



Conference Outline

Zurich, 20th-21st May 2016

The Department of Religious Studies in cooperation with the University Research Priority Program Asia and Europe at the University of Zurich and the European Research Network on Death Rituals

“Deceased and Bereaved! Continuity and Innovation in Death Rituals”

Our conference aims to explore the problem of continuity and innovation in death rituals. On the one hand death rituals have often been explained to be expressions of social stability and continuity in the situation of death. Yet, on the other hand, one might just as well argue that changes and innovations in ritual seem to be a constant phenomenon in the history of religions. Nevertheless, changes in death ritual often refer to traditionalised forms of knowledge and practices and might thus appear more constant than innovative. It is therefore one of the main goals of our conference to explore and understand the reasons and dynamics of continuity and change in death rituals. The conference will specifically focus on the question as to what extent changes, innovations as well as continuity in death rituals reflect their social (and religious) contexts. Two aspects related to the problem of ritual continuity and change will be addressed.

First, we would like to shed light on the diverse processes of negotiation, that might be at play in promoting or preventing changes in death rituals: Change and innovation in death ritual might not only be welcomed but also contested, criticised and refused. Reformers, innovators and “modernisers” of death rituals might likewise criticise or condemn the pertinence and continuity of traditionalised ritual practices. The perception and negotiation of death rituals as “innovative” or “traditional” thus seem to be a crucial factor to either render ritual change and continuity acceptable or intolerable for a given social context. Such processes of negotiation might be linked to questions of authority and power, medicine and hygiene, economic resources, social identity (religion, gender, nationality, community, individuality), etc. Hence, questions we would like to address are the following: how do negotiations of such issues and the respective discourses in the social sphere affect or prevent change in death rituals? Who are the actors and what arguments and strategies are applied to push or prevent ritual change?

Second, apart from being an object of negotiation, reform or preservation, the problem of continuity and innovation in death ritual also arises in regard to their actual practice. Thus, the conference will not only ask for the aspects of death rituals that have changed and those that have not, but it will also focus on the diverse social effects which innovations and continuities of ritual practice might have on the involved communities and agents. Does ritual change have an influence on the understanding of roles and identity? Does a change in ritual correlate with a change in the social structure of the community or do death rituals indeed function as a medium to create social cohesion in and continuity of the community?



The conference aims to focus on different historical, social and geographical settings and contexts. The conference therefore addresses scholars from different scientific backgrounds and disciplines who work on death rituals.

In the conference papers, different areas of interest should be addressed:

Social Context

The social context and the surroundings of rituals are of particular interest. What are the crucial aspects of the social context that lead to changes in rituals? What aspects of the social context are reflected in the rituals? Or is there no evident relation between context and rituals and hence the rituals seem to function irrespective of the social context? What is the relation between the respective social groups/communities and the performed rituals?

Identity

How do innovation and continuity reflect negotiations of identity? What role do issues of gender, nationality, community, individuality, religion, etc. play in the before mentioned processes?

Actors

Another emphasis might be placed on questions with regard to the actors and roles in a death ritual, e.g.: Who are the relevant players and ritual actors? What is the role of gender? Who attains ritual competence and who loses it? How do the actors understand themselves? Who are the addressees of a ritual; the dead, the relatives or others?

Structure and Practice

As we are interested in change and continuity of death rituals, not only their negotiation but also their structure and elements have to be examined. E.g.: Has the handling with death and the dead body changed in the death rituals?

Does the shared experience of emotions lead to a construction of a temporary community within the ritual?

Concepts

What kind of concepts are applied in the rituals, those concerning the here and now or rather concepts concerning the afterlife? Are those concepts objects of negotiation and how are innovation and continuity in death rituals related to them?

Philipp Hetmanczyk, Dorothea Lüddeckens, Lilo Ruther, January, 20th, 2016