are, or can be, connected to a third element of liminality: the sacred and secret objects he calls "*sacra*, the heart of the liminal matter" (1967: 102). These objects can be employed in various ways. They are exhibited to the neophytes, can entail normative views and instructions about society and the cosmos, and may invite speculative thinking about the world. What Turner holds for liminal situations in general is also true for the *sacra*: they are simple in form or structure but culturally complex and rich in interpretative potential. Considering the functional side of Turner's approach above, it is obvious that this part of his ideas reflects his cultural side and his stress on (the production of) meaning. When dealing with death, Turner's ideas offer a significant stimulus. Obviously, the "factors of existence" are never more at stake than in the contexts of death, and the corpse itself may assume the function of *sacra*. Death offers a creative space for rethinking life and reformulating social relationships because of its inherent ambiguity.

The volume is divided into three sections that deal with different dimensions of ultimate ambiguities. The first section is concerned with the description and analysis of contemporary ritual practices in liminal situations; the second section approaches ultimate ambiguities from a more theoretical angle, critically discussing analytical concepts, while mental and material images and imageries are the topic of the third section.

Empirically observed ritual practices and related ideas about death and liminality are at the heart of the first three contributions to the first section. They all deal with examples from the Indian context, especially

Indian tribal (Adivasi) communities that are otherwise hardly the focus of attention when ideas and practices concerning death in South Asia are being discussed. **Erik de Maaker** takes us to a contemporary highland society in the Northeast of the subcontinent, a community called Garo. His contribution is inspired by the work of Robert Hertz in that it analyzes the relationships between corpse, soul (ghost), and the living. De Maaker particularly focuses on the ambivalent status of various materializations of the dead prominent in the ritual process, most notably the corpse. He explores the nature of vitality that is significantly related to the corpse as the source of impurity (*marang*). But also other objects related to death are ambivalent as they have been made by the living and/or reside with them, yet are associated with the deceased. The most conspicuous of these objects is the effigy that is created on the second day of the mortuary ritual and set up in the yard of the deceased's house (as with the Kyrgyz yurt described by Hardenberg in this volume, close to but not in the house). This effigy not only symbolizes the deceased but it actually "re-presents" him or her. Some Garo hold that the ghost actually animates the effigy, and it is treated accordingly, especially being fed. With the effigy, the Garo turn death as an abrupt and dangerous event into a controlled ritual process. The effigy is subject to slow, gradual, and public decay, without, however, the dangerous pollution pertaining to the corpse. In the long ritual process of death, the living not only reorganize and renew their social relationships; ultimate ambiguities also provide the space for their reinterpretation.

While material objects play a significant role in the gradual process of transforming a dead person among the Garo, it is the communicative dimension that is stressed in the case of the Sora of Middle India. As **Piers Vitebsky** describes, the Sora regularly communicate with their dead via shamans; indeed, in their case, the realms of the living and of the dead seem to be mutually constitutive. Moreover, the ideas of the Sora concerning the dead also include a complex theory of suffering as a person joins a certain category of spirits after death and inflicts his or her own experience of suffering and death on kinsmen. In this way, the dead remind the living of their continuing relationship by making them ill and eventually causing their death. The dialogues with the dead, among many other things, create a space in which the deceased person can eventually be transformed from a virulent member of a category of illness into a benign ancestor that passes on his or her name to a child. In this way the living try to cope with the event and pain of death, and as the dead are transformed, so are the memories of them, from a painful and fearful memory to one unconnected to suffering. Vitebsky conceptualizes the dialogues as a shared experience and as a perpetual *communitas* of death and living,

but recognizes the messy nature of liminality and *communitas*, lacking clear-cut boundaries between “structure” and “antistructure.”

Peter Berger compares the ideas and practices surrounding death in a tribal highland society of Middle India called Gadaba with those of high-caste Hindus. In both contexts, the dead are fed and, in the ritual process, become food as well. Beyond such similarities, fundamental differences are apparent too. The rituals of the Gadaba pivot around reciprocal exchange, assimilation, and replacement of the dead, while in the Hindu case such symmetrical transactions are out of the question. Here, impurity, inauspiciousness, and sin have to be transferred from the deceased to his or her son and to Brahman ritual specialists—such transactions precluding reciprocation. Not being a mere ritual detail, this difference between unilaterality and symmetry points to quite different worldviews. For Hindus, death and rebirth is thoroughly “ethicized,” as Gananath Obeyesekere (1980) has called it, and behavior during lifetime and the time of death directly affects the status of the next rebirth. In contrast, such moral considerations of merit and demerit are irrelevant in the Gadaba case. Their death rituals concern society and those affinal and agnatic relationships ensuring its continuation. Hindu death rituals are more ambivalent, as Nina Mirnig (in this volume) also points out. On the one hand, the transformation of the ghost into an ancestor is important, but a matter of the family and not of the community, as with the Gadaba. On the other hand, the value of liberation, a vital part of Hindu cosmology for centuries, permeates their view of death.

While the first three contributions of this section are based on ethnographic descriptions, the material of analysis, as well as the context of the described practices, are very different in the case presented by **Pieter Nanninga**. The deaths of suicide bombers deviate from the usual fate Muslims expect after death as well as from the common ritual process. So-called martyrs are said to enter heaven straightaway, and often there is no body that can be buried, as in the previous Argentinian example. Focusing on the well-documented suicide attacks of 9/11, Nanninga shows how the ritual process fits quite well with the general tripartite structure of rites of passage. Suicide bombers are separated socially, spatially, and mentally from society, and could be said to be reintegrated by the new genre of martyrdom videos. Significantly, however, liminality precedes and does not follow death. Premortem liminality is highly regulated, and everyday activities are strongly ritualized, orienting the attackers mentally towards the otherworldly realm and sacralizing their violent plans.

Violence is also an important dimension of **Ton Robben’s** contribution to the second section of the volume, which discusses analytical concepts

related to ultimate ambiguities. Among all contributions, the latter expression is perhaps most suitable with reference to the dramatic case presented and analyzed by Robben as he deals with the liminal processes that abducted persons and their relatives went through during and after the military regime in Argentina. In fact, liminality is multiplied and intensified in these cases, which is why Robben speaks of the “biliminality” of the disappeared and their searching kin. As noted before, the uncertainty of the fate of their abducted children was unbearable for the parents, who were not intimidated by the despotic violence and therefore inactive, as the regime had first assumed they would be, but began a relentless search for the disappeared that was then recognized by those in power as potentially politically disruptive. Robben shows that the liminal statuses of searcher and searched were interdynamic and at the same time had an impact on the changing political situation as they were shaped by it. After the new democratic government was elected in 1983, a collective death ritual was held that was supposed to provide closure. But while in a legal sense ambivalence was resolved for the disappeared, in the personal sphere this closure was often difficult to achieve, and politically it was even unwanted by many of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

In his analysis of Kyrgyz death rituals, **Roland Hardenberg** approaches the notion of liminality by focusing on three dimensions he suggests can be distinguished in specific ethnographic contexts: the emotional, the cognitive, and the social dimensions. In his case at hand, the emotional aspect is highly elaborated, as especially (but, significantly, not only) female relatives of the deceased are expected to mourn the dead for 40 days in a yurt that has especially been set up for this occasion. Hardenberg argues that it is through these intense, standardized, and prolonged mourning activities that a transformation of grief into a memory of the deceased is achieved. Regarding the cognitive dimension, the author contends that far from being a matter of antistructure, liminal time and space in Kyrgyz death rituals are highly structured, so much so that he speaks of “hyperstructure.” The third, the social dimension, pivots mainly around sacrifice and commensality. While death breaks up relationships, as Hertz has noted, social relations are reconstituted through repeated situations of hospitality and food sharing.

In relation to the topic of this volume—death and liminality—**Peter Berger** discusses the analytical potential of a much-neglected concept: Durkheim’s notion of collective effervescence. Much like Turner with his concept of liminality, Durkheim was concerned with understanding the emergent aspects of social life (beside the problem of continuity), and he regarded those assemblies that generate intense emotions, which in turn may trigger novel social and ideational forms, as crucial in this regard.

Partly building on the critical contributions of Lukes and Baumann, Berger argues that the social outcomes of effervescence are often too narrowly connected to uniformity of ideas and the production of social cohesion, while the effects of such experiences based on joined action are diverse and unpredictable. After a critical discussion of Tim Olaveson's comparison of effervescence and *communitas*, Berger suggests analytically distinguishing three types of effervescence: systemic, negative, and evenemential. This latter form is also a recognition of a blind spot in the anthropology of death, namely that, since Hertz's contribution, which stressed the processual aspect of death, anthropologists have tended to ignore death as an event. The three types of effervescence are discussed in relation to death as part of ritually structured life cycles and "dead-body politics" (Verdery 1999) in the public domain of bureaucratic societies.

The third and final section of this volume considers images and imageries of death and liminality, including ideas of the soul and its relation to the body, as well as its fate in the afterlife and material, musical, and textual representations thereof.

In ascetic terms, the ultimate experience and condition is certainly liberation, and one would perhaps expect little ambiguity about the ritual status of a person once liberation is thought to have been achieved. Yet, as **Nina Mirnig** argues, Shaiva tantric death rites revolve around a tension between worldly and transcendental orientation. In an attempt to be more attractive to mainstream Brahmanical society, which stresses the male role of householder when alive and of ancestor when dead, medieval Shaiva specialists accommodated their ritual practice, which led to several paradoxes that are still traceable in contemporary Hinduism. Originally for the Shaiva ascetics, liberation was already granted during one's lifetime by way of initiation but fully manifested itself only on the death of the person. From this perspective, postmortem rituals that deal with the transformation of a ghost into an ancestor were not only unnecessary but also contradicted the main value of liberation. However, a curious combination of both paths—communal and ascetic—was constructed, with one liminal period ending with death (when liberation was fully realized and, indeed, a second liberation ritual was included) and a second one beginning with death (the ritual transformation into an ancestor). In this situation, the author argues, it is difficult to say where a "ritual of passage" begins or ends.

Justin Kroesen and **Jan Luth** are concerned with a central ambiguity in the Christian theology of death. The question of the whereabouts of body and soul between the moment of death of a person and the Last Judgment has never been fully resolved by theologians. From the sixth century onwards, the idea of a personal judgment immediately after death became

common, and the concept of the soul in Purgatory served as an image of its liminal status. Later in Protestant popular belief, the idea of death as sleep became very prominent, a feature the authors show with reference to the tombs designed by the seventeenth century Flemish-Dutch artist Rombout Verhulst and the music of Johann Sebastian Bach a century later. The works of Verhulst and Bach show that popular imagination developed largely independently from doctrinal views, such as Luther's and Calvin's divergent opinions of the nature of the sleep, and that representations of sleep and rest left room for different interpretations—for example, with regard to the relationship between body and soul. The occasion of a second general judgment after the individual first one appears to be unnecessarily redundant and is reminiscent of the double liberation discussed in Nina Mirnig's contribution. Both are examples of how cultural imagination and practice are necessarily entangled in inconsistencies and paradoxes in their attempt to come to terms with the ultimate ambiguity of death.

On the basis of textual and iconographic evidence, **Jan Bremmer** is concerned with the representations and practices of death in Archaic Greece (800–500 B.C.E.). He starts by noticing that the idea of *psyche* is not connected to emotional states, as we might assume from the common usage of the term nowadays, but is perceived as a vital aspect of a human being and, moreover, the basis of consciousness. It is the *psyche* that goes to the underworld, but only if the death rituals have been appropriately performed. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, the right to a proper burial (for the deceased) and the obligation (for the living) to perform death rituals are strongly evident in the Greek material. The three parts of death rituals—preparation of the corpse, procession, and cremation—show that death rituals, at least of the upper echelons of society, were highly public events. Moreover, not only were the rituals concerned with the transformation and passage of the deceased, the latter being de-individualized in the process, but they were also a demonstration of life—not a denigration of the here and now, but a celebration of society.

Yme Kuiper's contribution revisits the general theme we encountered before, the fear of loss and the attempt to preserve in the face of death and decay, and returns to the biographical dimension with which this introduction started. Also, it once more testifies to the vital, generative side of ultimate ambiguities as death and decay are transformed into a memorial novel. In his analysis of the context and content of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*, Kuiper shows how death, destruction, and degeneration are dealt with on different intersecting levels. The prince of Lampedusa only turned into a novelist shortly before his death and partly in order to come to terms with the destruction of his palace in 1943,

the end of Sicilian nobility and his own life. Kuiper uses Edward Said's notion of "late style" — which resembles in significant ways the notion of liminality as it is outside time, creative, and concerned with the unconventional and abnormal — to conceptualize Lampedusa's transformation. The author transposes and relates his own experiences to his protagonist, his great-grandfather Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina, and his historical context, the process of national unification after the conquest of Sicily in 1860 by Giuseppe Garibaldi. While Don Fabrizio experienced the beginning of the gradual decay of the Sicilian aristocracy, his alter ego Lampedusa perceived this process as being consummated during his lifetime and with his death.

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