



Funeral ceremonies in the Guatemalan folk tradition

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The purpose of this exhibition is to leave testimony about the transformation of funeral ceremonies in Guatemala, which are becoming more concise every day due to the advance of global culture that has deeply influenced our ideology, leaving aside old customs of which many still exist that are worth mentioning in order to record them for future generations.

In the development of this exhibition, we will understand by funeral ceremonies all the manifestations of individual and social mourning with a deep civil and religious content that are expressed in cultured and popular art that generates the death of one or more people.

The relationship between the prevailing ideology and ideas about death

The ideas that society has about death and the expression of grief are a clear reflection of the degree of development of its productive forces to which a prevailing ideology corresponds biunivocal that has its respective institutions to protect it and reproduce it.

In our society, ideas about death are traceable to the pre-Hispanic period (5,000 BC to 1524 AD), the Hispanic period (1524-1821), the Republican period (1821-1956) and a postmodern period (1956-211). This periodization was adjusted to the topic that we now present because, as we will prove in the present exhibition, the last periodization has determined forceful changes in the way of facing death and expressing grief in our country.

Funeral ceremonies in the pre-Hispanic period

The customs surrounding the death of human beings in this period were dictated by the development of a theocratic society that needed a great artistic apparatus to establish the positioning of religious belief in the world of its ideas, based on the dogma of the existence of life after death and the human capacity to last eternally in a metaphysical world.

The ideas and myths in this regard can be sought by reading some chapters titles

from the Popol Vuh that tell us about the death of characters, their resurrection and transformation into celestial bodies that can be appreciated by conscious living beings, beyond a generation. (Recinos, 2001: 92 to 102)

Pre-Hispanic funeral customs are also described by indigenous and Spanish chronicles from the 16th century that tell us what the burials and other manifestations were like after the death of people that occurred according to their social economic position.

It is interesting to appreciate the burials from this time the use of votive objects that were placed next to the deceased as part of a ritual that would allow them to be used in the afterlife. In the burial ritual, the mat had a special function as an element of comfort on the ground or as a wrapping for the deceased, custom that generated within the popular ideology the saying "He doesn't have a mat to fall dead on", which alludes to its ritual use since ancient times, a determining factor in the economic positioning of the people.

Funeral ceremonies in the colonial period

The colonial period (1524-1821) proposed the development of funeral ceremonies in the style of European customs brought by the Spanish and governed by legislation with ecclesiastical and civil jurisprudence, which has the Councils as its main point of reference Mexicans of the 16th Century;

These ruled the bishopric of Santiago de Guatemala that was the suffrage of the archbishopric of New Spain from 1545 to 1743, which ostensibly influenced the development of similar customs to achieve a common ideology.

The search for the dissemination of the common ideology and the control of society determined the impartation of the Sacraments that the vassals of the monarchy had to pay to the Church through stipends from the baptism until their burial, and funeral honors, covering all social and ethnic classes of the kingdom. Funeral honors had as a common denominator within the development of the ideology of that time: "the salvation of the soul from the clutches of the underworld", as a site of perpetual torture for those who disobeyed the prevailing social order.

In this context, the Catholic Church as the only institutional entity recognized by the State was in charge of everything related to the reproduction of the system of life and control of the population, which was exercised based on the premise that the king ruled by Divine will and delegated his mandate to local royal and ecclesiastical authorities. Catholic priests and other religious people were in charge of controlling society through the aforementioned sacraments, the fulfillment of which is recorded in the parish register books in urban and rural centers and which it is now convenient to list: 1.- Baptism, 2.- Confirmation, 3.- Penance 4.- Communion, 5.- Marriage, 6.- Priestly order, 7.- extreme unction.

The first gave identity to people with a name and was recorded in the registry book of each parish, extending in some cases, especially to economically well-off people, a document called "Baptism Certificate", which attested to the fulfillment of said sacrament. This custom developed as Hispanic culture advanced in the environment.

The second confirmed the existence of an infant after forty days of birth, surviving infections and threats of diseases that were now easy to control but that at that time were a real challenge for the healthy survival of children, a circumstance that included the poor and the rich who they died very frequently, generating a variety of funeral ceremonies such as those that we will mention later in the development of this exhibition.

The third sacrament refers to penitence as a means of absolution, forgiving sins committed after baptism to those who confess them with pain, the intention of amendment and other appropriate circumstances. (*Real Academia Española*, 2001: 1722.) Understanding the ideology and exercise of Penance in the period of Spanish domination in the ancient kingdom of Guatemala is fundamental to understanding the attitudes and actions around funeral ceremonies during the colonial period and its influence until today.

The fourth sacrament refers to continuous participation in the mass with the object to constantly recapitulate the life, passion,

death and resurrection of Christ, as well as his presence with the people of God materialized in the sacred species, which must be ingested continuously to strengthen the religious bond.

The fifth and sixth sacraments refer to the life options that a person could choose to reproduce the system of life, which was completed with the seventh, Extreme Unction, which consisted of helping the dying or foreseeing the end of existence as a means of preparation for eternal life, generating the legacy of goods and properties to also contribute to the reproduction of the system.

In teaching the fulfillment of these precepts, the altarpieces of the churches played a fundamental role, which we must interpret in other somewhat more monumental and ritual environments where formal knowledge was reinforced by myths and legends spread throughout the religious orders that, as rulers of the system of life, they prayed to Christ for the salvation of sinners from the eternal flames of hell.

The clear exposition of these ideas, although transformed by the action of time, are visible in the altarpiece that is preserved in the church currently known as San Francisco de la Antigua Guatemala where we can see San Francisco and Santo Domingo praying to Christ for the salvation of souls through the fulfillment of the sacraments, which highlights the repentance and amendment of sins expressed in the male branch in Saint

Peter, who after denying being a follower of Jesus, he cried and asked for forgiveness, likewise in the female branch Mary Magdalene, at that time she was associated with the sinner of a licentious life, crying at the feet of Jesus she asked for forgiveness, following him until your death, an eventuality that allowed her to be the first witness of his resurrection.



Illustration 1

Altarpiece of Christ of souls that presents us with the unity of the religious ideology of the Church as mediator of the sacraments of Penance and Extreme Unction. (Picture: Fernando Urquizú.)

Funeral ceremonies and tradition in the colonial period

The development of Hispanic culture in the environment determined the dissemination of customs and traditions that, when mixed with local ones, generated new ones in relation to the topic that concerns us now. The death of a person was in this period of our history a reason for coexistence in families depending on their social position in the communities.

The archival documents consulted from the 16th to the early 19th centuries reveal common customs that are described in the breakdowns of testamentary expenses in

the mortuary section in the General Archive of Central America, having as a common denominator the celebration of a wake the night after the death of the people that began with the pertinent prayers and the presence of a priest or in his absence, religious prosecutor or praying person to proceed to Extreme Unction, which is the last sacrament to be fulfilled and which was already described above.

Once the person had been helped spiritually and the stipends for registering the death and the right to be buried in a church chapel or holy field had been paid, the payment of bell doubles was carried out to announce the fact to the community; Depending on the social position of the deceased, the doubles could range from a catón or a neighborhood to all the churches of the largest city such as Santiago de Guatemala. It is interesting to note that this communication procedure by means of bell doubles was also applied when the death of a monarch or close member of his family, the Holy Father, archbishop of the diocese and other civil and ecclesial dignitaries, was officially known.

The social position of the deceased also determined the hiring of specialists in properly preparing the body of the deceased to withstand the honors that would be given to it on the following night, whose services included everything from the preservation of the corpse to its makeup. Then the wealthy people proceeded to pay artists dedicated to different tasks, it was common to pay for funerary portraits, altars that were dedicated to curtain the house in rigorous

mourning and making the so-called "Apparatus Room", a colorful altar for the dead in front of which the dead would be placed on their bed, a walker or a suitable catafalque.

These artists had to be joined by musicians and mourners who had to sing prayers and sing special praises to bid farewell to the soul of the deceased and begin to pray for God to receive him in his holy glory. The housewife, accompanied by family and neighbors, had to begin organizing the food and drinks that should be served to the people who would soon arrive to pay their condolences and accompany the night vigil.

After the night, the deceased, mourners and companions carried out a small funeral procession towards the nearest church or several were visited, depending on each case, where one or more masses were sung or prayed for the body present, together with prayer of the deceased, before proceed with his burial. Subsequently, the novena for the deceased was held in the house and the Nine Days mass in the church or private chapel, when there were economic possibilities and space with these buildings within the residences, generally the mourning lasted up to forty days, which symbolized the permanence of the soul in a transitional stage before being elevated to heaven, a belief based on the commemoration of the Ascension of the Lord.

The social position of the deceased also determined the creation of large altars in

the cathedrals and main churches called burial mounds or cenotaphs there are specialized studies of those carried out in the ancient kingdom of Guatemala¹. The social function of this type of altars was to move ideas between different social groups regarding the consolidation of the established social order.

The development of funeral ceremony in the dominant social groups also included publications called: "Funeral Books" which were small pamphlets of the current size called a quarter of an office whose content was of an apologetic order in honor to the deceased. This type of document was also printed after the official knowledge of the death of a King, the Pope and other influential civil and ecclesial authority in society for propaganda purposes of the prevailing system of life and was delivered at the novena mass, forty days of deceased or the end of the year.

An important guide that reinforced the funeral ceremonies is constituted by the church books with the prayers and masses for the dead, as well as the novenas which were prayed in churches and private homes. A curious line regarding the topic cited in the documentation consulted: it is the data that states that occasionally more than three hundred people were transported from the surrounding Indian towns to the city of Santiago to carry

¹ More information about these altars can be expanded by reading the book by Heinrich Berlin and Jorge Lujan *Los túmulos funerarios*. Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, 1982.

torches and hatchets to illuminate the wakes and accompany the burials as was customary every Good Friday in the Holy Burial procession of the Santo Domingo church in the capital of the kingdom. It is also interesting to note the custom that close relatives, especially widows, had to mourn for at least one year after death. The



Illustration 2.

Funerary mound of Felipe V, erected in Cobán, Alta Verapaz, Guatemala, 1747. Col. General Archive of Central America. (Berlin and Luján, 1982: 29.)

family or social group returned again to the commemoration on the first anniversary of the death, when another novena was carried out, which was to end with the ceremony called "*Acabo de un año*", ending the mourning until then.

The interpretation and popular practice of funeral ceremonies of Hispanic descent

It is interesting to note that parallel to the official customs, the alternate groups were

reinterpreting the customs of the dominant classes, adding their own exegesis that their social condition and intellectual development allowed, as well as the geographical environment that determined specific factors such as the use of flowers and fruits for altars or the type of clothing to use.

The vigils in honor of the deceased took shape in the town with a lively meeting called the wake and which is already described in detail by Archbishop Pedro Cortes when he visited the town of Mazatenango in 1770. commenting:

The *zarabandas* (reducing its explanation to a few words) consist of the fact that from the beginning of the night, all kinds of people, men, women, married and free, gather in a house or hut; They have their music and dances all night until dawn the next day; There is eating, drinking and drunkenness as well as all kinds of dishonesty without the slightest shame or compunction and this very serious disorder, which is seen as irremediable, is common throughout the diocese, as can be seen in the responses of several priests.

For this they take the pretext of collecting alms from them to cover the expenses of their festivals; but since the object is their incest, dishonesty and drunkenness, they also take advantage of other reasons, such as the fact that there is someone dead, which they call a wake, or that a marriage is contracted, or that there is some plaintiff who carries an image, because in the wakes of the deceased there are

zarabandas very frequently. Although there is no school, there is no lack for the four children who have to be raised and educated for the choir. (Cortés and Larras, 1958: 251)

The story allows us to infer the current use of the concept of wake to identify the night vigil after the death of a person, as a prerequisite for the day of their burial. This description specifically refers to the custom in alternating groups of accompanying the mourners in an animated attitude, which the cited author probably exaggerates to the point of comparing it to a sarabande with its pertinent effects.

Properly understanding this testimony helps us to infer the popular customs that have survived to this day around the wakes, such as the presence of jokes and animated stories of those called by the people as "Colorados" because of the blushing they produce in some people address sexual issues and intimate life situations.

At many wakes, the presence of musical groups is still customary to accompany the prayers that take place in private homes and churches. These sacred musical groups should not be confused with others that are formed at wakes with guitars and other musical instruments that accompany popular pieces that are sung especially after having ingested a few sips of alcoholic beverages that are never lacking in these meetings to console the mourners and relatives of the deceased.

It should be noted that at some wakes there are also musical groups that perform popular music to accompany the wake, especially if the deceased was from the philharmonic union. Sometimes they are hired by mourners to serenade the deceased, or simply accompany the candle and the funeral. In cases of public officials and ecclesial dignities, there are municipal bands that accompany wakes and burials, performing funeral marches, which is a widespread custom in our country.

Children's funeral ceremonies as a special variant of cultural and popular manifestations

The death of a child generated special funeral ceremony derived from the belief that a child's innocence exonerates him from sin and therefore, they gain direct access to Eternal Glory. This dogma has as its direct patron of this eventuality the Blessed Virgin who receives the souls of deceased children directly into her bosom.

This belief is materialized in a funerary altarpiece dating from the 17th century, currently found in the museum of the Church of La Merced in Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, where the Virgin of Mercy directly receives the soul of a child deceased while his parents kneeling accept the Divine will in a resigned manner ².

² The data about this popular belief can be expanded by reading the document presented by Fernando Urquizú. (2008). "*La participación infantil en las manifestaciones religiosas populares.*" La tradición Popular No. 179. Guatemala. Centro de Estudios Folklóricos, University of San Carlos de Guatemala.

The acceptance and dissemination of this dogma by society since the consolidation of Hispanic culture in the environment determined special customs around the death of a child who was believed to have added another little angel to the heavenly legions, a belief that may be treated in some visitors who came to Guatemala in the 19th century and who interpreted their vision of this fact under the influence of the Enlightenment, such as the traveler Artur Morelet who left the following story duly titled, cited by Paulo de Carvalho-Neto :

Angelito's burial

The practice of making burials in churches was abolished in 1831 by a decree of the Legislature. This allowed the hospital cemetery to be used and prohibited burials elsewhere. This cemetery is surrounded by high walls, which, as in Spain, also serve for burials. They are built in open compartments inside, in which the coffin is placed, and then they are closed. Outside, arranged in appropriate places, are diamonds painted black for inscriptions, so that the wall resembles an exhibition of innumerable packets of playing cards. After ten years, the poor people's niches are vacated and used to receive new occupants. The bones are piled up in the shape of pyramids one in each corner of the cemetery.

One day, while I was in the vicinity of the cemetery, I heard happy and lively music from a distance as if it were a party. It came from a group of young people carrying

between them a litter, covered with flowers. Every face had an expression of joy and everyone entered the cemetery with soft steps as if they were going to a wedding. Surprised by the spectacle of a group like this in a place that has little to do with joy, I instinctively followed them, until they stopped at the edge of a deep grave of these that remain open waiting for the corpse. I approached and asked one of them what was the reason for such a happy meeting. "We are burying a creature," was his simple answer. He looked at me with a surprised face as if said "What is this question about?" The explanation reminded me of an incident from my Hispanic experiences which, with the reader's forgiveness, I will now relate. (Carvalho-Neto, 1981: 28 and 29)

It is interesting to note that burials in churches had already been prohibited in 1831, an eventuality that implies the nationalization of part of the funeral



Picture 03



Picture 3A

Altar of a deceased child in the arms of a sculpture of the Blessed Virgin and altar of a deceased child in the arms of the sculpture of an angel that symbolically leads him to the arms of the Blessed Virgin. (Temporary exhibition poster of the now-defunct Fray Francisco Vázquez museum, Guatemala, 2004. Picture: Various Authors. La Antigua Guatemala. J.J. Yas J. D. Noriega 1880-1960. La Azotea, Editorial Picture of Latin America. CIRMA Pictures. Antigua Guatemala-Argentina, 1990. p. 48.)

ceremonies by the State. The story, when related to photographs with images of children's altars of the deceased, brings us directly closer to the popular traditions around this particular topic and broadens our focus of knowledge.

This prohibition also gives us interesting clues that we can relate to the construction of special carriages to carry the bodies of the deceased to a place more distant from the churches of the Nueva Guatemala of the Asunción, because the cemetery was at

a more considerable distance, changing the way of carrying the deceased to their burial on shoulders in a small funeral procession to accompanying the event in carriages, naturally this procedure was appropriate for the people who could pay for the new service related to funeral services.

The funeral ceremonies in the Nueva Guatemala of the Asunción in the mid-19th century

The following reference regarding the topic that concerns us now was taken from the book *Tiempo Viejo, recuerdos de mi juventud*, by the writer Ramón A. Salazar who around 1896 recalls in his work the customs that he lived in his childhood and young years during the conservative government leaving a valuable testimony about the organization and development of funeral ceremonies in the now Republic of Guatemala. In the abstract of chapter XI. We can extract the following topics: -The clothing and veiling of the deceased. - Panegyric of the present body. - The florin. - The usefulness of nuns. - The raffle of souls. (Salazar, 1957: 49 to 51).

In this part of his work, he refers to the hiring for wakes, in the middle of the 19th century, of a body of mourners and praying women dedicated to dressing the dead, as well as in charge of crying and remembering the virtues at the wake of the deceased from the house that had hired them, whom they almost always never met. This body of ladies was led by the best character and more eloquent for the

office that extended over the nine days of the novena for the dead.

Once this mission was completed, they visited the relatives of the deceased to collect chicken eggs and take them to the nuns so that they could pray for the deceased. The quota of thirty-three eggs formed one florin and in these proportions the prayers they sought were performed. food for the nuns and mourners.

The raffle of souls consisted of giving alms and participating in a raffle that was held in the month of November in the church of San Sebastián, leaving the names of the deceased faithful written on paper that were placed in an urn on the agreed day. A priest extracted the name of the winner who was automatically freed from purgatory while the other names of the participants were distributed among the attendees so that they could pray for their souls. It is interesting to analyze that by the year in which Salazar's work was published, 1896, as he declared in his work, customs had already changed as a product of the advance of liberal culture, especially in the Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, which also absorbed the product changes of the industrial revolution.

Funeral ceremonies in the first four decades of the 20th century

The Liberal Reform of 1871 brought about an expansion of the power groups that dominate the economic structure of the

country that determined a substantial change in the social functions of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, which went from being the main reproductive entity of the social system of life to a mediating entity between the different social groups in the country, separate from the State.

This transition took about twenty years in which its property and officials were fiercely attacked, a process in which a large part of the traditions it had developed were lost. This process included a ban on manifestations of external worship due to the threat they posed of becoming manifestations hostile to the established regime.

These measures profoundly affected the popular demonstrations around the dead and the funeral ceremonies because customs became detached from the traditions described above due to the advance of liberal ideology especially in



Funerary photograph dated 1898, which replaces the use of the so-called funerary portraits where we can see a deceased prepared for his wake, note the presence in the background of two of the four so-called "pound" candles ready to be light up, as well as the use of a Christ of Animas presiding over the altar. (Anonymous picture).

urban centers. However, this process did not happen suddenly, elements typical of the development of technology and science were gradually incorporated, such as what we can see in the following picture that replaces the use of a funerary painting in which we can appreciate the body of a deceased person prepared for the wake that was not placed in a box for burial, but rather lying in his bed.

Capitalist development and the reduction of funeral ceremonies

In the 1930s, the first city colonies began to be founded with houses built in series, an event that determined the reduction of spaces in houses in an increasingly growing population. In this context, the revolutionary process, which formally began on October 20, 1944, expanded access to more people to this type of construction, an event that raised the need to create new services such as chapels of vigil to satisfy a social need that began to profoundly alter the traditions related to the deceased.

On March 28, 1953, a coffin sales room called: "Funerales Mancilla" appeared, which opened its viewing chapels on February 1, 1961. This was the first company to make a vehicle available to its clientele funeral car brought especially for this business from the United States. (www.funeralesmancilla.com)

The social hierarchy of this type of services made this type of business spread,

increasingly, with more sophisticated premises, which currently have ample parking for the comfort of the mourners and meals typical of a standardized reception are offered during the wake, contributing in this fundamental way to the transformation of the meaning of funeral ceremonies that reflect in their facilities and forms of behavior the social organization of capitalism.

These modern funeral homes also have the provision of various services including sending flowers, condolence notes, purchasing services. among others, which can be done and consulted by entering the words funeral services in Guatemala from any Internet search engine on a computer.

The search for data about funeral customs through information technology in our country can lead us to all kinds of news, from the cost of a clandestine funeral service to the organization of the most sophisticated wake, repatriating or importing the body from any part of the world.

However, no page offers a historiographic discourse like the one we have exposed, whose traces we can still observe in the old city neighborhoods of the urban centers of the country, somewhat less diluted in the rural environment, refusing to disappear or transform.

The correct interpretation of these elements helps us understand the presence of religious groups singing in the most

elegant wake chapels, board games to speed up the passage of time, telling jokes to liven up the night, the presence of contraband liquor where its consumption is not permitted, and musical groups on the journey to the cemetery or the serenade in the cemetery in a different amalgamation in each region of the country that reflects the social status of the deceased and his mourners, that gives identity to our customs different from those of other parts of the world and that is hap refused to disappear in the face of the advance of global culture proposed by capitalism.

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