Chapter 8
Death and Grief in Mexican Families

Rosario Esteinou

Introduction

Death and grief together comprise a social and cultural phenomenon of great importance in Mexico. The death of a parent, child, or a close family member involves complex rituals, religious and traditional beliefs, and both community and personal resources which support the process of grieving and the integration of grief. In the following chapter, I will present an overview of how this phenomenon is experienced by many Mexican families, particularly those of low socioeconomic status.

The Macro System

Mexican society has a long history that stretches back to pre-Hispanic times, when numerous indigenous groups populated the area of Mesoamerica (located in the central and southern area of the country). These groups featured deeply held beliefs and practices regarding death, "death alive" (that is, dead individuals who are thought of having a role in the lives of close people, as if they were alive), services for the dead, and the veneration of the ancestors (Bonilla, 2002; Cortés, Oliver, Rodríguez, Sierra, & Villanueva, 1987). Even today, anguish toward dying, the fear of death alive, the cult of the dead, and the veneration of ancestors cause some people anxiety and the need for catharsis. It has even become a Totemic issue, according to Lomnitz (2006); that is, something that calls for veneration.

R. Esteinou (✉)
Center for Research and Higher, Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS),
Mexico City, Mexico
e-mail: esteinou@ciesas.edu.mx

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Many studies have demonstrated that the cult of the dead, which archeological evidence indicates has been present in the region from the early archaeological phase up to the village phase, is an important and substantial aspect of the constitution and function of the ideology of the group (Durkheim, 1968). In the case of the Mesoamerican culture, Ochoa (1974) has pointed out that—according to the archeological findings—in the preclasic period, between 1800 and 1300 (before Christ), some Mesoamerican social groups developed rituals (such as collective offerings of objects) and beliefs about burying their dead, starting with this a cult of death related with the development of certain forms of religion. In other words, these findings revealed that these Mesoamerican social groups started to develop certain views regarding the ways the deceased were going to be buried, what happened with them after death, what was their connection with the ones who stayed alive, and the strong belief that life extended beyond death as an answer for the meaning of life. The answers to these philosophical questions appeared in certain forms of religion, resulting in specific rituals and the cult of death (Barba de Piña, 1956; Bowker, 1991; Matos Moctezuma, 1971; Ochoa, 1974; Piña Chan, 1967). The main influence of this line of thought is found in the beliefs that life continues after death and that dead have a role within the living relatives and the community; that is, there is a fluent connection between these two worlds.

In Mexican indigenous culture, for example, death ideology formed the substrate for a complex array of practices that manifested in daily life, social organization, and relationships with other groups. Death ideology was reflected in sculpture, architecture, ceramics, poetry, music, and above all, in religious thinking. Religion, death, and the dead formed a unique relationship. Cosmogony, or a shared worldview, was understood to be closely linked to the type and condition of death. For example, different types of deaths yielded specific consequences that dictated the rituals to be followed. Since death bestowed, in certain conditions (for example, when due to war), status and prestige, the cult of the dead, the service or rituals devoted to it, and the attendant offering (objects used in the service in order to give peace to the soul or to support the journey of the deceased) developed as such fundamental aspects of this culture that it devoted special annual events to recognize its dead (Matos Moctezuma, 1971; Ochoa, 1974).

The early Mesoamerican rituals and traditions about death became intermingled with Catholic teachings introduced by the Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century, and although there were significant differences among them, there were some aspects that were similar (Camacho & Jurado, 1995; Ruz, 2003). In the Catholic tradition, death does not mean the extinction of life. Rather, it is the process, the possible spiritual transmutation, to a better or worse life. Heaven is for good souls, purgatory is for those who have "something to pay," and hell is for those who have not achieved the divine pardon. The concept of death is linked to the concept of a soul, which is perceived as a reality, a fact. Per this tradition, both the living and the dead have to wait for final judgment announced by Jesus Christ.

In the indigenous tradition, death is also a segue into another world. But according to Ochoa (1974), there's a significant difference between the two traditions regarding life after death. While in the Catholic tradition the final judge will define where a soul goes (heaven, purgatory, limbo, or hell), the indigenous tradition teaches that the soul

goes to a supra-world, where there is an abundance of everything that is lacking in the earthly world. Family members and friends help the soul get to this world by offering food, clothes, and other resources. Although this difference between the two traditions persists today, over the last four centuries there has been a process of syncretism (Ruz, 2003). Even though there is not a stark difference between social groups, we can observe today that middle and upper class families tend to follow the standard Western Catholic rituals regarding the dead and are thus less inclined to follow the indigenous traditions. The indigenous conceptions of death, life after death, and all the related rituals and beliefs normally appearing in social and individual behavior today appear to be more prominent among indigenous groups, peasants, and urban, low-income groups, along with, however, some important elements of the Catholic religion. So, as we will see, we can find today in these groups many of the rituals and traditions coming from the indigenous cultures as well as rituals symbols and objects coming from the Catholic religion. The Guadalupe Virgin is our brown color Mexican Virgin, a culture national symbol, representing in itself a symbol of these syncretic forms: a Virgin who doesn't have western features but rather indigenous; a Catholic Virgin who is asked for protection and for miracles and is widely venerated by low-income groups. Her picture is almost always present as an object in the shrine for the dead, and so, for that matter, is the Catholic cross. Further, most of the prayers made during the services are also Catholic. Here lie important manifestations of the syncretism that has evolved across centuries, demonstrating an absence of contradiction between these two traditions, at least from the individual experience perspective.

The Meso System

There is a strong tradition around death that continued through the centuries, not only among indigenous people, but also among mestizo (mixed ancestry) groups, urban low-income groups and other substantial proportions of the Mexican population. This tradition manifested in Día de Muertos, a national festival devoted to venerating the dead that runs from October 31 through November 2. During this festival occur important rituals in which family members, friends, and people from the community participate (Cortés et al., 1987; Ríos, Ramírez, & Suárez, 1995; Vázquez, 2013). The most famous is held in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. Another important celebration is in Mixquic, near Mexico city. But there are celebrations all over the country and they are so important that November 2nd is considered a national feast recognized by the state.

The concept of death transcends human and worldly extinction; that is, in both aforementioned traditions, there is a certainty about immortality. Death is perceived as a transmutation, a change, and an inevitable process that leads from a physical state to another, superior, state of being. In both worldviews, while dying may seem tragic, life *after* death does not.

One of the differences between the two traditions is that the Spanish Catholic tradition ties immortality to the concept of deity and to the idea of sanctity and salvation, whereas the traditional indigenous cultural beliefs do not.

When a member of the community dies, people of the neighborhood offer to help to serve the family of the dead: women spend time grieving with the members of the family, they help clean the house, prepare the food, care for the children, and organize the wake. Men, on the other hand, organize themselves into the *fajina* (a kind of collective work group) to dig the tomb and bury the body, performing all this work as an act of solidarity (Flores, 2012; Ochoa, 1974; Vásquez, 2002).

The body is washed and dressed in clean clothes, and utensils and food are offered inside the shrine. After holding a solemn wake, drinks and food are served to everyone. The body is placed in a coffin chosen according to the economic resources of the grieving family, then brought to a church accompanied by a large group of mourners. A mass is performed, aimed at bringing tranquility to the soul of the deceased, and prayers are offered. The body is then buried in the cemetery that surrounds the church and an arrangement of flowers is emplaced to distinguish the tomb (Ochoa, 1974).

Over the next month, the tomb will receive flowers and special care. In the house of the deceased, a lime-colored cross is put in the place where the deceased died, and the area is lit with a blessed candle in honor of the decedent's soul. The candle is removed after 9 days of prayers. Afterward, the deceased still has rights which demand a candle and a special offering every year in the domestic shrine (Ochoa, 1974).

Close family members and friends remain in the house during the preparation of the body, the arrangements for the service, and the first prayers. The personal belongings of the deceased are given to other members of the community or they are inherited by close relatives according to the family rules. Rarely, they may be destroyed. Usually, however, close family members avoid using the personal belongings of the deceased as a first option.

The tomb of the deceased will receive flower offerings during the entire year, at least once a week, which are especially abundant in September, November, the day of the remembrance of the death, and the day of the saint's death: there is a custom that each individual's name is acquired according to a saint, who will protect the person through life, and each year the date of the celebration of the saint is celebrated by the individual (Ochoa, 1974).

It is especially important to point out that, in this tradition, mourners recognize that the deceased is still in a relationship with the family. He or she continues to be psychologically present in their daily lives. For 3–7 years, the offering in the domestic shrine will have a special place in the home. A more recently deceased person is remembered more frequently. And as a result, the family will honor him or her, offering personal objects and food that he or she especially enjoyed (Ochoa, 1974).

The deceased now becomes a "death alive"—a supernatural protector, a vigilant soul that demands seriousness and good behavior. The deceased judges, advises, and serves as an intermediary and has the power to punish or reward. In sum, the person who died now mediates the behavior of his or her family. This is a strong belief held in the rituals of the community (Ochoa, 1974; Pérez Castro & Castillo, 2007).

There is an important event in the funerary service, one upon which the afterlife of the deceased is seen to depend, performed at the moment of placing the body in the coffin. The family places some water, a humid cloth, salt, pepper, seeds, sandals

or shoes, clean clothes, and coins that will be used in a journey through the desert, mountains, and swamps in the coffin to accompany the deceased relative. The water will calm the deceased's thirst and the salt prevents the rotting of flesh before he or she arrives at the final destination. The sandals or shoes are necessary for the long and thorny roads. The coins are for "the dog," a mythical black creature that helps the soul cross the river of seven arms; the candles, lighted during the 9 days of prayer, will light the way traversed by the soul (Ochoa, 1974).

A soul that is abandoned in this journey and that does not receive help from his or her close family is condemned to return to the town or place where he/she used to live, to suffer, and may cause damage or harm to surviving relatives. Often, this motivates grieving relatives to serve their deceased ones well, pleasing them and giving them part of their possessions. Should the dead be displeased, the living might live in fear of future punishment. When children die, their souls are treated as little angels. Babies and children who die are dressed up in tunics or as saints and are buried following a more modest ceremony (Ochoa, 1974).

Día de los Muertos, the nationwide celebration of the dead, begins on the 31st of October and continues until the 2nd of November. During these 3 days, communities, friends, and families commemorate and honor their dead. The prescribed rituals are very important during this time. Grievers devote a great deal of time to arranging domestic shrines during the last week of October. Shrines are cleaned to make the souls of the dead happy. The shrines are made from tables or empty boxes covered by paper, over which part of the offerings and some images are put. The table is placed near a wall and is ornamented with colored paper. The floor is also decorated, and this is where grievers place offerings such as candles and food. Theoretically, for each dead member of the family, a candle is put in the shrine. Offerings are made to grandparents, parents, children, siblings, and other relatives, so some shrines will contain many candles. In all of them, *frankincense o copal* is burned to perfume the spirit of the dead. Dead children are offered colorful objects and food because color is their glory (Ochoa, 1974).

The gift of food consists of offerings of *tamales* (corn dough stuffed with meat), oranges, sugar cane, bananas, different kinds of the so-called *dead bread*, salt, water, candies, corn, *atole* (a special beverage), squash, hawthorn fruit, lemons, sugar, chocolate, *mole* (a paste made of chili), and various types of fruit and vegetables. For adults, alcoholic beverages, such as *pulque*, tequila, and rum, are offered, as well as herbs and ceramic objects representing animals. Children are offered toys. Flowers and candles constitute the main part of the act (Ochoa, 1974).

According to Ochoa (1974), the objective of the offering, besides pleasing the dead, is to fulfill a responsibility to his or her memory. It is believed that the deceased relative visits the home and likes to enjoy the food he or she enjoyed when alive. The visitor, as a spirit, can only smell the aroma of the offering and is satisfied by it, since it is thought that souls are made of wind and clouds, without teeth or palate, without eyes and hair. In this case, souls are an active part of domestic life. Grievers work all year to actively remember their dead. Meanwhile, the dead, if they are pleased by their relatives or friends, can intercede and help whomever needs it, in case of illness or economic difficulties, family, or work problems.

Although death and grief rituals have been gradually losing their meaning in some communities in Mexico, these traditions and rituals still exhibit a strong presence in others, especially among indigenous, peasant, and urban low-income groups. These rituals facilitate the sharing of feelings, communal grieving and praying, and remembering the dead. These shared activities help mourners to process their losses.

The Micro System

Long-standing rituals, like the ones described above, play a crucial social function, as Durkheim (1968) pointed out decades ago, in easing the grief after the death of a close family member. There are specific steps to the vigil ritual, the wake, and the way in which the family and community members keep or remake certain group mental states, as they try to process their grief.

Pérez Castro and Castillo (2007) present a case in which this process can be observed in the *Huasteca* area (located in the state of Veracruz, on the central east coast). A couple, Teresa Gómez and Pedro Torres, and their son, Juan Torres, died in a car accident on the highway, on the way to buy items for the National Celebration of February 5th. They were *mestizos,* i.e. Mexican-Spanish blended, and their family and community followed many of the traditional indigenous rituals. Family and community members said they had premonitions about the crash, revealing the popular belief that death is often intimated and foreboded. This can occur through a vision of the person who is going to die, a dream about that person dressed in white or getting married (believed to be indicative of imminent death), or dreams about sweeping the floor or killing a pig or cow. Members of the community reported that Teresa dreamed about a lot of meat, an assumed presentiment about her own impending death. Other types of premonitions include special characters such as Jesus Christ or *La Llorona*, a crying woman who wanders the streets moaning. Even animals are thought in some cases to predict the death of someone, like the chant of an owl, dogs barking, or coyotes crying.

In this tragic case, Pedro crashed into a large truck, and all three family members died instantly. Mexican culture distinguishes between a good death and a bad death, and the family and community reckoned this a bad death because it was sudden and violent. Thus, the logic goes, their spirits remained tethered to the place where the accident occurred since death took them by surprise, and because of this their spirits were not prepared to die. The location of this tragedy is marked with three crosses, and flowers will be placed there continuously. Mysterious occurrences are reported by visitors at the site of their deaths, such as the sounds of branches snapping, or moans being heard. Because their spirits did not die in peace, to avoid harm from them, a courandero or healer was needed to protect the community from these possibly harmful spirits. The courandero took some earth from the place and took it to their home where family and friends would be holding the wake or vigil. He also sprinkled blessed water on the place, and the three crosses were then erected. This ritual was intended to reunite the spirits with their bodies, since otherwise they

would wander angry and resentful, and could cause harm to others. Once the spirits and bodies are reunited, the belief is that they would become protectors of family members and friends.

All three bodies were taken to Pedro's house and a series of rituals were performed that prepared the bodies and helped relatives grieve. The closest relatives washed the bodies according to the tradition, they were dressed with new clothes, and inside the coffins a bed and a pillow, made of perfumed leaves, were made for their final rest. Teresa was dressed in her wedding veil, Pedro in his work clothes, and Juan with a pair of little wings and a crown. Teresa and Pedro's coffins included some of the things they liked most. A bag with water, some food, and seven coins for the journey were placed in Pedro's coffin. Teresa's coffin didn't include money, but did include a dish, cup and needle, representing her daily chores. Both coffins held a little boat to cross the sea. Juan's body is prepared in a similar way but with some notable differences. The three bodies bore crosses and a blessed palm leaf, and each person's hands were clasped together.

The people of the town all knew about the accident and the deaths. The bells of the church rang. The whole town attended the burial not only to accompany the family of the deceased but also to support them with produce and work. Women prepared food, rice, chicken, *mole*, coffee, and cookies; men were in charge of killing the chickens and pigs. As one man said, "All of the town cooperates because people here do not abandon the dead" (Pérez Castro & Castillo, 2007, p. 87). All unite before death, each one gets closer to the other, and they support each other because when an individual dies, not only the family group but also the community itself is diminished. To rest indifferent before the grief of other members of the community would be to forget that the deceased are also part of it. Assistance and cooperation are seen as acts of reciprocity, necessary because of the fragile economic situation of the people.

During the burial, prayers were offered in order to defend the spirits of the other world and help them to find peace in the afterworld. Four people who are devoted to prayers in the town were called. Each prayed for some time until tired and was thereupon replaced by another person, a relay that continued throughout the burial. The prayers for the dead included the five mysteries, the litanies, and praises to God used in Catholic ritual. The attendants at the service listened and by all accounts felt the prayers deeply. Death hurts, and when people suffer tragic and unexpected deaths, like these, they say that the spirit can reach them. In moments of tremendous vulnerability, there seems a force beyond this world that helps them.

Those in charge of the prayers are experts in awakening others' emotions, and they recognize the importance of weeping in the mourning process. Mourning which is suppressed is believed to affect the body, manifesting in headaches and gastrointestinal distress. When a person feels sadness over the death of another person, they will cry for 9 days, as it is thought to take 9 days of prayers in order to begin the healing process when a loved one dies. The prayer leader in this case was understood by the community to be a "guarantor"; that is, a person who can help defend the soul, asking the Lord for forgiveness and advocating for the spirit.

As Juan was a little boy, an angel according to custom, praises were prayed for him, and the vigil was held only during daylight. Mysteries were prayed for the adults, Teresa and Pedro, because their souls are seen as less "heavy" than those of their elders, and the praises weren't as sad for that same reason. The belief is that older people have more sins to carry and children, having a short path in life, are without these heavy sins.

Both praying and crying can help individuals to become closer to each other and to their community, connecting them in a stronger bond, and allowing them a means through which they can communicate their sadness. It is a communion of consciences that enhances the social vitality of these communities.

All these beliefs, traditions, rituals, and practices are structured in such a way that they start preparing the grieving relatives, friends, and community members to process the death of one of its members. Keeping vigil over the body is a special way of maintaining the social balance while dealing with the departure of the dead, the attendant necessary restructuring of daily life, and the emotional turmoil of loss and mourning leading to eventual acceptance of death. In fact, as Durkheim (1968) has pointed out, keeping the vigil is a response to the impression of weakness the group feels when it loses one of its members. The sequence followed in the ritual purports to allow the grievers to go from one affective state to another; from surprise they transit to pain, and through the grief over the loss emerges a tranquility that derives from a sense of social solidarity.

Pérez Castro and Castillo (2007) note that the vigil can be seen as a set of actions intended to regulate and develop friendly relationships between those who are alive and those who are dead. Following a period of grief and anguish caused by death, the grieving relatives arrive at a state of confidence and security. From the pain of the loss they pass through a state in which feelings of mistrust and insecurity toward the dead emerge, because they believe that the dead also have mixed feelings of sadness, anger, and cruelty. The liberated soul detaches itself from those feelings of love toward their living relatives to become a potentially harmful entity. Such transformation, however, is transitory, since once the funerary rituals have taken place, the dead becomes once again a caring entity who will support the family with the powers acquired due to its new condition. The fear inspired by the dead during the vigil changes into feelings of tenderness and solidarity, as it is believed the dead become protectors. The resulting tranquility indicates that the process can be described as a purifying ritual. The funerary ritual, in sum, is a necessary act whose social function is to restore social balance.

Some Contemporary Experiences Regarding Death and Grief

In this section, I present information from experiences gathered through in-depth interviews with two family members with indigenous backgrounds from low socioeconomic strata, in order to show more deeply how these traditional rituals still play an important role in processing death and grief today. I concentrate on this social

group because it constitutes the majority of the Mexican population. However, it is important to point out that middle and upper socioeconomic groups in Mexico usually follow different paths in processing death and grief, paths more similar to practices in Western contemporary cultures.

The first experience comes from Juana, a 36-year-old domestic worker, who lives in Mexico City but was born in a dairy in San Francisco Jaltepetongo, Oaxaca, in the southwest of the country where Juana's parents and part of her family still live. She had a brother, Antonio, and a sister, Maria, who both died. Antonio died of pneumonia while in his twenties about 20 years ago while working as a cook in Los Angeles. He was the fourth of eight children in the family. Maria was 48 when she died 14 years ago, of what her family believes was cancer. Married with six children, she was the oldest child of the family and suffered a great deal when she became sick. It began with some marks and spots near one of her eyes, and on her cheek, and with pain in her arms. The physicians could not offer a diagnosis, so the family took her to a traditional healer, a courandero, and he said someone had made a spell on her or wished her harm, according to traditional belief.

Before Antonio and Maria died, there were premonitions of their death, including dreams of a vibrating eye, of a tooth that came out, of a woman dressed as a bride, and of cloudy water.

When Antonio died, the family was not able to follow all the rituals because the body took 15 days to arrive home from the United States, by which time it was badly decomposed.

Conversely, when Maria died, they were able to follow all the traditions and rituals. First, a member of the family went to the *biscal*, a local authority of the church with specific functions, and to the local authorities to give notice of the death. The *biscal* sounded the bells of the church to communicate the news to all the people of the town while the family looked for a *rezador*, a man of the community in charge of praying. At the same time, other members of the family started preparing the body and bought items necessary for the vigil. They washed and dressed Maria's body in her best clothes, and put her in front of the home shrine, on the floor, over a mat made out of palm. They bought food (beans, corn, eggs, coffee, and rice) and started to cook the post-vigil meal. Meat is not consumed during the wake meal because it would symbolically represent eating the dead person. They bought candles and flowers and decorated the place where she was lying in the house.

The wake started at night according to custom, about 11 o'clock, when the native and local authorities came. Before that the *rezador* (the pray-er) began saying prayers with the members of the family and community who were gathered in the house. He also preached a sermon so sad that some attendees began to cry. At about 11 o'clock the municipality president, the *cabildo*, the *regidor*, the *sindico*[1], the minister, and two or three additional authorities arrived. The person with the lowest rank, the minister, brought their *facultades* (traditional sticks with ribbons carried

[1] Cannot be translated into English because these are specific kinds of authorities of the indigenous traditional groups.

only by the authorities) tied in a roll, and he gave one to each authority. The authorities brought a *rezador* (pray-er) and a *parangonero* (orator or speaker), and the family also had a *parangonero*. Family and community members had previously made the mortise (a white tunic used to dress the deceased), as well as the rosary, the *cíngulo* (belt), and the sandals made out of palm, and now put them in a tray. Five *comadres* or godmothers (godfathers, when the deceased is male) were chosen to dress Maria, and would serve as the godmothers of the cross they took to the cemetery. These roles all find their place in an indigenous framework of positions that depend on kinship and ranks in the community: people in charge of the cross, of cleaning the body, of dressing the deceased, of praying, and other rituals.

The authorities' *parangonero* presented himself and the authorities who were with him, and announced that they were there to share the loss, noting that it is also a loss for the community. He emphasized Maria's value to the community and the family. The family's *parangonero* thanked the attendees for being there, and spoke for a considerable period of time. When the speeches ended, the tray with the mortise and other objects was blessed and the *comadres* took the tray and asked for permission to dress Maria. They also asked Maria for her permission to dress her, otherwise, the logic goes, and she might not have let them do it, making herself rigid. While they dressed her, the *rezadores* and all the attendees prayed, sang, and cried. After this ritual was finished, the members of the family served the meal to the attendees, after which they continued to pray, sing, and cry until about 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning.

The next day, prayers started at about 7 o'clock in the morning and there were fewer attendees because of the need by many to attend to their daily work. Before the burial took place, the family fed lunch to all of the attendees, and then a last rosary was prayed and they all sang for Maria.

The burial started at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. This is usually the time when people are buried, because it is believed that the deceased experience this time of day as daylight and, as a result, can see the way to the cemetery. It is also a convenient time because most people have finished their work in the fields and households, and therefore they can attend the burial. As they took the body outside the house, a lime cross was made on the floor where the body had been lying. Maria's body, rolled in a palm rug, was carried out by her family members (only recently have coffins begun to be used to transport bodies) and taken first from the house to the church, with praying and singing along the way. At the church, a rosary was prayed and a mass was delivered on her behalf. (Some families cannot afford the mass because it often costs a fee.) A ceremony was also performed in which Maria's husband returned his groom's bouquet (*suchitl*), meaning that his role as a husband was fulfilled and his engagement concluded, and now he was free to enter into another relationship. He also formally declared his last farewell to Maria. The *biscal* (the father in charge of the church) communicated to the family the place where Maria could be buried, and the burial procession continued to the cemetery.

Earlier in the day, a member of the family had measured Maria's body with a reed in order to determine the size of her grave, which was then dug the same day by men close to the family. When the procession arrived more prayers were delivered and Maria's body was interred. The attendees then proceeded to the family's home where they would share a meal.

For the next 9 days, the *novenario* (the Catholic ritual consisting of praying the rosary and other prayers, asking forgiveness for Maria) were delivered by *rezadores,* family, friends, and community members. After eating, the mourners talked, seeking to comfort one another. Special *comadres*, or godmothers, are assigned to different aspects and objects that have significance during the rituals, and so for example, *comadres* were responsible for replacing certain candles, the function of which was to light Maria's way into the other world.

The powdered lime cross on the floor was decorated during this period with flowers, sand, food grains, and special colors, thus creating a shrine. On the last day of the ceremonies, family, friends, and community members brought sets of poplar leaves arranged as crowns, and put them on the walls in the shrine room. The godmothers began removing the lime cross and all the decorations nearby, putting them in a sack and burying the sack in the tomb, near Maria's body. While the powdered lime cross was being removed, the *comadres* brought in a new one which they blessed. This new cross, which can be made of wood or another material, had Maria's name and dates of birth and death, and it was taken to the tomb. Later, everyone returned to the house where the family once again prepared a large meal for the *comadres*, their husbands, and other attendees. This time, meat was allowed and was offered as a sign of gratitude. From this point on, Maria and Antonio are honored and remembered annually at the death festivity, following the rituals and customs described in previous sections.

These traditions served to help process the grief and heal the pain. But the deaths proved particularly difficult for some members of the family. The siblings' deaths were very stressful for Juana's mother, especially that of her son, Antonio, because he was in the United States and had died alone. She experienced deep regret for not being there during his illness, as a result of which she denied her belief in God. In addition, she felt angry because her son had been planning to return to Mexico soon to participate in the performance of an important role in one of the religious festivities of the town. Her family and friends talked with her, telling her that she should accept his death, that this was the will of God, that crying was not good after the 9 days of praying. Doing so, it was asserted, would preclude Antonio from finding peace. While from the outside, all the prompting from others seemed to move her along in her grief, she actually became more angry and bitter, and she scolded her children more. To make matters worse, Antonio's father started to drink more than usual. As difficult and painful as this experience was, they report some relief every year when they go to the tomb and talk to their son. Juana was 12 years old at the time of Antonio's death and does not recall suffering much because, she explained, she wasn't very conscious of the implications.

Juana also told me about the death of her uncle, who lived in Mexico City. The family took him to a funeral parlor to be embalmed, and then the body was taken to the town where all the rituals and traditions were followed, from the vigil to the burial of the body. Juana said this is very common. The family rented a bus and family members and friends drove to the town. The 9 days of prayers were offered in Mexico City. Her aunt and her children experienced considerable sadness at the uncle's death. They cried a lot at first, but after the nine days of prayers had ended, family and friends told them that it was better for the peace of the deceased not to cry.

Instead, they were told, it was better to talk and remember him. With these rituals and the support of the family and friends, they gradually found their way to acceptance of this death.

The second experience comes from Mario, a 41-year-old security policeman, who lives in Mexico City, also existing on a lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder. Recently, his maternal aunt, Maria, died. She was very sick with stomach cancer, and Mario said, "she was decomposing from the inside to the outside for about a year." She was a very close relative who lived near his home, and he had frequent contact with her. His aunt lived with two grandsons, Carlos and Fernando, since her daughter had moved with her husband to the United States. These two grandsons, and another married granddaughter, Denise, who lived nearby, helped to take care of her at the beginning of her illness and supported her economically. As time passed, it became more difficult to take care of her since one of the grandsons traveled a great deal and the other one worked fulltime.

When the aunt died, Mario's mother had a very difficult time in overcoming her grief, and the entire family suffered and grieved. As conventional tradition dictates, they followed many aspects of the funerary practices and rituals previously described. They put food and bottles of tequila, which she enjoyed while alive, on the offering altar. But they couldn't follow the entire wake ritual because she was decomposing. In fact, the whole process of illness and physical deterioration was a great shock for the family.

Despite these difficulties, the traditional rituals and practices were useful in helping to process the pain and grief and in bringing some peace.

Still, there was peace only up to a certain point. The way individuals overcome death and grief depends a great deal on the emotional relationship the living relatives held with the dead. Likewise, the family environment and the community and professional resources available are fundamental to processing the many feelings related to the loss.

Mario reported that his aunt was a strong figure—the "matriarch," as Mario put it—who held the different members of the family together. However, the family lived with very harsh rules, and family violence was prevalent. His aunt used harsh language, was not nurturing, and frequently physically abused her grandchildren and other members of the family.

While she was dying, she called the grandchildren to talk with her but some of them refused to see her. When she died, the ones who had refused remained resentful and had difficulties in processing her death. The two grandsons who lived with her had a hard time in grieving her death because they experienced ambivalent feelings: both love (she was their grandmother and had raised them, after all) and resentment (she was violent and abusive).

Under these circumstances, the traditional rituals and practices helped, but the memories of their grandmother and the strong feelings associated with them made it difficult to find a state of forgiveness and tranquility, and to make matters worse, they didn't have any other personal, family, community, or professional resources to whom they could turn.

As a result, one of the grandsons, Carlos, started to drink heavily, not returning home at night, and, according to Mario, he is still grieving the death of the grandmother and doesn't know what to do with his life. The family has not been very helpful since all the members grew apart and little contact is maintained between them. Mario has tried to talk to Carlos but to no avail. The other grandson, Fernando, also started to drink heavily and eventually died. Mario said that he was so resentful and sad that he couldn't overcome the death and find his way in life. Although it is not possible to attribute his death to his grandmother's death—and to his response to that death—directly, it certainly was a contributor, as it was for Carlos' behavior.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen that ancient rituals, customs, and beliefs in Mexican society offer strong social and cultural means to process the grief that death causes in close family, friends, and community members. At the macro and meso level, these tools appear as useful and effective means toward that end and may help to bring peace to mourners, while depending on the nature of the relationship (parent to child is particularly difficult) and the cause of death. As one griever said, "We find peace when we follow the tradition because that was what our parents taught us and they are happy to know that we do it." The power of the group is revealed in the involvement of community members supporting the family members, helping in the different activities, talking, crying, and praying. These activities bring a sense of community, of a group, of belonging that help individuals bear the pain and grief. Religious beliefs and traditions are also a powerful cultural force which may help mourners to bear pain and grief. Both Catholic and traditional indigenous belief systems recognize the continuation of life after death. It is a spiritual idea of transcendence which salves, at least in part, the anguish of death. Some people were offered platitudes about their dead relatives being "in a better place," and in communication with the living. However, some, such as Juana's parents, may not have received these well-meaning statements as helpful.

One of the strengths of the Mexican culture's handling of death and grief is the respect and dignity demonstrated by the ceremonies of the vigil and burial of the body. These social elements at the macro and meso level have an important influence on the individual as they help to support the individual and family process of grieving and are very common, especially among the rural population and in low socioeconomic, urban areas. But one important thing we could observe through the interviews is that although these rituals are still strong, there are also other elements, at the individual level, that have to be taken into account, including the actual relationships family members had with the deceased. It seems that if the relationship and the family environment were not satisfactory, as we saw in the case of Carlos and Fernando, grieving and overcoming the loss can be more difficult.

It is further noteworthy that it is rare for relatives of the deceased member to use alternative resources, such as psychological and/or palliative care. Therefore, if individuals cannot find solace in family relationships, rituals, and spiritual beliefs, then sadly, powerful experiences of loneliness and resentment are likely.

In Mexico, traditional rituals still persist and offer tangible help for those grieving. Modernization, globalization, and the dissemination of more secular belief systems seem to be influencing individuals in particular socioeconomic groups. It is likely that in the absence of tradition and social support, new approaches including counseling and other psychological treatments are being developed. The influence of the macro and meso systems is still important and brings fundamental resources for processing grief and pain; but it is also likely that they are losing some ground in a society increasingly globalized and modernized, where the individual has more room, and even can have different and contradicting views regarding the social group. In the traditional views (indigenous or Catholic), the individual experience of death and grieving is regulated mainly by the group view: There is little room for showing individual differences, beyond those allowed by the group. This leaves a gap when these rituals are not adequate for processing the loss, but there are not other available resources to help those who are suffering. Future research needs to assess more comprehensively how much the traditional beliefs and rituals are helping in the grieving and recovery process in the current context; if there are other views about death and grief developing among these groups; and where we need to develop other intervention strategies.

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