

Invisible Complexes of Death: A Preliminary Review and Personal Reflections on Researching Deathlore

Beliefs about life as predictable, subject to our control, and destined to continue indeterminately are incompatible with the experience of death. It is this contradiction that first drew my attention to folkloristic works on death and sparked my attempt to discover the different themes that folklorists have explored in their death-related research. Here, I reach across folklore genres and draw on different time periods in the discipline's history to trace the story of folkloristic approaches to death. Folklorists' explorations of grief culture extend from historical and contemporary death customs and rituals to belief and vernacular spontaneous memorials. In exploring the themes that emerge, I ask how this body of work on death and grief differs from that of other disciplines, including psychology, health professions, and sociology. Finally, I draw attention to the challenges of doing ethnographic research on death customs and beliefs. Because individuals mourning the death of a loved one negotiate complex fields of emotion, folklorists have struggled with the responsibilities of eliciting, recording, and reporting extremely sensitive, personal information and emotions of grief and loss. They have faced challenges of representation as they attempt to convey family members' re/creation of memories of the deceased person. In this

regard, I explore how folklore researchers have positioned themselves in their works on death. What is particularly challenging for them in sharing their fieldwork experiences when dealing with others' mourning and grief?

To explore these questions and concerns, this paper focuses on three topics. First, I begin by briefly introducing folklore themes that emerge in interdisciplinary research on death, grief, and death rituals. These include death rituals, funeral customs, roadside memorials and cemeteries as material culture, and finally, folk beliefs on death. This overview reveals that for many decades, folklorists have analyzed death, but whereas earlier works deal with the folklore of death beliefs and death customs (Halpert 1952), more recent works focus on the evolution of contemporary death customs (Ellis 2019). Lastly, I explore the often-challenging fieldwork experiences of folklorists who do ethnographic research on death and reflect on the diverse fieldwork dilemmas they face when transforming others' personal grief experiences into research "data."

In this literature review, I draw mostly on folklore research; however, in a few places, I include some reflections from anthropological works on death. There are many published sources about folklore and death, and out of this enormous literature, I review selected representative sources. As this paper is mostly focused on folklore scholarship on death, I discuss themes following a chronological analysis of the folkloristic work. This chronological consideration of each theme helps the reader to appreciate the connections between contemporary folklore works and earlier works on death. It also helps to expose temporal shifts concerning different notions of death in folk culture. My discussion starts with death as a

rite of passage, where I examine death rituals and customs. Then, I analyze death in terms of humour and folklore, where I consider folkloristic works on the traditional Newfoundland wake. Next, I turn to intersections of death and material culture, reviewing folklore studies on cemeteries, decoration of cemeteries, and roadside memorials. I end my thematic analysis of death studies with a discussion of folk beliefs about death, moving from Violetta Halpert's work on death beliefs to the contemporary notion of "good" or "bad" death as embraced by folk groups in different communities. Finally, I point to some accounts of fieldwork experiences shared by folklorists where they speak of the emotional challenges of researching death. Given the large amount of folkloristic literature on death, I consider this paper to be only a partial review. My goal here is not to offer an exhaustive analysis of all published scholarship but rather to discuss representative examples to identify general themes that may help open up new possibilities for future folkloristic research on death. By exploring some of the fieldwork challenges folklorists face when researching death, I raise this as a topic that I think deserves more scholarly attention and consideration.

Researching Death: Inter-Disciplinary Approach

An extensive body of folkloristic work raises important questions about death through examinations of beliefs concerning death, death taboos, death rituals, and the role of death customs and beliefs across cultural groups and different historical backgrounds. In highlighting intersections of cultural and personal expressions of grief,

folklorists have contributed to larger international and interdisciplinary conversations about death. It is worth stating that folkloristic work on death is wide-ranging, examining many different aspects of death, from methods for the disposal of the corpse to expressions of grief to beliefs about death's existential dimensions. For example, following the seminal contribution of Robert Hertz (2013), a large body of literature examines death as a process rather than an event; one in which the boundaries between life and death are culturally ambiguous.

Folklorists have contended that the multitude of varieties of eschatological beliefs about death and rituals related to disposal can culturally be understood as a communal social response that represents the experience of death as interpretable and replete with narratives (Butler 1982). Because folklorists have a long history of engaging in the study of death as a cultural phenomenon, it is important to note that current ethnographic interest in death is less a new direction of study than it is an exciting extension of earlier work. While reviewing folklore scholarship on death, I found that folklorists have emphasized the relationship of the deceased to the culture and community to which they belonged. For example, in the case of burial ceremonies, community members in many cultures focus their efforts on preserving a deceased's physical remains (Kiong and Schiller 1993). A thread running through folklore scholarship is the effort to understand the deeper social and cultural implications of death; it is the most private and, at the same time, most public of human experiences.

Human deaths have long commanded a prominent place in folklore theory-making on belief, religion, rituals,

customs, personal experiences, and memorial culture. Since the nineteenth century, folklorists have published extensively on the topic of death and some have accorded death and the treatment of the dead an extremely prominent place in their theoretical enterprises (Clark and Cheshire 2004; Everett 2002; Frisby 2015; Halliday 2010; Hertz 2013; Petersson 2009). The majority of these works focused on emotional aspects of death and bereavement, but folklorists also studied death in humour, especially as part of “sick,” “cruel,” and disastrous event joke cycles (Dundes 2017). Interestingly, some of the best-known folklore studies are the psychological analyses of Alan Dundes (2017), such as his writing on “The Dead Baby Joke Cycle” of the 1960s and 1970s, which he interpreted as reflective of the rapid social changes that took place in American culture during these decades. Dundes emphasizes the social effects of genocide and the psychological function of such inhumane activities within this joke cycle.

Folklorists have also dealt with vernacular understandings of death as cosmological design; here, the premise is that there is an otherworld of magico-religious significance that can be reified through ritual (Frisby 2015). In folkloristic work, many traditional conceptualizations of death emerge, including death considered as a divine or semi-divine being possessing extraordinary magico-religious powers; death as a restless soul, sometimes trapped in a liminal area; death as a sociable cadaver who interacts with the living; and death as spatial-temporal, with calendar events and physical spaces concerning death, tragedy, and history. Helen Frisby’s analysis of vernacular death portents and divinatory customs in early twentieth-century folklore collections

reveals the complexities of contemporary, subjective experiences of mortality (Frisby 2015). Drawing on calendar and seasonal death portents, as well as spiritual beliefs about death, she argues that contemporary views of death are more complex than can be accounted for with a simplistic dichotomy between modernity and magical thinking.

These contributions of folklorists to the larger body of interdisciplinary research on death sometimes contrast and/or complement other disciplinary approaches. For example, based on my reading, the work of healthcare professionals on death seems to be mostly devoted to the clinical setting of death, where they examine death as a lived experience of physicians dealing with patients; offer a rational model for coping with bereavement and the grieving process; and present a phenomenological investigation of death (Angoff 2001; Kasket 2006, Papadatou 2000; Wilson and Kirshbaum 2011). Relevant to this clinical emphasis in death research, I note that psychologists' works are mostly focused on death anxiety, the emotional stress of grief, aging and death, suicidal mortality, and the management of the terror of death: these publications talked about psychological aspects of dealing with death and trauma (Lyke 2013, Steger and Frazier 2005, Wong 2007). Interestingly, I found that this literature dealing with clinical and rational understandings of death and grief did not consider socio-cultural experiences of death related to folk lives, overlooking folk narratives and experiences. This is an area where I think folklorists could make valuable contributions. It is my observation that, compared to other disciplines, folkloristic work more closely links death to the broader context of folk groups

and cultures through analyzing beliefs, performances, and material cultures. I see this folkloristic approach as a strength, and it has the potential to shed light on areas not often discussed, such as people's beliefs about the afterlife. I could imagine folklore research, based on conversation and interviews, as part of a therapeutic process of managing grief and pain. Hypothetically, a respectful environment of fieldwork might allow people to share their pain and trauma of loss with the folklorist when they may not have other outlets. I feel that folklorists can use their strength in researching experiences of death on the micro level as an asset. This disciplinary scholarship might help to open some new therapeutic areas for bereavement and grief management, and it represents a possible direction for further research.

Rites of Passage: Death Customs and Rituals

Death always bears upon the living. Its observances and rituals represent a form of expressing sociability. This is seen, for example, when community members join family members of the deceased to participate in death customs and rituals. It reflects the social nature of human beings when a community takes part in death rituals and even in the grief process. As such, death rituals can be viewed as culturally heightened activities: these rituals conflate, refract, and highlight a culture's most important social and religious values, even though these values are not always immediately apparent, explicit, or understood by others as symbolic statements about the social order (Leach 2021). For folklorists, much of what is interesting about death rituals is how they help us understand the social

organization and institutions of the living. Death rituals not only reveal social relationships but also the attachment to the community, mediate the dynamics of group relations, and allow members to define and redefine their associations within the social group.

In my Bangladeshi socio-cultural setting, I have observed that people view dead souls as undesirable entities that need to be removed from the living world by ritual cleansing, marking boundaries, and discarding objects following respective religious views. Across different religious groups, I see that normally, when a person dies, some family members—mostly adults and others from the community—busily prepare for the final burial process. The final ritual varies from religion to religion, but the goal is the same: to perform the last rites as soon as possible. Here, I observe death ritual as an effective way of uniting social groups by bringing them together for a common purpose: to bury the dead. The rituals thus invoke the conventions of exclusivity and delineate the group from outsiders. I witnessed that, even those who had a difficult or uncomfortable relationship with the deceased person for any familial or other reasons, came together to take part in the burial process. This commonality creates a communal feeling as everyone who knew the deceased tries to see them off for the last time. When all the close relatives arrive, the final burial rituals begin with the aim of burying the dead body within the shortest period of time because of the theological belief that it is important to bury the deceased person as soon as it is possible in order to free their soul from this living world. In Islam, it is believed that a delay in the burial ritual brings sin to the deceased person,

whereas in Hinduism, death is believed to be the release of a soul, which is then reincarnated into a new life.

Whereas these death rituals mark the completion of the dead person's existence, folkloristic studies of death in Christian communities in places like Newfoundland and Labrador interpret ritual as an attempt to create an ongoing relationship with the deceased. For example, Gary Butler contended that death used to be considered an integral part of life that united home and community, and he argued that this communal approach to death rituals changed with modernization (1982). In his study on the traditional Newfoundland house wake, Butler demonstrated how "a structured deployment of interior spaces" abetted in resolving the sacred-profane tensions and a movement from worldly to otherworldly status (1982, 31). His analysis details the material and social transformation of the "front room" or "parlour" from a formal space for entertaining guests to a sacred wake room, and he observes that the Newfoundland wake serves to remove the imbalance between the profane and sacred domains, which death has created (Butler 1982, 31). Butler also notes the differences between Protestant and Catholic modes of decorating the wake room, and their differing explanations of customary practices. Linking to Butler's work, Venetia Newall also asserts that death represents the last transition and change in the life cycle of a human being. In "Folklore and Cremation," Newall comments that ritual actions concerned with life-cycle events are helpful to participants and assist them, in the case of death, to accept what has happened and to adjust emotionally (1985). Thus, funeral customs can be regarded as a means of helping the deceased's soul to achieve eternal rest, but are also full of dramatic activity

surrounding the corpse; family members/relatives cleanse and dress the body, arrange the home to create an appropriate mood for mourning, and observe other rituals as symbolic acts that help to control the entire experience of grief.

Death is a supremely significant occasion, and the deceased is, in a peculiarly real and moving sense, the central actor. Although dead, the corpse remains alive as the central figure of the funeral ceremonies. Careful cleansing and dressing of the corpse, followed by religious rituals, express the affection and sorrow of the living for the dead, where the emotional crisis of burial is met with heightened drama by honouring the dead and showing gestures of farewell (Charles 1948). Over the years, folklorists have analyzed death rituals from various perspectives. Whereas earlier works focused on documenting different death customs and rituals, more recently, folklorists have focused on the changes in death customs over time. For example, Peter Narváez stressed that while in the first half of this century in Newfoundland and Labrador the traditional house wake was an important social context for the enactment of forms of mediation and magical agency, with modernization, dying persons were no longer cared for by their community (2003). Rather, the dying were routinely sequestered from the living in specialized hospital wards and tended to by professionally trained morticians who prepare cadavers to be “lifelike” for public display in funeral homes (Narváez 2003, 113). Narváez notes that domestic funerary customs and rituals, community mechanisms of consolation, and collective support for the bereaving no longer appear to be as

prevalent as they once were in the province, even if people still perform these rituals in some places (1994).

Death must be consistent with the larger socio-cultural value system of a society, whether in kinship, marriage, or economic networks. It is within this context that the elaborate and often very expensive rituals make sense. Similarly, in a study of wakes in the community of Calvert, Gerald L. Pocius describes death “as a sombre community occasion” (1991, 181). To extract oneself from performing these ceremonies is not just to serve a relationship with the dead but, more importantly, to risk excommunicating oneself from the community. For example, in Bangladesh, I have observed that there is an economic class dimension to the performance of death rituals. Those who are economically better off usually arrange a grand feast in the name of the deceased person, after both four days and forty days following the burial. This is an expression of one’s social status as well as their affection for the deceased person who was close to them. The grand feast ultimately symbolizes the family’s social and economic status, even though the family members refer to it as “charity” in the name of the deceased person. This example highlights that death rituals must be understood within the context of the total transactions in a society and not merely as isolated events. It also reveals that these transactions occur at two levels: first, between the living and the dead, and second, between living individuals and groups within a society.

These examples show how folkloric works on death customs and rituals, in general, demonstrate the link between the deceased and their community. They highlight the very social fact of ritual, which is considered a social

process of communally bidding farewell to the dead. Importantly, they also reflect a shift in folkloristics away from examinations of particular death customs to analyses of changing death rituals due to the influences of modernity. This discussion also marks the influences of bureaucratization, specialization, and compartmentalization of “modern” death, which largely removes dying from community context. Today, the bereaved person can suffer from a paucity of ritualistic conventions during the mourning period since his emotional involvements are not diffused over an entire community but are usually concentrated on a few people. I think changing death customs and rituals and their impact on bereavement represents a rich topic for future folkloristic examination.

Death and Memorial Culture

Along with death rituals, folklorists also analyze death in terms of material culture, focusing on death memorials, cemetery traditions, roadside crosses, and even floral customs in funerals. Gravestones and grave sites are material statements of how family members believe a loved one should be remembered. Internment in a remote, anonymous grave without a funeral would be a casting-out; it would be an indication that the person no longer belonged to society. While it has been a longstanding tradition to commemorate the dead by the roadside (numerous war memorials and statues of prominent figures stand on or beside public highways), not all roadside memorials necessarily honour the dead.

Recently, it has become popular to memorialize accident victims in England and other countries through the

construction of roadside memorials (Everett 2002; Monger 1997; Petersson 2009; Smith 1999). For example, in the article “RIP by the Roadside: A Comparative Study of Roadside Memorials in New South Wales, Australia, and Texas, United States,” Jennifer Clark and Ashley Cheshire critically examine roadside memorials. This comparative study raises questions about the consistency in memorial form and practice between societies with diverse ethnic and religious profiles and different historical backgrounds (2004). Clark and Cheshire suggest that in the United States of America, ethnic and sub-group affiliation accounts for local and individual differences in mourning culture. The authors note that “the roadside memorial reclaims public space for the celebration of the individual in a period and place of overwhelming technological and cultural change” (2004, 203).

Another important folkloristic work on memorial culture is Holly Everett’s *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* (2002). In her field research on roadside cross memorials in and around the city of Austin, Texas, she thoroughly analyzes these memorials as material culture. Everett considers memorial issues as an important folkloristic phenomenon in belief and folklore studies. Her research provides the historical and current context for the appearance of vernacular memorials and discusses a number of culturally important memorials. Everett illustrates dominant patterns in the construction and assembly of spontaneous memorials and roadside crosses, demonstrating that different items placed at road crosses reflect an ongoing dialogue with the deceased (notes, inscriptions on bridge railings) and the continuation of missed celebrations (toys, homecoming mums, graduation

tassels). These memorials are communal responses in terms of vernacular, religious expression as well as political activism and the grief processes of a community that represent the deceased and contain elements which allow bereaved individuals to incorporate the dead into the world of the living and vice versa.

Like Everett, Jack Santino also discusses the concept of “spontaneous shrines,” along with other examples of public memorialization of death in his edited work *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (2006). Santino explores the social dynamics and political repercussions of spontaneous shrines and suggests that, by combining the personal with the public, they can be seen as a metaphor for folklore itself. He notes that the motivations leading to public acts of memorialization are complex because they have to do with sickness, belief, personal devotion, attempts to influence that which is beyond human control, and also a need to demonstrate to an audience. Like memorials, cemeteries also act as a unique form of material culture which reflects a communal setting as well as different forms of memorialization of death. Gerald Pocius’s work on Newfoundland gravestones reflects this idea of a material culture marked by “the rock” used as a gravestone in the Newfoundland region (Pocius 1981). Pocius’s study depicts how local crafts and material culture combine with communal belief in gravestones.

Overall, folklore work on memorials emphasizes the idea that whereas contemporary funeral custom and landscape highlight the difference between the deceased and those who mourn, roadside cross memorials present a cross-cultural affective threshold. Individuals mourning the sudden death of a loved one negotiate a complex field of

emotion, often dealing not only with their own grief but also with other relatives and friends of the deceased. Robert Halliday writes that as an effort to incorporate an unexpected loss in grief culture, spontaneous memorials should be understood as places of intimacy and community, sacred spaces in which death may be contemplated, and life celebrated (2010).

Along with the studies of memorials, I found Michael Owen Jones' article on "Dining on Death Row: Last Meals and the Crutch of Ritual" very fascinating in terms of relating foodways as a material culture related to death. Jones narrates the preparation of last meals for the prisoners who are sentenced to death as an important folkloristic work to explain foodways beyond traditional meals (2014). He analyzes why the public desires information about the food requested by those facing death, and how the condemned's meals are politicized, feeding arguments by both those for and those against the death penalty. This article also examines the origin of the last meal ritual and why this custom with varied meanings for different participants in the drama of execution perpetuates. Jones argues that the ceremonial last meal is one of the most powerful symbolic elements within a larger phenomenon laden with rituals and symbols in terms of the death penalty.

Lastly, another folkloristic article concerns floral traditions as material culture in funerals. Written by Susan Drury, "Funeral Plants and Flowers in England: Some Examples" examines the custom of crowning the dead, carrying garlands at funerals, and strewing coffins and graves with flowers, herbs and evergreens prevailed in England from early times to today (1994). Drury found that

in “earlier times, aromatic herbs and strongly scented flowers were used to hide the odour of decay when the dead were laid out, often for several days, in private houses before burial” (1994, 101). Other flowers and plants were used for their color or their symbolism. This paper presents a preliminary survey using a regional or county approach regarding funeral flowers and plants.

In brief, work on memorials and cemetery culture in folklore studies reflects changing trends, from a focus on beliefs to one on contemporary roadside crosses and changes in cemetery decorations. These discussions indicate how people try to stay connected with the dead through forms of material culture; these material expressions demonstrate communal behaviour in terms of cemetery traditions. All of these activities are closely connected with personal and community-shared beliefs.

Folk Beliefs about Death

In earlier periods of folklore scholarship, folklorists paid most attention to folk beliefs, legends, and myths about death. They tried to figure out peoples’ perceptions of death according to their communal beliefs about death, death taboos, and even death omens like, “If one stood on the church porch on the last night of the year, he would see the shadows of those who were doomed to die in the coming year” (Law 1900). The appearance of the face of the dead was considered to be an indication of the state of the departed soul. A calm, peaceful expression was considered a hopeful sign that the deceased person would go to heaven, whilst those who had died in a state of sin had a look of pain or an evil sneer.

In “Death Beliefs from Indiana,” Violetta Maloney Halpert wrote about death beliefs that she classifies as either omens or taboos. Death omens, which informants often call “signs” or “tokens,” are simply notices of impending death (Halpert 1952, 205). Halpert shares beliefs about death that are usually manifestations of the external world, although there are occasional exceptions by way of extra-sensory perceptions; thereby, death taboos can be regarded as warnings against committing actions which are or were once believed to cause death. From the evidence of this collection, death taboos seem to inspire less intense belief and testimony than omens (Halpert 1952). She describes two notions of death taboos in her collection: if you do so-and-so, someone will die; and never (variants: don't, you shouldn't) do such-and-such, or someone will die. Her collection is a great source for folklore researchers because she includes many personal narratives collected from Indiana about death, death omens, and death beliefs. Halpert notes other examples of various incidents at the time of death or during a funeral that are said to predict another death. Many of the beliefs Halpert records in Indiana are cross-cultural, and interestingly, I heard some of the same taboos in my Bangladeshi community, especially in rural settings. This idea of finding the same beliefs in different cultures in different characters is similar to Claude Levi-Strauss’ arguments in his work *Myth and Meaning* (2017).

Likewise, in his work on Chinese residents of Singapore, Bloch Parry notes that birth rituals seem to follow similar patterns to death rituals: just as corpses are buried, so too are placentae during birth (1982). He asserts that the notion of death related to rebirth is not unique to

Southeast Asian societies because, of course, many people who believe in Hinduism and Buddhism believe in an afterlife that one can enter after death. As Parry suggests, the promise of rebirth is used in many cultures to negate the finality of death, whereas fertility symbols are prominent in death rituals because of the conception of death as a source of life. Through a manipulation of the ambiguous concept of time, death can be successfully harnessed to ensure regeneration (Parry 1982).

Because what happens to us after our bodies die is an important question for many people, it is arguably one of the most important issues folklorists address. Who among us has not at some point in his lifetime wondered, “What will happen to me when I die?” or, “What happens to the people we love when they die?” These questions impact our daily lives, and a better understanding of how individuals and cultures answer them can be seen as integral to our understanding of the structure of our civilization and our theological beliefs. I would argue that whatever we believe happens to our sense of self or personhood at the end of our days also strongly affects our outlook on life while we are alive: it can determine our sense of social ethics and profoundly affect our cultural values.

Some scholars have emphasized the connection of death practices to underlying cultural beliefs. For example, Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington argue that death cannot merely be understood as an event marked by a haphazard assemblage of ceremonies and activities (1991). Beyond being a natural fact, death is a culturally constructed idea to which people connect their worldly experiences. As life becomes transparent against the

background of death, fundamental social and cultural values are revealed (Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

*Role of Culture in Framing Expressions of Grief:
“Good” or “Bad” Death*

Processes of meaning-making, social narratives, and cultural norms regarding death are mutually constituted. Rituals of mourning and remembering are not only shaped by cultural discourses, but also, in turn, shape communal narratives. Likewise, folkloristic works document the ongoing transformation of rituals, traditions, and emotions, as well as of the verbal, embodied, and material expressions of loss. Folklorists show how the response to death becomes a site of negotiation between personal identity and social and familial relationships, while also reflecting and refracting larger issues of trauma and emotional grief. Rather than a solely individual process, extensive research shows that the response to loss is always intersubjective.

The work of Diane Tye and Diane Goldstein also illustrates the emotional stress caused to the family members after the sudden tragic death of three young boys (2006). The authors narrate the story of the drowning of three teenagers from the small coastal Newfoundland community of Pouch Cove and the grief of their close ones after the accident. This sudden death of such young people brings a great deal of pain and shock to family and community members. Their expressions of grief reflect the belief that it is tragic and unnatural to lose someone at a very young age. In contrast, if someone dies at an advanced age, or after suffering from a chronic disease, their family

members are often mentally prepared for their death and view it as more natural.

The manner of dying and the meaning given to death have great implications for the grieving process. If one person dies of old age and another dies by accident at a young age, very likely there would be a significant distinction in the grieving process. For example, in my community in Bangladesh, where peoples' lives are shaped by diverse social norms and religious values, a death resulting from suicide or violence (such as sexual or physical assault) is often considered a "bad" death. On the other hand, dying at an advanced age, dying as a religiously respected person, and/or dying from natural causes, are all considered "good" deaths. When an individual takes their own life, their family members can be socially stigmatized, and the meaning-making process surrounding such a death has a great impact on the grieving process. At a time when family members remain in shock over the sudden death of their loved one, they may also have to deal with lots of questions and stigma within their community. For example, if a young girl is murdered following a rape, then her family may experience victim blaming. They may face shameful and accusatory questions such as: Why did she go there? What was her relationship with the rapist? Were there any unlawful relations between them? Did her outfit send the wrong message to the assailant? This response reveals why folklorists cannot study death as an isolated life event. It is embedded in communal narratives and social values.

The cultural construction of emotions is a multi-directional process, and community structure and tradition, in part, determine what is allowed, encouraged, or

prevented in terms of expressing grief. Personal and communal needs do not always synchronize with each other: sometimes, the individual's need to express and recognize their loss may conflict with restoring the social fabric and collective identities according to expected communal norms. Folklorists explore who gets to define what constitutes healing, the ways in which rituals reflect understandings of the nature of mourning, and the role of the collective in managing the emotions that go with it. Folklore studies also demonstrate that in many societies, some ways of dying are deemed better than others, which are considered bad, tragic, or ugly. Likewise, there are also certain times when dying is seen to be appropriate, depending on the context. The meaning that is assigned to death through shared conceptions and values predates the event, yet individuals often actively seek to shape and define deaths in particular ways that, in turn, shape the emotional response to that death. Among the many emic categories which characterize a death, the opposition between a "bad" and "good" death reflects deep social values that continue to affect survivors even after an individual has died.

Ethnographic Challenges of Researching Death

Grief researchers have long recognized the important role of culture in framing the mourning experience as processes of meaning reconstruction and relationship transformation that are inherently situated in interpretive communities and social relationships (Rosenblatt 2008). Ethnographic research on a sensitive topic such as death presents a host of personal and professional dilemmas for a fieldworker. It

calls for intense involvement of emotional capacities and raises practical and ethical challenges related to privacy, trust, and maintenance of boundaries (Watts 2008). The uneasy feeling that another person's pain is the source of the researcher's academic advancement can take an emotional toll on the researcher. It can be hard to acknowledge and record the emotions that a researcher experiences and realizes, which are also data in their own right. Grief, loss, pain, and death are all connected to our personal lives, and importantly, these feelings are shaped by our surroundings. In "Catullan Myths," Aaron Seider (2016) argues that expressing emotion for the departed soul of a family member varies based on gender. On this point, researchers need to pay attention to the culture where someone is expressing their emotions and feelings.

Even in earlier folklore works, folklorists faced the challenges of doing fieldwork on death. For example, in his 1994 article on the Merry Newfoundland Wake, Peter Narváez talks about the challenge of avoiding ethnocentrism in research on death. He notes that ethnocentrism biases thinking with regard to such an emotionally charged subject as death (Narváez 1994). Ralph LaRossa and Linda Bennett's seminal paper on the ethical dilemmas of doing qualitative research with families is relevant in this context (2018). Emphasizing the pervasiveness and inaccessibility of family life, they raise the ethical issues of informed consent and the risk-benefit equation for families. Qualitative researchers, more often than not, do not have clearly formulated research questions or strategies: the very strength of this method of research is its openness and responsiveness to contexts and subjectivities. The issue of "informed consent,"

a cornerstone of ethical practices in research, becomes challenging; while this fact is humbling, it also raises the issue of paucity of support structures and avenues available to families in difficult circumstances to talk through their troubles to an empathetic, non-judgmental listener. This situation sometimes also reflects upon the power relations that characterize the research engagement and the way that these relationships are complicated by the researcher's positionality.

For example, in the article "Researcher as Insider: Opportunities and Challenges," Shuvangi Vaidya shares her experience of doing fieldwork with parents who lost their children with disability (2010). Vaidya narrates that many parents told her that they had been interviewed or surveyed before, and they had cooperated but felt that the researchers were more interested in the information they had to offer rather than in them as persons. She stresses that when doing fieldwork on an emotionally difficult topic, it is important to carefully and sensitively approach participants. She admits that she has invested considerably with her research participants herself by sharing her own story and narrating her own pain. Vaidya finds that with every disclosure of her pain, particularly the difficult time when she lost her husband, her respondents would open up more and more and talk freely and frankly.

In such a situation, the collected "data" reveals personal and emotive stories of pain, loss, rebuilding, and acceptance. Here, I recall Judith Stacey's classic piece *Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?* (1988) where she argues that the friendship that may develop between a feminist researcher and her respondent could end up becoming more manipulative than the more usually distanced

researcher/participant relationship, which had no pretensions of aiming at empathy or solidarity. Stacey shares her own experiences of feeling that she was using and betraying her informants by transforming the extremely private and intimate information revealed to her into data. There can remain an uneasy feeling that another person's pain is the prime source of the researcher's academic advancement, and there's limited space to justify this.

To summarize the challenges of conducting folklore research on death, I would like to draw on the personal experiences of someone who did such ethnographic research. In her thesis, Holly Everett shares how emotionally challenging her fieldwork on roadside memorials could be (2002). She notes that she had to struggle with the responsibility of eliciting, recording, and reporting extremely sensitive, personal information of her informants. In addition, she felt she had a major responsibility to accurately represent the beauty and power of the memorials that her informants create, recreate and describe during their interviews. I find Everett's account emotionally moving, and the very challenging nature of her fieldwork comes through clearly. Based on her experience, I think the main challenge for a folklore researcher is to sensitively represent the voices of participants; this is perhaps especially difficult when documenting deep grief and loss. Everett's work may generate new directions for folklore research as her emotional—yet potentially therapeutic—process of managing grief and trauma may encourage folklorists to cope with emotional turmoil during their fieldwork.

Final Thoughts

To conclude, this paper weaves together earlier and current ideas on the folkloristics of death. I ground this paper in the examination of data and theoretical approaches utilized by a number of folklore scholars, and in some parts of the discussion, I reached beyond folklore scholarship to contextualize folkloristic analyses. For the most part, I presented a detailed account of the cultural practices of death across a range of religious and cultural contexts. Although I could not incorporate all published folklore sources on death in this single paper, I tried to draw on representative works from this large body of folklore scholarship. My reading prompts me to do more study on the topic. Each area of literature sparked new ideas and new ways to think of death. While death has been a focus of study for folklorists since the early days of the discipline, there still remains much to be done and many unexplored aspects for future folklorists.

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