Death and identity: graves and funerals as cultural communication

EVA REIMERS
Umea University, Sweden

ABSTRACT A multicultural Swedish grave quarter and three immigrant funerals are used as vantage points to elucidate how funerals and graveyards are employed as communicative symbolic actions for construction of ethnic and cultural identity. The theoretical perspective draws on ritual studies (Driver, 1991; Durkheim, 1915/1965; Myerhoff, 1984; van Gennep 1960), Goffman’s (1967) notion of self-presentation, and studies of ethnicity (Barth 1971; 1994). The study focuses on situations in which ethnicity is actualised and brought to the fore as essential traits of individual or collective identity. Comparison between immigrant ritual practices and mainstream Swedish practices indicate that death rituals can be employed to enhance, subsume, or to fuse social boundaries. In the latter case, the rituals play a part in constructing new social groups. The study further elucidates how multicultural cemeteries reflect and construct a new multicultural Sweden.

Introduction

From a distance, Quarter 83—situated at the cemetery of Kviberg, in Göteborg—looks like any ordinary modern Swedish cemetery. The gravestones are similar in height, width and shape. They are placed in straight rows, and small plots with lamps, flowers and wreaths are situated at the foot of each stone. However, a closer look disrupts the homogeneity and reveals inscriptions in different languages, with symbols pertaining to different religions and cultures. In contrast to the segregation that usually characterizes Swedish society, and which is characteristic of the suburbs only a kilometre or two away, these graves bear witness to a growing multiculturalism in contemporary Sweden.

This article focuses on funerary rituals in migration. It is based on observations from Quarter 83 and the ritual procedure of three immigrant funerals. These examples show how funerals and graveyards function as communicative symbolic practices that construct and express individual and collective ethnic and cultural identity. Ethnicity and culture are blurry notions. In this article I will employ them side by side and some times in a synonymous way. The focus is on the expressive function of different practices, i.e. how actors or bystanders
ascribe the actor a culturally identifiable identity. In some cases this identity is based on adherence to an ethnic group, i.e. a group identity founded on the conception of a common historical provenance. In other cases the adherence is wider and encompasses a region that shares certain cultural traits, such as language, religion, traditions, etc., but lacks the notion of a common provenance. That is when I use the term ‘cultural identity’.

Death, rituals and identity

Death poses a challenge to all kinds of ontological security. The demise of a relative or an acquaintance illuminates the transient and finite character of everyday life and threatens conceptions both of an actual and enduring individual, and of a similarly enduring collective identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1979: 118–122). According to many scholars (e.g. Ariëns, 1976; van Gennep, 1960; Myerhoff, 1984) this is why rites and rituals, always and everywhere, have circumscribed death. One aspect of rituals, and especially of rites de passage, is that they unite participants both with each other and with situations and collectives beyond themselves, such as relatives at other places, ancestors, and rising generations (Myerhoff, 1984: 306). Rituals bridge the gap between past, present and future and diminish the threat that death poses against enduring individual and collective identity. In and through rituals the deceased and the bereaved become anchored in a specific common culture, in a specific value system and world-view, which is expected to persist, regardless of the demise of its singular constituents. Besides being means to show respect for the deceased and support for the bereaved, death rituals can consequently be regarded as tools for the construction of individual and collective identity.

Different cultures and different religions employ a variety of rituals. Funerary rituals in Islam are not the same as funerary rituals in Catholic Christianity. Rituals performed by Muslims from Bosnia depict similarities with, but also considerable deviations from, those of Muslims from Iran. Similarly, it is possible to delineate a common framework for Catholic funerals, yet within this frame recognize multiple regional, national and ethnic differences. How people choose to make their last farewell, and how they choose to remember their dead can therefore be regarded as part of their individual and collective self-presentation (Goffman, 1967). In Driver’s words: “To ritualise is to make oneself present” (1991: 37). People employ rituals to demonstrate where they belong and who they are. But rituals are not merely ways to present an alleged identity. Rituals are performative actions (Austin, 1976), i.e. actions that bring about ontological changes. A ritual is not only a means to demonstrate a preferred identity, but actually engenders this identity.

Funerals in migration

In order to elucidate this process I have chosen to focus on immigrant funerals and immigrant graves. In a situation of migration, the larger society offers little
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or no affirmation of migrants’ traditional values, norms and status systems. It is plausible that many immigrant groups experience the dominant culture as a threat to their own heritage and traditions. The death of a person in the collective accentuates this lack of affirmation. In the context of migration, a funerary ritual therefore offers an opportunity to enhance an identity and an origin that is under pressure from the surrounding culture.

The study presented in this article is based on an instrumental theory of ethnicity, such as that delineated by Barth in Ethnic Groups and Boundaries (Barth, 1994: 9–38). Ethnicity is henceforward regarded as an aspect of social organization, not as innate characteristics that naturally persist. The term denotes a repertoire of identity markers that individuals and collectives employ in order to ascribe to themselves, or to others, a common heritage that forms boundaries against other social collectives.

The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. The boundaries to which we must give our attention are of course social boundaries, though they may have territorial counterparts. If a group maintains its identity when members interact with others, this entails criteria for determining membership and ways of signalling membership and exclusion. (Barth, 1994: 15)

This induces a situational perspective (Ronström, 1992), i.e. a study of situations in which ethnicity is actualized and brought to the fore as a meaningful and essential trait of individual or collective identity. The focus in this study is therefore on situations where ethnic identity is made relevant through different boundary-maintaining or boundary-reducing processes. I have expounded slightly on the notion of boundary maintenance, as Barth employed the concept (1994: 9–38), and extended the study to include boundary-reducing and boundary-fusing practices, i.e. practices that establish new boundaries, both against the migrant heritage and against what can be conceived as Swedish.

In their anthropological study of funerary rituals Metcalf & Huntington (1991: 24) assert that funerary rituals have more to say about life than about death. The ritual is employed to confront death with life’s most cherished values. This is my standpoint as well. However, I do not claim that the values that are enhanced in the ritual are necessarily the most cherished values, only that, in this particular situation, they are the most threatened values. In migration, death revitalizes a threat against group maintenance that people constantly experience. It is therefore likely that a social group in exile will use funerary rituals in order to reinforce ethnic or cultural identity.

In a study of Greek and Turkish funerals in Berlin, Jonker (1996, 1997) presents examples of funerals in migration. She focus her study on transformations of ritual practices, on how the community adapts to constraints in the exile, how religious authorities rationalize and legitimize ritual change and innovation, and how practices circumscribing death contribute to a construction of a collective memory. Jonker demonstrates how ritual transformations in
migration can to a large degree be attributed to pragmatic concerns and practical circumstances in the new environment, and points out the pivotal position of the funeral director in these processes. In the article ‘Death, gender, and memory’ (1997), Jonker attributes the constructive aspect of funerary rituals to the construction of a shared memory. I agree, but believe that funerary rituals do more than that. They are not only reactive in the sense that they bring forth a shared past. As I will demonstrate in this article, they are also, and probably predominantly, proactive, forging a new understanding of the present situation that serves as a starting point for self-understanding and actions in the future.

A study of a funeral of a Chilean refugee in Sweden, (Eastmond, 1988) demonstrates how central values of the group involved are thematized and brought to the fore. This secular funeral had a format combining symbolic forms from the political meeting with traditional church funerals. Most mourners were political exiles and Eastmond’s conclusion is that the funeral temporarily united the mourners in protest over the political situation in Chile, and in restating norms concerning orientation and organization that had been under stress for some time. I have not been able to discern a similar politicization of the funerals I have attended. This can be seen in the light of funerary rituals as means to assert values that are, not only central, but also questioned and thereby pose a threat to the unity of the community. In the case of the funeral Eastmond visited, the Chilean exiles wanted to overthrow an oppressive regime and the political exile movement had recently experienced a division into two different factions. Together this called for unity in the political struggle. I employ a similar method as Eastmond, but broaden the study to encompass graves and funerals of different origin, an approach that allows me to conduct a comparative analysis.

The findings in the present study are based on participant observations in connection with immigrant funerals in Göteborg, Sweden. The Co-operative Funeral Service Fonus manages roughly 70% of all immigrant funerals in Göteborg. During the autumn of 1997 I followed funeral directors from Fonus in their work. In this way I came to attend funerals of 10 different immigrant groups, as well as several Swedish funerals. The data encompass 19 immigrant funerals, seven Swedish Lutheran funerals, one Swedish civil funeral, and three Swedish Mission Covenant funerals. I also took part in preparations of the body of the deceased, transportation procedures, cremations and so forth. In addition, I visited and took photographs at one Muslim and two public cemeteries in Göteborg.

A multicultural cemetery

Like most cemeteries, Quarter 83 at Kviberg is not only a place set apart by society for interment of the dead (Myer, 1993: 3). It can also be read as a cultural text about society and the individuals that have found their last place of rest in its burial lots. This is exemplified by Figs 1 and 2. Each of these photos
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Figure 1. Ethnically varied graves in the Quarter 83 cemetery at Kviberg.

Figure 2. Ethnically varied graves in the Quarter 83 cemetery at Kviberg.

depicts three graves in two different rows in the quarter. Both middle graves are Swedish family graves, decorated with common Swedish gravestone templates. These typically Swedish graves are surrounded by gravestones raised over
people with a national origin other than Swedish. Symbols on the stone, and the plot at the foot of the grave to the left of Johanssons family grave in Figure 1, coincide with Swedish customs. However, the name on the grave ‘Iskrenovic Borivoje’ bears witness to a Serbian heritage. The inscription on the stone on the other side of the Johanssons family grave is in Chinese. It gives the name and the maiden name of the woman interred in the grave, her place of birth, and birth and death date. Her name was Mrs Rose, which doubtless explains the choice of symbol. On both sides of the Swedish grave in Figure 2 are black gravestones with inscriptions in Persian. Besides stating birth and death dates, both stones carry memorial poems in accordance with Iranian customs. All graves are decorated with plants, lamps, winter wreaths, or flower bouquets. The image of Quarter 83 presented by these two photos is representative. Memorial stones raised over people from different countries are placed side by side, row by row.

Several graves in Quarter 83 depict both boundary-maintaining and boundary-reducing traits. First, the mere existence of the grave is in itself boundary reducing. A common definition of home is to equate it with the place where the ancestors are buried. This is also true at old Swedish churchyards where several generations are buried side by side. Today, when people are more mobile, it is a common practice to repatriate the remains of the dead to the same cemetery as their ancestors. This is also common among immigrant groups in Sweden. The Turks have a funeral fund and elaborate routines in order to repatriate their dead. According to Father Dragan, the priest in the Serbian-Orthodox church in Göteborg (personal communication, 5 September 1997) it is only since the recent war in Yugoslavia that the Serbs in Sweden have ceased to bury their dead in Serbia. Today most Serbs are buried in Sweden. The decision to bury in Sweden indicates that the bereaved no longer wish to, or believe they will, return to Serbia. The grave becomes a mooring in Sweden.

The shape and design of different gravestones at Quarter 83 depict examples of both boundary-maintaining practices—i.e. practices that clearly differ from Swedish customs—and boundary-reducing practices—i.e. salient incorporation of Swedish elements. The inscription on a modern Swedish gravestone usually consists of the name of the interred together with year of birth and death. The most common templates are a cross, roses, twinflowers, lilies of the valley, doves, or a setting or rising sun. Several stones have no symbols, only name and dates of the interred. I regard gravestones with Swedish names and in compliance with Swedish customs as expressions of a Swedish identity, but without actually bringing this identity to the fore. Because Swedish identity is the norm at a Swedish cemetery it does not need to be enhanced. Symbols and customs have to deviate from the norm, thereby creating a boundary against the majority, in order to serve as markers and expressions of ethnic or cultural identity. However, when practices in accordance with Swedish norms are deployed on immigrant graves, they deviate from the tradition of provenance and consequently become significant as markers that express a far from self-evident identification with the surrounding culture.
Many gravestones in Quarter 83 have inscriptions in other languages than Swedish. These inscriptions leave a Swedish speaking person with little or no information about who is buried in the grave. This is especially the case when the inscription is in another alphabet than the Latin, such as Cyrillic, Arabic, Syrian, or an Asian alphabet. Language not only serves as a carrier of ethnic notions, traditions, and so forth, but is in itself a fundamental element in the construction of cultural identity (Nash, 1996: 26; Fishman, 1989: 32–35). Inscriptions on gravestones in Sweden in languages other than Swedish both define the addressees and ascribe to the deceased identities that deviate from the norm. Not only the language of an inscription, but also the meaning of an inscription, can express a deviating identity, or provenance. For example, besides stating year of birth some gravestones also state place of birth. In Quarter 83 there are gravestones stating that the interred was born in Bogota, Abadan (Iran) or Lebanon. This practice is not totally unknown to Swedish grave customs, even though it is usually employed to convey the fact that the deceased was born in another part of Sweden. In Quarter 83, however, this practice is restricted to people who were born abroad. The quarter is a place where Swedish origin is taken for granted and therefore need not be specified. It is only deviations from this norm that are noteworthy.

It is a prevalent custom in Catholic countries in Southern Europe to have an image of the deceased on the gravestone. In a Catholic context this practice is likely to emphasize the individual identity of the dead. In a Swedish context, however, it deviates from the Swedish norm and tends to become a marker of cultural identity. The same is true for the Orthodox cross, images of the Madonna, and the crucifix. Although in another context these symbols are self-evident, in this Swedish context they serve as signs of an identity other than the predominant Swedish identity. Just as many gravestones have inscriptions in several languages and alphabets, some stones depict a mix of different symbols. The same cross, rose, twinflower, dove, or sunrise frequent on Swedish stones is also found on many immigrant stones. This incorporation of typical Swedish grave stone patterns can, of course, be the result of economic and institutional constraints; ready-made designs are cheaper than originals. It can also, however, be seen as an expression of a mixed identity where the bereaved claim an identity that adheres to both the country of birth and to Sweden. The same applies to one of the most salient traits of Swedish cemeteries: grave lights and lamps in front of the gravestone. This is a custom that was introduced in Sweden in the 1940s and is now ubiquitous (Rehnberg, 1965). Initially it was a practice delimited to All Saints Day and Christmas Eve. Today lights burn in grave lamps at any time of the year. In Fig. 2, which was taken on a weekday in October, lights are burning in all the lamps.

Most graves are decorated with plants, flowers or funeral wreaths (see Figs 1 and 2). In some cases the flowers are made of silk. Because silk flowers are rare on graves with Swedish names, these flowers can be read as cultural signs. However, there are examples when they do occur. This shows that the incorporation of new practices is a reciprocal process, for Swedes also incorporate new...
practices in their burial customs. This can be exemplified with a gravestone raised in memory of Sven-Ake Liljeblad—a Swedish name—that, in a southern European manner, has a photo of the interred. Another example of a boundary-reducing or even boundary-fusing practice is the shape of headstones raised over children. Regardless of national heritage, these stones are carved in the shape of a heart. These heart-shaped gravestones symbolize and signal the death of a child. This is a new symbol that seems to transcend cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The cemetery as a reflection of society

The distinction between cemeteries as secular municipal graveyards outside the control of the Church, and churchyards as Christian graveyards run by the Church (Rugg, 1998: 111), is not pertinent to a Swedish context. Except for Jewish cemeteries in the major cities, almost all cemeteries in Sweden are both public and owned and operated by the Church of Sweden. All citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, are guaranteed a burial lot in the territorial parish of residence. The Church of Sweden in Göteborg runs two crematoria, a Muslim cemetery and a Christian Orthodox cemetery. The authorities are very restrictive about allowing private cemeteries and private crematoria are forbidden (Carlsson & Schönert, 1991: 20).

Some 30% of the population of Göteborg are first or second generation immigrants (Statistiska Centralbyrån [SCB], 1996). Sixty-five percent of the graves at Quarter 83 are immigrant graves. One possible explanation for this overrepresentation is that Göteborg is highly segregated and several immigrant-dominated parts of the city are within the admission area of the cemetery. Another possible explanation is that Quarter 83 is restricted to corporal burial. Around 70% of the deceased in Göteborg are cremated. Islam as well as Catholic and orthodox Christianity recommends inhumation. As a result, the number of immigrants among those who are buried this way is comparatively high. It is furthermore likely that many Swedes already have burial plots at other cemeteries, closer to their forebears, and therefore do not get buried in a new quarter like Quarter 83, which was first used in 1989.

The reason why, at a distance, Quarter 83 presents a uniform appearance is that, because of rules and regulations, no gravestone has been allowed to dominate over another. This uniformity provides a striking difference from most old cemeteries where social and economic status are reflected in sizes and forms of the gravestones (Åkesson, 1997: 136–137). Such markers of social position violate what in the funeral law is designated as “good grave culture” (Carlsson & Schönert, 1991: 174–179). The meaning of this expression is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is stated as a major rule that the bereaved should be free to decide the appearance of the gravestone. On the other hand, it is up to graveyard authorities to decide the boundaries within which the bereaved can make these choices. These limitations, at least at modern cemeteries, usually prescribe that every gravestone be kept within a clear shape, size and design.
This is of certain practical significance. A graveyard where gravestones are placed in straight rows is easier—and cheaper—to maintain than one in which grave owners have been allowed to spread out more freely. However, there are other concerns as well. In adhering to a good grave culture, historical cultural values will be maintained and the risk that other lot holders or the public will be offended is minimized.

A comparison between Kviberg and the 100-years-older Östra (Eastern) cemetery can further elucidate the social symbolic significance of grave culture. The churchyard administration presents the cemeteries in the city in a booklet. In the account of the Östra cemetery the following is written:

Most attention has been paid to the western hill with its impressive mausoleums. Most of these are raised over people from Göteborg who have been active in trade, industry or shipping, many of whom have given generous donations and been part of the building of Göteborg. (Göteborgs kyrkogårdsförvaltning, p. 4 [author’s translation]).

The account of Kviberg, on the other hand, emphasizes the international features of the cemetery, pointing to its British, German and Latvian quarters. These national graveyards, founded in the 1950s, reflect a segregated society where different nationalities are kept apart even after death. This is in contrast to Quarter 83, which stands out not as a national but as an international cemetery. A close look at the gravestones discloses that the conformity inherent in the notion of a ‘good grave culture’, and the segregation expressed by the national quarters in the cemetery, is about to be dissolved. Despite similar form and size, inscriptions and symbols on the gravestones evince an emerging cultural and religious diversity in contemporary Sweden.

Quarter 83 recounts a story about a society in change. Unlike gravestones and funerary monuments at Östra cemetery, which are markers of social status and affirm the social stratification in society, Quarter 83 expresses, and ritually affirms, an ethnic diversity. While Östra cemetery affirms class society, Kviberg affirms both the ideology of equality, which has been fundamental for the construction of the Swedish welfare state, and the new multicultural Sweden.

Funerals and the construction of identity

It is not only graves that are employed as a means to assert and construct cultural identity. It is likewise possible to ascertain practices that maintain, reduce, or fuse cultural boundaries in funerary rituals in their entirety. In connection with this study I have attended funerals where just about every element can be perceived as a deviation from Swedish customs. I have also been present at funerals where Swedish customs have been mixed with customs from the country of origin, and at funerals where cultural markers of the country of origin have been suppressed. In the following I will present three funerals that differ in the way boundary-maintaining and boundary-reducing practices are employed. They are viewed in contrast to practices employed by 90% of the
population, i.e. Lutheran funerals in the Church of Sweden (Bromander & Straarup, 1998).

The focus of the analysis is not on intentionality, but on performance. Some practices or elements in the funerary rituals are deliberately chosen by the bereaved, some are the result of practical and institutional circumstances, others are purely accidental. I give all ritual elements equal weigh because, regardless of how they were instigated, they are part of the ritual and contribute to the message it conveys. I explore how ritual elements, regardless of intentionality, in a particular context can be perceived and employed as tools for construction and communication of ethnic and cultural identity. My conception of communication is based on the notion that all meaning is situated meaning (see e.g. Heritage, 1987; Shotter, 1993). This means that, although there might be a religious interpretation of the significance of a specific ritual element, this interpretation is always contested, re-evaluated and negotiated in the actual performance of a ritual. There is an open-endedness to all communicative events, and it is in the actual performance of the ritual and in the interaction between those who partake in the event, that meaning is attributed, created and negotiated. A ritual is always multivocal (Turner, 1967). There are an abundance of potential meanings that can be actualized in its performance. I hereby perceive different aspects of the ritual in analogy with the most conspicuous tool for communication, i.e. language (Rommetveit, 1987; Volosinov, 1973). In the same way as a word or an utterance has to be put into context in order to be intelligible, different traits of a ritual gain their meaning from the context in which they are actualized, both in a narrow sense, i.e. the entire ritual, and in a broader sense, i.e. Göteborg, Sweden.

An enhanced Chilean identity

The first funeral was of a 67-year old man, born in Chile. Throughout the service, his Chilean identity was brought to the fore and asserted. Taken together, different practices in the service, and the choice to bury the deceased in Chile expressed dissociation from Swedish identity, and identification with a Chilean provenance and belonging. The dissociation from Swedish funerary practices had already been manifested in the announcement of the death and the funeral. Swedish custom prescribes that this information is publicly announced through an advertisement in the local newspaper. In this case, it was announced through the Spanish speaking local radio. It was thus only the Spanish speaking community who had access to the information. Consequently, the former employer of the deceased—a shipping company—was never informed and could not attend in order to show their respect.

One of the most conspicuous boundary maintaining traits was that the service was held in the main Catholic sanctuary in downtown Göteborg, and in compliance with Catholic funeral liturgy. Regardless of the level of personal religious commitment of those involved, the choice of religious affiliation at rites of transition is of symbolic significance. Sweden is often described as one of the
most secularized countries in the world (Berger, 1992: 31–32; Pettersson, 1988: 76–83). Nevertheless, 90% choose a funeral in accordance with the rituals of the Lutheran state Church. This is not likely to be the result a sudden religiosity, but because of the symbolic value of the Church of Sweden. The funeral is conducted in a similar way as were funerals of one’s ancestors, which implies that the deceased and the mourners become incorporated into the community of others who bury this way, i.e. the Swedish community. It is in the same way possible to regard the choice of a Catholic ritual as the means to express an incorporation into a Catholic community, such as the Chilean. The Catholic character of the service was evident in features such as holy water, incense, the ringing of bells at the transubstantiation and the vestment of golden brocade that the priest was wearing. Language is another strong marker of ethnicity (Giles, 1979). In this case, the whole service was conducted in Spanish, albeit—thanks to a deficiency of priests in the Catholic Church—with a heavy American accent. This created a Spanish-speaking, and in this case a Chilean, haven in stark contrast to the Swedish world outside the building.

The lid of the wooden coffin was open and revealed an inner coffin made of zinc-plate, and the embalmed body of the deceased. The corpse was fully dressed, with a rosary in his hand. Even though candles on stands and floral tributes—one wreath and 25 funeral bouquets—flanked the coffin, in accordance with Swedish practice, the open coffin and the embalmed body signalled that this was not an ordinary Swedish funeral. This was further consolidated by ribbons and cards where the writing was in Spanish.

The funeral mass was preceded by what could be labelled a ‘wake’. This part began 45 minutes before the service, when the widow, a son and other next of kin arrived. They knelt by the open coffin, cried and touched the embalmed body. After next of kin, mourners arrived in a constant stream. Upon entering, most of them dipped a finger in holy water, crossed themselves, viewed the body in the coffin, and greeted the bereaved. The lid was closed by the funeral director just before the commencement of the service. The ‘wake’ was an apparent deviation from Swedish funerary customs. Even if it is gradually becoming common for next of kin to look at the encoffined body before the coffin is finally closed, and some people choose a more personal alternative to the shroud that comes with the coffin, public wakes and embalming are still extremely rare practices.

Another significant trait pertaining to demeanour was the way the mourners conducted themselves in the sanctuary. Most of them brought flowers, which they either handed over to the funeral director, or placed at the foot of the coffin. Many subsequently briefly left the church in order to smoke and chat on the church steps. New mourners continued to arrive throughout the service and people continued to move back and forth between the pews and the church steps. This created a certain stir in the sanctuary, which was in stark contrast to ordinary Swedish funerals, where mourners remain outside the sanctuary until the funeral director signals that the service is about to start, and where everyone remains in the pews during the whole service.
Not everything in the service was in accordance with Chilean customs. Some non-Chilean traits showed that this service took place outside Chile (e.g. the American accent of the priest, and the zinc-plate coffin inside the wooden coffin) but without actually enhancing the specific Swedish context. The zinc plate is a requirement for the transportation of corpses between countries, in this case to Chile. Other features, however, were evidently part of the Swedish environment and indicated that this funeral service took place in Sweden. Several of these boundary-reducing practices derived from the behaviour of the funeral director. If not occupied with something else, he greeted the mourners by the door and gestured that he wanted to take care of the flowers. The mourners acceded to his instruction and handed over their bouquets. If the funeral director was busy, the mourners carried their flowers to the side of the coffin themselves. These actions from the funeral director were partly prompted by a service that funeral homes provide for their customers after the ceremony, namely to hand over a little booklet listing those who have given flowers and the messages on cards and ribbons. It is not likely that next of kin in this particular case had any expectation of receiving such a booklet, but since it was part of the service that the funeral home offered and charged for, they would get one anyway. Both the performance in connection with the service and the booklet in itself stand out as boundary reducing so that, even though most actions and symbols at this funeral deviate from the customary, they are nevertheless enacted in Sweden.

Most Swedish funerals are private, and concern only the immediate family (Åkesson, 1997: 124–128). This funeral was public and a concern for the whole Chilean community. When the service began there were about 100 people. When it ended they were close to 200. This indicates a different conception from the Swedish, where the number of mourners rarely exceeds 20 persons who can or are supposed to attend a funeral. Another aspect of the funeral that differed from Swedish customs was the music. Swedish funeral services usually include three hymns: one or two solo pieces, a prelude and a postlude. In this service, there was no music. This was not only a deviation from Swedish customs but also from most Catholic funerals I have attended, which included at least a prelude and a postlude. The total lack of music in this particular service was the result of a lack of awareness on the part of the funeral home and the bereaved. Neither knew that the parish did not automatically provide this service, and when they found out three hours before the commencement of the funeral, it was too late to make new arrangements.

The deceased was going to be buried in Chile, so there was no burial in connection with the service. The usual scenario in such cases, or when the body is going to be cremated, is that the mourners make an individual farewell and then leave the coffin in the sanctuary. This was not the case here. When the priest had concluded the service, the funeral director called on bearers who carried the coffin outside. The coffin was placed in a motor hearse, and all mourners got into their cars or a bus, which was hired for the occasion. The coffin was transported to a cemetery on the outskirts of the city. The bearers
carried the coffin to a cold-storage room. The coffin was then moved outside and everyone gathered around. The son of the deceased said a few words, the coffin was taken back into the storage room, and the funeral director locked the door. The party dispersed. No clergy took part in this brief ceremony.

The funeral described above is an example of how funerary rituals can serve as means to create boundaries against the surrounding culture and thereby enhance the identity of the culture of provenance. It is a ritual in which traits that deviate from customs of the majority are easy to discern. It is furthermore evident that most of these traits can be attributed to the Chilean origin of the deceased and the mourners. However, this does not exclude the fact that, because of the Swedish context, the service probably also differed considerably from how it would have been performed in Chile. A Chilean identity in Chile does not equate with a Chilean identity in exile (Olsson, 1995: 243–244).

A subsumed Polish identity

The second funeral was of an 84-year old woman born in Poland. She was born a Catholic but had converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, better known as Mormonism. The funeral service was held in a funeral chapel at the cemetery of Kvikberg, and she was subsequently buried in Quarter 83. In contrast to the funeral described above, it is not possible to explain deviations from Swedish practices as contingent upon the innate ethnic identity of the deceased, neither is it possible to explain deviations from Polish customs as a consequence of the Swedish context. The service was neither Polish, nor Swedish, and neither Catholic, nor Lutheran. It was Mormon.

The funeral depicted both boundary-maintaining and boundary-reducing practices. Among practices that can be labelled as boundary reducing were the funeral advertisement that announced the funeral, the way the flowers were handled as a means to express bonds with the dead, the floral tribute on and around the coffin, and the practice of presenting the guests with a written order of service. The closed wooden coffin was placed on a small podium in front of the pews. It had a flower decoration on the lid and was flanked by eight bouquets. Four chairs—one for each of those who were going to perform the ritual—were placed on the right side of the coffin facing the mourners.

First to arrive were the organist, the bishop of the ward—which in a Protestant vocabulary is equivalent to pastor or priest of the local congregation—and the bearers. Fifteen minutes before the service, they were followed by relatives of the deceased, a group consisting of two elderly men and one middle-aged woman. Before they took their seat in the first row on the right side, they walked round the coffin to look at the floral tributes. All other mourners, except those who had specific tasks, waited in the waiting room until a verger opened the doors just before the commencement of the service. Most of the 45 mourners placed themselves in pews on the left side of the coffin, where they remained throughout the service. The demeanour of the mourners was in accordance with Swedish norms, i.e. they avoided entering the chapel
until the doors were opened, they were seated with relatives on the right side of
the aisle and friends on the left, and next of kin walked closest to the coffin out
of the chapel with other mourners following row by row.

Differing from priests at common Swedish funerals, the bishop did not
wear liturgical vestments, but a wine-red suit. The liturgy was informal, with
four laymen participating and no pre-written prayers. The bishop introduced the
participants saying “Now brother NN will … sister NN will …”. Although the
service included the same amount of music as a mainstream Swedish funeral,
the actual pieces were unusual. The opening hymn was the well-known hymn
*O Store Gud* (How great thou art). This is originally a Swedish hymn, but also
one of the most commonly sung hymns in the USA. Neither of the other two
hymns in the service nor the hymn by the grave was from the Swedish
hymnbook. They were Mormon hymns. There was also a solo piece played on
an accordion, which is an unusual instrument at funeral services. After the
closing hymn the bearers carried the coffin outside. The mourners formed a
procession behind the motor hearse, which slowly drove to Quarter 83 a
kilometre away. The bearers lowered the coffin into the grave, the mourners
placed themselves around, a hymn was sung to the accompaniment of the
accordion, there was a silent farewell, and the bishop concluded the ceremony.

One boundary-reducing factor was the language—the funeral was held in
Swedish—although the German accent of the bishop marked the transnational
aspect of the religious movement to which the deceased and most of the guests
adhered. Most of the discernible deviations from Swedish practices, e.g. the
clothing of the officiating bishop, the way the four officiating persons sat on
chairs beside the coffin, the unusual hymns, the accordion, and the fact that
several persons took part in the performance of the service could all be
attributed to a Mormon identity. This is not an identity of origin but a chosen
identity. It was the benefits of this choice that were emphasized and enhanced
in both speech and music. The tie to the ‘Heavenly Father’ and the Mormon
fellowship was more important than earthly bounds. In a Swedish context
Mormons are defined in a sociological sense as a sect (Gustafsson, 1991:
93–97). It was this chosen identity that was put to the forefront. This was
probably the reason why the actual Polish identity of the deceased was neither
highlighted nor asserted. The bishop only mentioned it briefly. The only
element in the service that deviated from both Mormon and Swedish practice
was the accordion. In his speech the bishop explained the accordion as a
personal wish from the deceased. This was an expression of her individual
identity. Whether or not she was Polish, Swedish or Mormon, she loved
accordion music.

*A fused Polish—Swedish identity*

The third funeral was of a 56-year old woman, born in Poland. The body was
later cremated and buried in Sweden. This funeral exemplifies how boundary-
maintaining and boundary-reducing practices can be mixed so that the pre-
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The death and the funeral were announced in the local newspaper, and the service took place in the same church as the first funeral, i.e. the main Catholic Church in Göteborg. The coffin was placed in front of the altar. It was closed, with a flower decoration on the lid, and flanked by large candles on stands, four wreaths and eight bouquets. The flowers carried ribbons and cards with messages in Polish or Swedish. The most conspicuous funeral wreath had condolences from the employer of the deceased. Apart from the place of the ceremony and the messages in Polish, this was all in accordance with Swedish custom.

The next of kin, three sisters who had travelled to the funeral from Poland and Canada, arrived half an hour before the service. They crossed themselves upon entering, and approached the coffin. They subsequently went into an adjacent room to make confession. Following next of kin, additional mourners arrived. Most of them brought flowers, which they placed by the foot of the coffin. Those who came early appeared to be Polish, as demonstrated by clothing that slightly deviated from Swedish style and their familiar demeanour in the sanctuary. Ten minutes before the service, a group of 20 Swedish-speaking persons, probably workmates of the deceased, entered the church. Differing from other mourners, they did not cross themselves, and they did not bring any flowers. A big wreath from the employer was already placed beside the coffin.

When the service began, all mourners, 80 persons, had arrived. About half of them appeared to be Polish and half appeared to be Swedish.

As with the first funeral, the most salient deviation from Swedish practice was the place for and the form of the liturgy. However, unlike the first funeral, this was topicalized in the actual performance of the service. This was the only funeral service in my data that was bilingual. Two priests—one Polish and one Swedish—were officiating. In the introductory part of the funeral, the Swedish priest addressed those who were unfamiliar with Catholic customs and explained the meaning of incense and holy water. Some parts were translated, whereas others were in either Swedish or Polish. The funeral included three pieces of music: a prelude on the organ, a common Swedish funeral hymn and a concluding piece—In Paradisum—on the organ.

At cremations, or when the mourners will not be present at the burial, mourners are usually invited to pay their respects individually by the coffin. The women place a flower on the coffin and the men make a slight bow. This usually follows strict rules: chief mourners go first, followed by more distant family, and lastly friends and acquaintances. In this case the body was, like most Swedish corpses, going to be cremated. At the end of the service, the priest invited the mourners to pay their respect individually. Next of kin paid homage by the coffin followed by other mourners in no special order, neglecting hints from the funeral director. This is unusual at Swedish funerals where mourners usually pay careful attention to the funeral director’s instructions. A sister of the deceased concluded the service with a short speech in Polish.
This funeral service can be seen as a ritual that anchored the deceased in a greater whole, displaying features of both her Polish provenance and her life in Sweden. This mixture was represented in the oscillation between two languages, the two priests who represented two aspects in the identity of the deceased, and the composition of the mourners. The Polish provenance of the deceased was communicated by the place and ritual for the funeral service. As stated above, over 90% of all funerals in Sweden are Lutheran, any deviation from this practice can therefore be interpreted as a symbolic action expressing either, as in this case, a deviating heritage, or, as with the Mormon funeral above, a personal choice. The fact that one of the priests who officiated was Polish implies that it was the Polish heritage, rather than personal religious conviction, that was communicated in and through the service. This was further accentuated by the presence of Polish mourners and the speech in Polish at the end of the service. On the other hand, the deceased’s life in Sweden and her Swedish identity were communicated by the closed coffin, the Swedish priest, explanations and instructions given in Swedish throughout the service, Swedish mourners, funeral flowers with ribbons and cards in Swedish, Swedish workmates, and the hymn, which was the most common Swedish funeral hymn, *Blott en dag* (Bäckström, 1992). The funeral service in its entirety can hence be described in terms of a complicated combination of boundary-maintaining and boundary-reducing practices. The message it conveys is simultaneously Polish and Swedish, and neither Polish nor Swedish. Two cultures are brought together, blended, asserted and celebrated in one and the same ritual.

Discussion

The account of Quarter 83 and the three funerals above demonstrates how funerary rituals play a part in constructing personal and collective identity in the face of death, and how ethnic identity markers can be employed as a resource for this endeavour. In order to elucidate and understand what is communicated by individual graves, grave quarter 83 as a whole, and the funeral services, I have found it useful to return to Durkheim’s (1915/1995) notions of religion and rituals. His thesis was that rituals should not primarily be viewed as expressions and communications of religious experiences and notions, but as expressions of social experiences, i.e. of communal life and common ideas. The core of the ritual is “that individuals are assembled and that feelings in common are expressed through actions in common” (p. 431). Rites are means by which social groups periodically assert themselves and are made conscious of their moral unity. This is engendered by what Durkheim called the “effervescence” that is accomplished through the ritual gathering. Effervescence is defined as a state of strong emotions that induces a stimulation of life energies, something which is likely to be of special importance in the face of death. In this perspective, the primary function of religious practices is to celebrate the collective and to arouse loyalty and strong emotions among its members.

This implies that, even if single individuals do not regard themselves as
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religious, they are still able to employ religious rites in meaningful ways. This is because rituals in a non-verbal language convey to people where they belong. By making choices on how to announce the death and the funeral, the place for the funeral, officiating official, the ritual service, flower tribute, coffin, music, gravestone, and so forth, the bereaved communicate not only who the deceased was but also who they are and where they belong. People assemble in what, in the Swedish context, are big crowds who get together in order jointly to root themselves in a specific cultural or ethnic context. Some of the practices are subject to structural, institutional, or economic constraints. It is not always possible to arrange a funeral that is identical to a funeral from the country of origin. The public funeral system, the bureaucracy, the production of necessary artefacts, and services offered by funeral homes delimit the available possibilities. The point I want to make in this paper is that, whether or not different practices in the funerary rituals are brought about through deliberate choices, they are part of the self-presentation and identity construction of the group involved. When this construction of identity takes place in an environment where the group to some extent regards itself, and is regarded by others, as deviating or ‘other’, this presentation of self can be viewed in light of Barth’s theory of ethnic identity (1971: 75), which defines ethnic identity not as an innate characteristic, but as a resource that can be actualized and made socially relevant in the social organization of different cultural groups.

The identity construction is not only accomplished through reiteration of old ritual practices. In all three funerals, new customs are incorporated into the old. It is furthermore likely that old rituals are attributed differing symbolic meanings in different contexts. At the funeral of the man from Chile, the Chilean identity is made relevant not only by the Catholic service, but through language, in the way the funeral is announced, by flower arrangements, how people act and perform in relation to the coffin and the dead body, choice of place for the grave, and so forth. Taken together these elements forge a situation in which a Swedish participant is alienated from what is going on. An ethnic boundary between the other and us is erected, where we are Chilean and the other is everyone outside this group. However, even though the service enhances the primordial Chilean identity, it also demonstrates the creation of a new ritual, that serves as a substitute for the burial. This ritual constructs the service as a funeral in exile.

At the Mormon funeral it is neither an innate Polish identity, nor an acquired Swedish identity that is enhanced. It is the chosen non-ethnic and transnational identity as a Mormon that is celebrated and asserted. It is a funeral that constructs the other and us, not as a result of descent, but of personal choice. The personally chosen identity is celebrated as more important than the inherited identity of origin.

Finally, at the Catholic funeral of a Polish woman it is a joint identity with both Polish and Swedish traits that is asserted and celebrated. The divide between the other and us in relation to Poles and Swedes is dissolved by the alternation between Polish and Swedish, the blend of elements from different
cultural contexts, the constitution of the assembled mourners, and so forth. Simultaneously as some elements signal respectively Polish or Swedish identity, these ethnic identities are fused in the ritual. What is asserted and celebrated is neither an exclusively Polish nor an exclusively Swedish identity, but a Polish-Swedish identity. In this sense the funeral can be understood as a construction of a new kind of *us*, which comprises both Polish and Swedish aspects.

The Durkheimian perspective is not as easily applied to cemeteries (which are products of a ritual) as it is to funeral services (ritual performances). They are not, at least not such clear, examples of groups who assemble in order to celebrate and assert their identity. But like funeral services cemeteries depict signs, symbols and markers of both individual and collective identity. They function as rituals in the sense that they assert the value of an identity that belonged to the deceased, an identity that the successors still cherish. Multicultural cemeteries, like Quarter 83 elucidate how bereaved immigrants are torn between preserving the traditional, i.e. employing symbolic actions that deviate from the norm in Swedish cemeteries, and assimilation, i.e. an adjustment and a tendency to incorporate new elements into old customs.

Particular gravestones serve as tools for presentation of self and identity. Through choice of language for the inscription and symbols on the stone, the deceased becomes anchored in a particular ethnic or cultural context. Furthermore, the stones can simultaneously carry symbols pertaining to different cultural contexts, so that the grave, just like the description of the Polish-Swedish funeral above, becomes part of an identity construction where the deceased is rooted in several cultural contexts. The gravestone serves as a device for the construction of a new cultural identity. Separate gravestones are furthermore placed side by side to other gravestones that, albeit similar in form and size, depict ethnic traits that deviate from the gravestones beside them. Taken together, and in a slightly figurative sense, the cemetery becomes a place where people, if not assemble, are assembled, to construct a common identity and belonging. Quarter 83 becomes a means to celebrate and assert a new multicultural Sweden.

A death brings about ruptures in the social community. The funeral and the headstone which is raised over the deceased can be viewed as tools for the reconstruction of social order and the joint identity of the group. How this should be done is not self-evident, especially in a situation of migration. The bereaved have two alternatives. They can choose to employ different religious and ethnic markers in order to distance themselves from Swedish culture and thereby assert their common heritage, or they can choose to blend practices from different cultural contexts and thereby ritually construct a new ethnically diverse cultural identity.

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Biographical note

Eva Reimers is Assistant Professor at the Department of Media and Communication, University of Umeå, Sweden. She has previously written on the use of infant baptism. Her research interest is on rituals in a secularized context.