Relationships of Affection. Relationships of Power: Death and Family Grieving in the Islands of the Aegean, 17th–18th Centuries

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Around 1700, J. P. Tournefort was traveling in the Aegean. By that time, Ottoman sovereignty in the archipelago had been achieved and its institutions, especially its taxation system, were starting to take on their final form; on the other hand, the presence of the Latin element, secular as well as religious, with the exception of the Jesuits, was steadily diminishing, to the benefit of the Orthodox communities. In his travel account, Tournefort describes, among other things, the funeral customs of the Orthodox populations of the archipelago. Taking the funeral of the wife of an elder of Milos as an example, he describes an extensive ritual organised in three stages: the moment of death; the hierarchically arranged funeral procession from the settlement to the church, where the funeral service was held; and the memorial service over the grave (possibly in the same church) nine days later. In his account, he stresses the element of the public collective lamentation: firstly, the presence of keening women who mourn the deceased for a fee during the three abovementioned stages and who resort to, besides the ‘mournful’ verses of the dirge, an emphatic body code: woeful shrieks or even screams, breast beating, hair pulling; and secondly, the public lamentation of the relatives, men as well as women, which was subject to the same code of expression. However, on some islands, such as Mykonos, during the same period, he observes that the funeral, conversely, was a simple procedure; the deceased was carried quickly to the central square where a few prayers were said, and was then buried in the churchyard; the public lamentations were limited, while the relatives (and, possi-
bly, friends) were in the habit of retreating to the home to mourn among themselves, from the
day after the funeral, resorting to less demonstrative body codes: the traveller typically uses the
terms tears, crying (larmes, pleurs) and sobs (sanglots). Pouqueville observes the same dif-
fences, in a more schematic manner, much later at the start of the nineteenth century on the
occasion of the funeral of community leader in the Peloponnese.

Anthropological consideration on collective and individual mourning, male as well as female,
and on the management of body language (gestes), starting from Marcel Mauss, represents a
vast, well-studied and well-documented field which will not concern us here; the range of cor-
responding historical considerations appears to be more restricted, less systematic and less
autonomous, as it is registered in a more general, older discussion on “sensibilities”, attitudes
and behaviours, and more recently on a discussion on “gestes”, while undoubtedly constitu-
ing a significant chapter of the history of death. Yet, the terms and consequently the conceptual
tools continue to pose a difficulty for historians. Recently the historian Elisabeth Pavan-Crouzet
formulated an interesting semiotic distinction: sentiment (in this case grief) is transformed into
“emotion” (in this case emotion or trepidation in face of death) when it performs a communica-
tive function, addresses meanings to a recipient or recipients, and, consequently, when it consti-
tutes a sign and creates language. Barthes had already alluded to this distinction in his game of
words between sensibilité and sensiblerie of tears. All this, however, remains at the stage of lin-
guistic-tool experimentation. What is interesting is that, under a new light shed by contemporary
considerations, anthropologists as well as historians, while not having ceased to face emotion
as bearing meaning, as a psychological ‘language’ of the mental representations or the cultural
stereotypes of a society, are tempted to study it as a social, ‘political’ act with specific histori-
cal social actors, thus achieving an anthropocentric turn of the field with a new meaning. If the
language of emotion can “create or reproduce social identities and relations”, then the actual
scope of study is no longer the ‘signs’, but again human societies, where the classical problem of
structures and relations of power is now approached through non-classical, peripheral and
hidden connotations, nonetheless belonging to the deep, human matter of history: it is this mat-
ter to which emotion belongs. From this aspect, a history of the changes in the ‘language’ of
grief would constitute, among others, a chapter, often exciting, in a less visible and more pen-
etrating history of power and the groups wielding power, in this case the modern societies of
the Greek archipelago within the framework of the Mediterranean and the critical turn from the
seventeenth to the eighteenth century.

At the end of the seventeenth century, a domestic ruling society seems to emerge, secular as
well as religious, since its emergence coincides, among others, with the change of the ecclesi-
astical organisation of the Orthodox communities of the Aegean from the system of patriarchal
exarchates to the system of autonomous metropolises and archdioceses. The basic core of this
society is comprised of people from the Phanariote world, whose origins were in the provinces
of the Ottoman Empire and who studied in Europe and who had replaced the old Byzantine aris-
tocracy in the higher echelons surrounding the Patriarchate and the sultan. From the end of the
seventeenth century, the descendants of this circle return to their place of origin on the mainland
or to the islands as consuls, voivods (lessees of tax revenues) and commissaries of parish coun-
cils: in other words, as intermediaries between the Ottoman administration and the subordinate
populace. There they contract relations by marriage – through marriage strategies – with local families (Orthodox, Catholic or other Latins who have adopted the Orthodox faith) – and invest the ready money that their families have accumulated (often from the leasing of patriarchal revenues) in real estate but also in commerce and lending: this was, for instance, the case of the renowned Mavrogenis family of the archipelago.

This new elite that establishes itself and develops on the islands does not forget to claim the actual as well as the symbolic capital of its predecessors: the possession of land and the revenue it produces always constitute the real raw material, and the distribution of family property, even the drawing up of a will, is the basic mechanism through which its social identity is maintained and reproduced at the critical moment of death; nor does it forget to claim the representations of the old bankrupt ‘nobility’, both the eastern (Byzantine) and the western (Venetian), even borrowing its symbols: it dresses, in this case, its deceased in their best clothes; it accompanies the funeral procession with an open coffin through the settlement where the place of the relatives, the higher clergy, often of both faiths, as well as the distinguished members of society, is hierarchically ordained; it uses wax candles, lace and artificial flowers, brought from Venice, for example; it wears colourful clothes at funerals, as travellers note, and why not; it employs the most expensive professional mourners, paying them in cash and kind, to publicly express and demonstrate its grief.

However, if the noblemen or the elders of the islands at the end of the seventeenth century behaved like miniatures of the old Latin or Byzantine princes, they were not impermeable to the transformations which Phanariote society in general was undergoing and which have been studied in recent years on account of their Western education and their experience with the sovereign royal courts along the Danube and in European embassies, the Phanariotes of the seventeenth century developed an economical and social ideology that generally found its theoretical grounding in a notion of private ‘property’ as the basic pillar of social ‘wealth’. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century in Europe, Antoine de Montchrestien, the Italian theoreticians of the state, and, of course, Thomas Hobbes had considered the common good and common prosperity as the sum of individual interests and individual effort to gain wealth; much later, dragoman and Ottoman secretary of state Alexandros Mavrokorodatos would establish the term of “virtuous selfishness” in the Ottoman milieu.

Did this new ambient ideology, along with the expansion of the financial activities as well as the social and political role of this elite which came about as a result of the extension of Ottoman sovereignty and its administrative and taxation system over the islands, change the psychology and consequently the emotional behaviour of island society? The family provides a privileged field of observation for that. It is interesting that the hereditary rights of the times began to show sporadic shifts, undoubtedly slow and unequal, from the blood relations of the maternal or paternal line, which were prevalent in the Aegean, to the line by marriage: it may not be by chance that, from the end of the seventeenth century and undoubtedly during the following century, judicial rulings and clauses settling or reinforcing the hereditary rights of in-laws became more common. The greatest number of hereditary transfers among in-laws are found in those cases which conceal credit networks within the family circle and, consequently, new relations of protection which seem to have developed into new emotional bonds. From this point of view,
of particular interest are those eighteenth-century wills in which legators violate the conditions of customary hereditary rights based on the blood line and the right of women, essentially the right of primogeniture, clearly mentioning the emotional argument. Cases include people bequeathing a significant amount of property to second-born male children so that they will not have any grievances about the harsh custom of first-born daughters receiving all the property; a man entrusting the same to his niece because he loves her dearly; or, finally, someone leaving everything to his wife because she was loving and caring and “looked after him during his illness”, instructing her to love their child, which he has left without any property even though he is an adult. If the restructuring of authority within the marital family eroded birthrights, and particularly those of females, to property and name, creating new relations of dependence after the legator’s death – in which the place of the widow is of particular interest – are invested with new emotional bonds, not only with the deceased, but also with the surviving relatives: it is perhaps in these bonds that we should search for the explanation of the increasing absence of lamentation and expression of grief within the family of the deceased if we are to believe the testimony of the travellers. These bonds finally allowed a tendency towards the individualisation of grief, one could say an enclosure of death within the family, reflected in the reformulation of the introductory phrases in wills: in the eighteenth century, death is described increasingly as the cancellation of nature as it relates to the individual and his relations with the family, and less as a divine rite which incorporates the individual within the broader Christian community of repentance and salvation. This absence brought with it a new distinction between genders: in the nineteenth century, Markos Zallonis, a doctor from Tinos who had studied in France and who was married to a daughter of a Phanariote, wrote that on the island only widows remained closed up in their home for years mourning their late husbands. The ninthteenth century has its own, different stereotypes: among these, according to a contemporary effort towards a typology of expressions of grief (which moreover restricted itself to the field of literature), there is also a distinction between tears as an exclusively female code and sobbing as exclusively male.

The shift or the parallel emergence of different codes of grief for the death of family in the archipelago seems, consequently, to reflect the rifts in the relations of power within island society, transforming the social representations and its ideals. Does it reflect, however, the games of social, cultural and political supremacy with the other ruling ‘societies’ that surrounded it?

It is true that the Patriarchate and the prelates that were well disposed to it used the behaviour relating to death to oppose the new island society: they subsequently made the exhibition of sorrow, public lamentation and the hiring of professional mourners the target of prohibitive orders, justifying these with the need to return to the ‘correct’ Byzantine typology of the faith. Had not John Chrysostom himself criticised and denounced not only professional mourning but also the beating of breasts, the pulling of hair and the laying bare parts of the body as having their origins in ancient, and consequently, pagan forms of orchestrating female lamentation? In some regions, for example the Mani and certain islands, even the public participation of women in funeral processions or funerals themselves was forbidden.

Nevertheless, this elite later confronted a broader Christian community of the Mediterranean in which contradictions were pervasive; in this confrontation, which left deeper and longer-lasting
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traces on its cultural codes, a typical object under dispute was sorrow, and particularly the tears at the death of a family member. On the one hand, the sovereign, seventeenth-century Mediterranean world was drawing to an end, the world of the French traveller, the dynamic elements of which constituted the rising urban social strata, both Catholic and Protestant, who regarded mourning as identical to grandeur, silence and dry eyes: this code was obeyed, for example, by mournful, silent and tearless male pleurers, the monks with covered faces who accompanied the stately funerals of the elite of the French south, where Tournefort lived a large part of his life. The same code dismissed, and often prohibited, every type of ceremony and certainly female lamentation at funerals.

On the other hand, in the seventeenth-century Aegean, there were people and politics who cultivated, provoked and even staged tears: Orthodox clergymen or laymen, monks from Mount Athos, Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries of the Counter-Reformation, and, possibly, missionaries of the Reformation (research on the latter is ongoing), who toured the islands, took confession and preached publicly to reinforce the loose ties of their populations, particularly the noblemen, with the sovereign churches, Orthodox or Latin. At the same time they were bearers of a common interior theological tradition, an “interior world”, a product of multiple, often ancient social and cultural intermingling, which disregarded the ruling dogmatic orders and ecclesiastical policies, and which often brought them into confrontation not only with the highest ecclesiastical authority, the Patriarchate, but also with the surrounding ‘political’ society of the Sublime Porte. Their sermons educated the island society on new forms of religious emotion, on public tears for poverty and scorn for worldly affairs, on the tears of self-denial, of abasement and repentance; their texts came to save their listeners from that ‘sinful’ internalised sorrow which threw it into the arms of the family, making it forget its bonds with the Christian community and even its dead: “Refrain from sorrow, which does not benefit the deceased but rather harms and angers the Lord. Pray for the soul of your friend, give alms, as you are able, pay the clergy to perform memorial and divine services, which greatly benefit the deceased,” wrote the Orthodox preacher in the widely read Amartolon Sotiria (Salvation of the Sinful). Taking the above into consideration, the historian wonders which society, historical conjuncture and dominant imagination is served by the modern European stereotype presenting Greeks as an emotional people, with tender hearts, always shedding tears over the graves of their dead.

NOTES


5 For the establishment of the term in the history of emotion, see Lucien Febvre, “La sensibilité et l’histoire. Comment reconstituer la vie affective d’autrefois?” Annales d’histoire sociale 3 (1941), pp. 5–20. Note also the alternative use of sense or sentiment in a similar context: Alberto Tenenti, Il senso della morte e l’amore della vita nel Rinascimento (Francia e Italia), Turin: Einaudi, 1957; Claude Sutto (ed), Le sentiment de la mort au Moyen Age, Quebec: Les Éditions Univers, 1979.


7 See her introduction in Emotions in the Heart of the City, pp. 27–29, and p. 27.


11 About this society and the analysis which follows her, see Eleftheria Zei, «Ο θάνατος στο Αιγαίο», pp. 149–186.


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17 Zei, «Ο θάνατος στο Αιγαίο», pp. 176–177.


Dimitris S. Loukatos, «Λαογραφικαί περί τελευτής ενδείξεις παρά Ιωάννη Χρυσοστόμω», *Epetiris tou Laografikou Archeiou* (1940), 63–64. During the Enlightenment the issue of the Greek national origin of these practices was vehemently discussed, see also the related bibliography for the renowned debate on the regularity of memorial services and offering of “collyva”, in which Korais formulated the argument about the ancient Greek origin of those ‘popular’ memorial practices: A. Korais, *Ataka*, vol. 4, Paris, 1832, p. 122.

