Shorter Note

A Comment on 'Funerals as Feasts: Why Are They So Important?'

(Brian Hayden, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 19(1) 2009, 29–52.)

Lisa J. LeCount & John H. Blitz

Brian Hayden asks an interesting anthropological question: why are funerary feasts so lavish? We certainly agree with him that lavish feasts fuel competitive displays of wealth and status, which in turn confer practical benefits such as attracting suitable mates for children of wealthy families and establishing economic ties between already well-connected families. No doubt lavish feasts are worth the cost in resources to host families. But Hayden's answers are too general, and may apply to all competitive feasting events. What is it about funerals in particular that require such blatant displays of wealth? Why do such displays exist in transegalitarian societies that value social equality? We think the answers to these questions are found in the dialectic processes between agents and practices.

Extremely lavish funeral feasts and the drama that surrounds them call for a phenomenological perspective. Hayden does touch on how funerals are ripe venues for the manipulation of emotions that achieve ulterior political motives. But the fact that extremely lavish feasts occurred during funerals points to something fundamentally different about social practices during a life crisis.

Here we are reminded of Victor Turner's seminal work on life-crisis drama. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner (1969, 96–7) suggests that tribal societies are locked in a struggle between two oppositional modalities — communitas and structure — that plays out during rituals. The ethos of an undifferentiated community of equal individuals (communitas) confronts the differentiated and often hierarchical system of social positions (structure). Public rituals, which generally concern all community members, undermine structure in order for the communitas to be revitalized. Funerary rituals, therefore, may act as levelling mechanisms by maintaining 'egalitarian' values that in transegalitarian societies may be strained by aggrandizing families wishing to change the system. Something more is going on here besides the constant generation, circulation and calculation of wealth that is Hayden's emphasis. Although wealthy families may benefit from the aggrandizement of their family member, they are also *required* to host lavish feasts to uphold their tentative social positions. Moral mandates oblige families to expend all available wealth, recall all debts and commemorate their dead to the fullest extent possible.

As the antithesis of structure, funerary feasting can be seen as liminal, the liberation of human cognition from the normative constraints imposed on individuals by society (Turner 1982, 44). However, we argue that people are not liberated from normative constraints during funerals. Instead, it is normal, often expected, that people reaffirm the existing social order in exemplary ways to assuage the chaotic emotions unleashed by a life crisis. Such acts heighten awareness of the fragility of the human condition, remind people what is important about life, help define what it means to be human and lay the ground work for memory and identity with family and community. Without appropriate displays, individuals may be viewed as indifferent, inconsiderate, immoral and possibly inhuman.

Extremely lavish funeral feasts may be deeply embedded in community practice in transegalitarian societies. According to Bentley (1987, 41), the role of habitus in sustaining social hierarchy is most evident in societies where institutionalized mechanisms for reproducing elite domination are lacking. In such societies, domination operates through face-to-face personal relations in which overt displays of indebtedness and subordination must be masked to save community solidarity (also see Sahlins 1972; Schneider 1968).

> Agents lastingly bind each other, not only as parents and children, but also as creditor and debtor, master and *khammes*, only through the dispositions which the group inculcates in them and continuously reinforces which render *unthinkable* practices which would appear as legitimate and even be taken for granted in the disenchanted economy of 'naked self-interest' (Bourdieu 1977, 196).

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In other words, lavish funeral feasts may be the norm, rather than the exception, and are compulsory for wealthy families who see themselves as the standard bearers of cultural values.

This is not to say that extremely lavish funeral feasts do not lend themselves to social and political manoeuvring. But Hayden's emphasis on the strict accounting of wealth displayed at lavish feasts does little to address ideologies of domination and how such practices legitimate claims to elevated positions through the establishment of moral order. The transition from egalitarian to stratified societies requires not only the economic tools with which social differences are materialized, but creation of the ideologies of domination that naturalize them (Van Buren & Richards 2000, 3). The 'socioeconomic promotion' that Hayden sees behind the escalation of feasting at funerals may not be the most potent force for change if these events serve to confirm and reify the ideological basis that define elevated social positions.

Exclusive claims to moral high ground are especially true in complex societies, where wealth takes a supporting, but not limitless, role in the creation of ideologies of domination. Extremely lavish funeral feasts and accompanying mass sacrifices were reserved for leaders, especially chiefs and kings, their close relatives and affines. Opulent kingly funeral feasts were an example of what Houston and colleagues (2006, 6) call 'the problem of the royal body'. The prodigious appetites of royalty are to be expected, since royal bodies were the physical representation of the larger group and their own superhuman desires. Kingly and queenly Egyptian rituals included the most costly objects and performances, but more importantly, the core ideology behind these acts demanded vast investments because royals renewed the forces of nature (O'Connor 2000, 29). The same can be said for the Classic Maya, who believed that the rebirth and resurrection of dead kings personified the ordering of the cosmos. Deities also dined at funerary feasts, and relished a hearty fare of human hands, feet, skulls and eyeballs, and of course, human flesh and hearts offered through sacrifice (Houston *et al.* 2006, 122). Humans did not eat these things, but kingly funerals demanded extreme feasts to placate the gods. These exclusive rituals, as opposed to the inclusive affairs of transegalitarian societies, mark the transition to ranked and stratified societies. The connection between extremely lavish funeral feasts and social agendas may have as much or more to do with defining the moral prerogatives and cosmological mandates of elevated positions as it does with the political opportunities of self-interested agents.

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Response

Brian Hayden

I agree entirely with LeCount and Blitz when they argue that ideology and norms can be important tools for domination, at least to the extent that aggrandizers or elites can convince people to believe and buy into their concepts (an important qualification). I also agree that extremely lavish funeral feasts can be instrumental in the creation or re-enforcement of such ideologies, and that such ideologies in transegalitarian societies often are used to mask the realities of domination (hence the blatantly false platitude expressed in many

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transegalitarian societies that everyone is equal, and there are no particularly rich or powerful individuals).

In fact, one ideological and political aspect that I neglected to emphasize in my original article, but which I have discussed elsewhere (Hayden 2003, 183ff.) is the elevation of the dead ancestors to very powerful supernatural positions (through lavish funeral expenditures) so that the dead can be portrayed as affecting the lives of the living. Thus, lineage leaders can claim that sickness or accidents or poor harvests are due to junior lineage members not providing enough contributions for feasts to honour lineage ancestors, thereby incurring ancestral wrath. Lineage heads can similarly link ancestral disapproval (as interpreted by lineage heads) to many other behaviours that might be in their interest (e.g. marriages, residence, ritual contributions). This can be a very powerful ideology of control and is probably yet another reason why individuals try to make funeral feasts as lavish as possible (i.e. to support claims that the dead have been able to enter higher echelons in the afterworld and have become supernaturally powerful, capable of dispensing both prosperity and retributions to their surviving kin).

As indicated in my previous reply, aggrandizers will try to make these kinds of ideologies and practices community norms or 'moral standards'. But this is not due to some moral imperative, it is because it is in the economic and political self-interests of some individuals to create debt systems, to concentrate power in their own hands, and to obligate others to produce surpluses that can be manipulated.

I differ from LeCount and Blitz in their view of ideology/morals as the main impetus behind cultural changes and practices. LeCount and Blitz's paradigm fails to explain how elite individuals convince other people to buy into such ideologies, especially when: a) the costs involved are high (as with ELFFs); b) other factions may be promoting alternative beliefs; c) the ideologies are not to the benefit of everyone; and d) there are inevitably a hard core of disbelievers. New ideologies and moral propositions and practices are constantly being generated in traditional societies. What makes some of these (like ELFFs) so accepted and widespread? It is clearly not moral superiority, or claims that elites could renew the forces of nature or placate the gods. Such claims may be believed by some of the people some of the time, but it is simply not tenable in my view to argue, for instance, that the Aztecs sacrificed scores of thousands of people every years because of a belief that the sun would not rise without human sacrifices. To argue for such a role of ideology confuses the justification used by elites (or others) to engage in practices of domination with the underlying economic-political power and desire to do so. Of course, elites will always make claims to exclusive possession of the moral high ground, but these will not be accepted by the general populace unless enforced by economic or brute force. If it were otherwise, it would be difficult to account for the well-documented use of force by chiefly and state elites.

Similarly, we differ in viewing morality as the reason for holding of ELFFs. I can only iterate my original observations from ethnoarchaeological experience that not holding as lavish funeral as possible is the equivalent of publicly admitting poverty and impotence — 'social embarassment' if one wishes to euphemize the concept. As also noted in my original reply, people do *not* affirm the social order to assuage internal emotional chaos or from fear of being viewed as indifferent or immoral at funerals, but for their own socio-political self-interests. These are events that are usually planned *years* in advance (well before or after the death of the individual), when any emotional chaos should have become negligible. Without denying the real grief that occurs at the death of family members, I would suggest that LeCount and Blitz's vision of funeral experiences stems more from romantic phenomenology than ethnographic reality.

In sum, I continue to maintain that it is the economic and political self-interests that provide the key to understanding why funeral feasts are so lavish and widespread in transegalitarian and more complex societies. They are certainly not 'levelling mechanisms' that maintain egalitarian values. Quite the contrary, they create, consolidate, and enhance positions of wealth and power in the name of the dead, thereby masking the inequalities of wealth and power in societies, and attributing them to supernatural sources.

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