

Women and Death

Cultural Power and Ritual Process in Inner Mani

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This paper is part of a larger study based on extensive fieldwork and concerned with the deritualization of women's mortuary ceremonies and women's cultural power in Inner Mani. This research has been supported by Charlotte Newcombe/Woodrow Wilson National Foundation and by Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

The identification of women with polluting activities and uncontrollable powers of defilement has been a fundamental thematic in the anthropology of Mediterranean societies. This linkage of women to the impure has been treated in anthropological analysis as a symbolic category that expresses the rigid division of genders and the subordinate position of women in these societies. Thus, the opposition of the pure to the impure in Mediterranean rural cultures is taken as defining the relations of men to women, society to nature, public to private domains, honor to shame, family to society, household to village, order to disorder. In turn, these oppositions have become fundamental frameworks for the analysis of the social organization and cultures of rural Mediterranean societies.

Objections to this framework have been twofold: 1) The dichotomies of purity and impurity as both conditions and activities do not follow strict gender divisions. Men are also capable of performing polluting acts. Women have no monopoly on pollution; they also play central roles in rites of purification concerning midwifery, maintenance of the symbolic integrity of the households, and in death rituals. 2) Male dominance, at least on the level of the village and the household, is often a surface reality, a highly ideological male representation of village society. Under-

neath this surface appearance of a monolithic male hegemony lie multiple domains of covert informal female power, such as the women's management and control of the domestic space, of important areas of agricultural production, and their mediation of life cycle events and rites of passage, i.e. birth, marriage and death. Through their gossip, Mediterranean women have been depicted as extending their power from the private domain of the household to public areas nominally dominated by men.

The organization of gender relations of Inner Mani, from 1850 to present, reflects some continuities with both of the above models of Mediterranean gender relations and some significant departures. The most significant departure lies in Maniot women's management of the central life cycle event of Mani: death. Despite the strong linkage of women to death, and through death to pollution, the management and performance of mortuary rituals by women is not an expression of their subordination, but rather an inversion of the dominant pattern of Maniot gender relations that prevail outside the ritual space of mourning. My thesis is that Maniot women, through ritual performance, transform the aura of defilement that surrounds death and the corpse into a domain of cultural power from which men, because of its pollution, must necessarily keep their social and physical distance. Nor is the ritual activity of mourning relegated to the private domain; on the contrary, in Inner Mani it has been the preeminent public event. Through their improvisation of mourning songs, Maniot women have been the creators of the region's collective oral history and have established themselves as arbiters in many areas of collective conflict such as revenge code violence.

Inner Mani is an arid, rocky, infertile ecological isolate of the Southern Peloponnese. It is set apart from the general socio-economic direction of Greek development from the 1821 revolution onwards, by the predominance of clan social organization, banditry, precapitalist economies, and violent resistance to state hegemony. These patterns persisted in Inner Mani well into the first half of this century. Since the 1950s, Mani has remained one of the poorest regions of Greece, a condition aggravated by massive depopulation. Depopulation, subordination to state institutions, and penetration of capitalist economies and urban ideologies have severely disrupted the integrity of traditional cultural patterns and practices in this region. Despite this disruption, however, the Maniot mortuary ritual, although under attack by urbanized Maniots, is still enacted within customary frameworks, and remains the last living expression of traditional Maniot culture. As a center of cultural resistance, the Maniot death ritual reproduces its central function as a medium for social conflict.

I have been referring to death as a singular event, but in practice death in Inner Mani is organized into a ritual cycle of prolonged duration. This cycle begins in the act of dying (what for Maniots was the "good death"), proceeds to the burial ceremony, and is formally terminated many years later ("in the old times" three years later) with the exhumation of the bones; a rite expressing the purified status of the dead. This mourning cycle is punctuated by periodic memorial services that are held at regular and established intervals. All these various events are managed exclusively by women, with the exception of the manual tasks of carrying the coffin and burying it, and the limited

participation of the priest in burial, memorial and exhumation ceremonies. Women are the central actors that construct, through music, discourse and gesture, the iconography of the individual dead and the general iconography of death in their society. It is on the semantic foundation of this iconography of the dead and Death that Maniot women ritually perform critical assessments of their own moral status, the status of their clan and of their village. Thus, the mourning songs that they improvise in cathartic mourning sessions can be read as symbolic mappings of Maniot society and history. The well-composed mourning song and the often dramatic events surrounding its composition, transform the funeral into a public and historical event, the details of which pass into Maniot collective memory.

The gender-based organization of the mortuary rite is expressed in the women's proximity to the dead. From the laying out of the corpse, through the burial ceremony, and years later at the exhumation of the bones, women remain in close physical contact with the corpse and its remains — entities that men refrain from coming into close contact with. The corpse is caressed and kissed by the women in ceremonies of ritual greeting as they enter the house of the dead where the mourning will take place. Through the order of mourning song performance, and in the intensity of their cathartic gestures such as the pulling out of hair and self inflicted wounds, women signify their proximity to the dead and their intimacy with the domain of Death. In this synthesis of authentic personal pain and patterned performance, the women both establish the intensity of their kinship and symbolic relation to the dead and ritually demarcate a woman's symbolic space and performative territory from which men keep their distance. Within this ceremonial space, only the priest enters, and his intervention functions as a definite interruption superimposed on the women's ceremony.

The mourning song performances function as divination rites in which women, through their poetic discourses on the dead, identify the manifestations of evil and of social crisis that become visible and accessible to criticism because of the event of death. The songs contain moral assessments of the dead, the clan of the dead and of the singer, and of the village community. Women also use these songs to express hidden conflict between the singers and the social order of the clan. In these instances, women whose social status is negatively affected by the

death of a significant male relation or affine, can resist the downwards repositioning of their social status, and through an eloquent mourning discourse fix or raise their social status within the clan and beyond it. The mourning ritual, and in particular mourning song performance, is one of the few opportunities for women to cross restrictive household boundaries prevalent at other times, and to overtly intervene in the public affairs of clan and village.

In the space of death, the relations of women to men are governed by discourse and by the demarcated zone of pollution emanating from the physical presence of the dead. In contrast to village spatial organization, this women's space of death temporarily dominates the village locales in which the mortuary rite and funerary processions occur. It is not in the least limited to the domestic space of the household although this may be its center of intensity during certain phases of the ceremony. Women are the sole presenters of funeral discourse during which men remain distant, peripheral and silent even when they are addressed and verbally attacked by female performers. The men in effect cannot respond. To do so, would be to enter discursively into the feminine space of death which they see as defiling. Thus, the mourning ceremony and women's central role in it, has a contradictory status in Maniot culture. The ceremony and the singing is considered a woman's activity, and, as all women's activities, should be classified as a low status practice. Yet, it is generally considered by both men and women that to sing at a ceremony is a bestowal of honor and high status on the female performer. The performances are competitive. A woman's personality, social status, and moral strength are assessed by both men and women on the basis of her performance. Yet the skilled performer can transform the men individually and as a group into objects of satire, ridicule, criticism, and aggression. The women in effect transform men's aversion to the space of death into a theater protected and insulated by its defiling powers and liminal order, from which they can mount assaults on the dominant sectors of their society: clan order and men. Conflict expressed in the ceremony is *not* only defined by gender divisions. Women performing in the ceremony engage in dialogical and conflictual encounters with each other, often attacking or satirizing each other in alternating performances.

The Maniot death ritual conforms

broadly to the Hertz/Van Gennepe model¹ according to which death in kinship dominated societies involves the suspension of the dominant institutions. This suspension of social order by death rituals is usually expressed in patterns of ritual inversion. Dying in Mani is a symbolic and topographical movement of both the dead and their kin groups from one classificatory position to another. Both the dead and their kin pass from a dangerous condition of defilement, incurred by the event of death, to a state of purification. This purification is brought about by women's ritual mediations from burial to exhumation. The inversion of dominant social order is expressed in the central role of women in the performance of the public ceremony, the marginal position of men in this ritual and in the public expression of social conflict by women.

Based on the women's mourning song discourses, their divinatory reading of exhumed bones, instructional dreams delivered by the dead and warning signs concerning impending death, we can discern two cognitive systems of knowledge in Maniot society that parallel Maniot gender divisions. These gender-based systems of cognition concerning the world of the living and the domain of death respectively, were central components in the social construction of reality in Maniot society. The division between these gender-based systems of cognition is reflected in the male cynicism or "common sense" attitude concerning the efficacy of the women's rituals. Women themselves pass back and forth between the common sense or secularized mode of cognition and the other mode in which death is symbolized and ritualized. Men in contrast remain marginal to the ritualistic construction of death. The so-called common sense perspectives are as much cultural and symbolic organizations of reality as the more dramatic ritual orderings of experience. Maniot women organize death into a performative event that dramatizes the destabilization that death causes to the common sense assumptions of the nature of reality. Skilled mourning singers perpetuate and dramatize modes of cognition, symbolization and interpretation that express the suspension of the normative order of everyday life by death. This mode of cognition expresses a liminal historical experience that emanates, like defilement itself, outwardly from the corpse and space of death to the entire Maniot society.

The superceding of this separate cognitive space by "common sense" at the termination of various events in the ritual

cycle, signifies the ending of a separate performative domain of woman's cultural power. Women's cynicism concerning the bridging of the rupture caused by death and their return to the "common sense" mode of cognition concerning death, is in fact the ritual return to a male dominated social order and its appropriate modes of cognition. The passage from the ritual space of death to the secular order of society, is in effect a passage from modes of cognition and sociation that threaten the legitimacy of male-based orderings of reality to modes of cognition and sociation that reinforce the dominant gender patterns of the social system.

The thrust of anthropological analysis has been to identify the linkage between women, death and defilement as an ideological expression of the domination of women by men. The Maniot mortuary ritual indicates that the reversal of social order instigated by death in patriarchal societies, can be exploited by women as an assertion of cultural power. This temporary dominance of a subordinate group, the performative amplification of collective liminality and inversion, has been classified by Victor Turner as the "power of the weak."² The historical presence of this phenomenon in Maniot culture points to the fact that in many Mediterranean rural societies, the structural dominance of men has not been monolithic; rather, gender relations have been held in a tension — tension that can be made visible in ritual performance.

The historical paradox of Inner Maniot women is that today their empowerment increasingly resides not in ritual but in relative economic mobility, urban ideologies, and the juridical guarantees of the state. The price for these freedoms and guarantees has been the incremental privatization of women within a nucleated family system that is still based on assymetric gender relations. By losing ritual domains of power that guaranteed a space of female sociation and cultural creativity, Maniot women lost a defensive perimeter against a patriarchal order.

¹ Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1960), and A. Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969).

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