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23-03-2015

A Tomb for One's All Being: The Alterations of Syrian's Death and the Changes of Their Life

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When individual humans die singly, among their living communities, they get buried individually. One grave for each person, no one shares ones grave with others. This could be a definition of humans, and it seems to be universally accepted, even though humans only agree a few things.

We let the dead peel away from us when their bodies are buried in known gravesites. But when they do not have known graves that can be visited, they remain roaming souls living inside us, only to intensify our souls' worry and sufferance. Only by burial people die. Those who do not get buried do not die; they remain prowling our common space. Mankind knew how to avoid the dangerous mix between the dead and the living. The essence of culture is the distinction between these two categories. Having gravesites, separated by a fence or just far from the living areas, controls the dead world and guarantees a separation between the living world here, inside, and the dead world there, outside, whilst keeping some sort of voluntary contact possible. Our formation as the "living" relies on separating ourselves from them, the dead. The present is made by letting them be part of a bygone era, our past, that has elapsed and ceased to come and budge. Thus, we smooth the way for the past to pass away and out, and for the inside to be the present, live and invite a future. We are the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, city or village, our dead are our past and our outside; they are our present's past and our inside's outside.

What happens when someone dies in time of war among the enemies? In the outer outside, not in the inside's outside? What happens when people die en mass? And when they die in groups among their enemies and away from their communities? When they are all killed by the enemies? When their bodies cannot be found? What happens when all the people in one neighbourhood die? Syrians have died in outlandish ways under the "Assad eternity" at the hands of the eternity agents and more recently at the hands of other eternity agencies. What is "outlandish" here is the mix between life and death, and

the inability of the living to separate themselves from their dead, because it's either physically or psychologically impossible when there is no corpse or a grave to visit, also because death is abundant and the living cannot always hold themselves together and separate themselves from their dead.

What befell the thousands of victims of Tadmur (Palmyra) prison in the 1980s and 1990s? Where were they buried? Did their murderers and torturers bury them like other people? Was it in a mass grave? Yes, if they buried them at all and not mashed up their bodies with some machine turning them into dust, or not burnt their bodies and dispersed their ashes. Maybe their dead bodies had the fate of Farajallah al-Helou's, whose dead body was dissolved in acid in 1959 in Nasser's prison. They must become nothing to prove that they were always nothing, they never existed. Who else other than insane people ask and care about the fate of those who did not exist? The insane are a menace of course, and it is alright to kill them.

And what happened to the 500 or more victims of the Tadmur prison massacre? They were killed in the prison in a summer day in 1980, and then the dormitories were emptied of the crushed bodies. Where were their mixed remains taken? Were they buried? Burned? Dissolved?

Were the people of Hama able to bury the thousands, or tens of thousands, of their dead? Some of them were buried under the houses that were demolished over their heads; the neighbourhoods were then bulldozed and modern hotels were built on the razed areas.

After the revolution, the most "decent" type of death

became when one dies and his corpse remains one piece so that the bereaved can bury him in a known and personal grave. The right to have a personal grave is not the dead's right, rather the right of their families and beloved ones, in order to keep a place for the deceased in the familial narrative, fill the vacuum of his absence and resume their life as normally as possible. "Normality" is made of the clear segregation between the present and the past, the inside and the outside, what is above the ground and what is under it, the visible and the invisible, the moving and the unmoving, the present and the absent. A "normal" death and a known personal grave guarantee the living a normal life after the departure of the deceased. With a mutilated or dismembered body, however, the dead remains to haunt the living, his departure starts to pump confusion in their normality. Normality is the core (or 'anthropological') culture insofar as breaking the normal death is the destruction of culture. So one can venture to predict that the abundant death of Syrians will be hugely impactful on their inherited core culture.

The violent deaths, especially those affecting the corporal wholeness of the victims, preclude the bereaved from seeing the deceased in many cases. In al-Mleha, May 2013, two victims were buried after half an hour of their death by a mortar shell that hit them in a field; their wives and children were unable to see them for one last time because their bodies were horribly mutilated. The emptiness caused by their absence cannot be filled or healed, there will always be a large notch on the family's body. "paying homage to the dead is burying him", a saying with Islamic resonance goes. but it is a homage to the departed that the bereaved get a chance to show him or her their last respects. Sometimes the elderly in the family decide that

no one will see the dead body if this would hurt his and their dignity. Like what happened in Douma, April 2013, to two other victims whose bodies were pulverized. They were immediately taken to the civil defense point, their names were registered and they were buried with the cloth left on them. Adults can bear this, but for the children, seeing their fathers as pulverized dispersed bodies will alter or obstruct their perception of the world and their future.

I saw two bodies of two six-month fetuses; their mothers have miscarried under fear. They got two small personal graves; I didn't see the two mothers. The mournful women grieve in seclusion, which doubles their grief.

And there are those who died trapped under the rubble of their ruined houses which made it impossible to rescue them or dig them out of the debris of their houses. As is to be expected, those are the poorest of the poor. If they had been affluent, no effort would have been spared to get them out of their houses-cemeteries.

The martyrs of the Ghouta Chemical Attacks, August 2013, lost their lives without their corporal wholeness being touched. They died amongst their community, not away from it in a hostile area. They were, however, buried in groups in impersonal mass graves. As if it is being said that they are a single soul, and as they all died at the same time, it is appropriate to bury them in the same place where they can keep each other's company in their final 'home'. According to Islamic rituals, martyrs are to be buried without bathing their corpses and with their "death clothes" on. They say this is because their blood will testify for them in the Day of Judgment. The Chemical massacre shed no blood, what will testify for our martyrs who were

also buried with their death clothes on? Could it be the orange foam that comes out of the mouths of those who inhale Sarin!

What about those who died under torture and whose pictures we saw? Where were they buried? It is unknown. Their bodies were naked and emaciated, but also numbered and photographed. Their death is a mass production of a systematic killing industry, but we don't know where the "final product" goes.

The Mediterranean water was the last home for over three thousand Syrians who drowned in the one stage of their journey to Europe. But the sea is not an appropriate grave because it is too large and moving; in the sea, the dead do not settle in one place, as if they did not die.

Does fire make enough of a grave for those who were burned alive or dead? What did the regime forces do with the remains of the dozens of people they burned alive since 2011?

Daesh shrouded with dust the remains of the Jordanian pilot in his cage, which suggests that shrouding is different from burial. Burial is an homage to the dead, it preserves his name and identity, while shrouding is disposal of the dead, it obliterates his name and existence. Nevertheless it should be mentioned that death to Salafists is almost just a "landfilling" of the dead.

Daesh threw off some of its victims in a ground hole called al-Houta in al-Hammam region north of the city of Ar-Raqqa. It is unclear whether the victims were thrown in the ground hole alive, but when I was in Ar-Raqqa (summer 2013) I heard that some blindfolded detainees were guided

to run for their lives towards the ground hole where they would fall; and the “Daeshist” perpetrators would rejoice over the scene. What is certain is that the criminal Salafist organization got rid of some martyrs in this method. There is at least one video showing it. Some corpses were loaded with cement blocks before being thrown in the Euphrates, according to a former detainee in Daesh’s prisons.

Daesh, and Salafism, relation with the living is the other side of their relation with the dead: their dead, the predecessors or the Salaf, are more alive than the living, and they depend on the living, their contemporaries under their rule, to be dead more than the dead (and if the living resist their “alive death” they would kill them). Preventing the dead from dying in this way, prevents the living from being alive; and not letting the past pass away suffocates the living and prevents the present from presenting itself, getting its independence, and becoming the future. Prevention is not possible without atrocious violence and cruelty that extirpate the boundary between life and death and keep the past closer and the present suffocated.

The regime, however, through its desire to make the present eternal prevents the future from coming and the past from going by, which is also unattainable without atrocious violence and cruelty, and without enforcing life and death to be neighbors.

There are no known personal graves for the deceased in all of those cases (i.e. the individual or mass death in a hostile area or the sea), therefore the deceased’s place in the family narrative will always be an open wound. The ideal situation for the living is to bury the dead of their beloved ones, and all parts of each one of the dead, in personal

graves in known lots. The extreme opposite situation is when all the corpses mix and are disposed of by unknowns in unknown locations. This opens the door for a massive, frightening diffusion: a mix between the inside and the outside, the present and the past, the moving and the unmoving, the visible and the invisible, and the reality and the expectation. The reality is limited by our death, we reasonably expect so because our death is certain, and we organize our life so that we die amongst our beloved ones. The reality changes when the expectation changes: by dying now, by dying together with our loved ones, by being buried under the rubble of our houses, by dying in a hostile area or under torture. The reality falls apart and becomes incredible when the expectation becomes intractable. We cannot expect anything in our lives when our death becomes very irregular and we don't end in known graves that contain our whole body. This diffusion is the gateway to horrible violence.

One can conjecture that the conditions of the dead, and post-mortal conditions, tell a lot about the conditions of the living. What is being and has been crushed during the Syrian revolution and war is not the bodies of the dead, but the bodies of the living, the communities and their living environment. Life is so much intermixed with death to the extent that the living cannot extricate themselves from the dead body parts and blood, or from the images, language and symbols thereof. This mix is very suitable for Daesh and their likes. On the other hand, death regularity in pro-regime communities was much less affected: death remained individual (it rarely happened in groups), the dead mostly have personal graves, and none of them was burnt or drowned.

In all cases, death is something that befall the living, not the dead themselves. Death is also a relationship with the living who have the responsibility to prevail over it by burying the deceased in known gravesites which shelter their bodies and indicate their names. When this becomes impossible, which happened extensively in Syria under the Assad eternity, the relationship among the living is disturbed and interrupted, as well as the society, the individuals themselves and their relation to the world...

...and to religion too

When people die in Syria, they keep the religion of their families, irrespective of who they are. Each one of us lives as an individual but dies as a member of his or her community. He might have been irreligious, but he dies 'religiously'. One may not be a Muslim or a Christian in his life, but Fares Murad (spent 29 years in jail, being a member of the 'Arab communist organisation, departed at 59 in 2009) died Muslim and the prayers for his forgiveness were held in a mosque, and Elias Murqus (a Marxist thinker, departed in 1991) died Christian and his body was taken from a church to his grave, and the headstones for both graves bear religious inscriptions. While it is possible for the living who belong to different religious groups to be neighbours, the dead can only be neighbours with other dead people from their group and in the group's exclusive cemetery. The last word is for the victor: religion. This could be an outcome of the weakness of individuals in front of communities, and the weakness of all communities in the general assembly of communities combine in front of the 'state'. They control death because life is out of their control.

Those who died in hostile areas weren't buried. Their corpses were disposed of in unknown ways, which cannot be considered burial; no religion could do anything about this or defend the sanctity of the dead, nor did any religious leader say a word in this regard. As for those who were killed by the Daesh, their bodies were disposed of without burial, and not only without honoring them but also in inhumane ways; they were keen on humiliating the dead to humiliate those who are still alive, because nothing can affect the dignity of the dead. Perhaps they considered all or some of them filthy and exterminable. But this breach of the respect of the dead crushed the dignity of the living, all of them.

Sooner or later, all the religious, and religion per se, must question their inability to face, or their collusion with, the horrible forms of death and dismemberment. Those who do not defend the dignity of the dead or who contribute to violating it, lose the right to oversee death and should be stripped of this right. This situation can pave the way for the independence of death from religion, and for the right to a non-religious death, which some may choose to be the end of their irreligious life. Liberating death from religion is the gateway to liberating life from religion, and to an increasingly urgent revolution in culture.

Overall, death order in Syria was destructed in a way that reflects the terrible destruction of life order. The general death order used to be that the bereaved would bury the dead publicly in a personal grave with a headstone, normally within a short time (shorter in Muslim communities than in Christian ones, and in the upper class than in the lower one, and in the suburbs than in the cities); it was possible for the family and friends to pay their last respects

and visit the grave whenever they wanted or in specific occasions; a public mourning would follow the burial. All of this is destructed. The family may not get the corpse, and the dead body might be dismembered or some body parts may be lost, and when the bereaved manage to get the corpse, they may be forced to bury it secretly and conceal the cause of death; the funeral is prohibited or impossible; the grave might be personal or mass grave; the mourning may be either prohibited or impossible. The family may not have their dead, and the dead body would be disposed of by unknown hostile hands in unknown location, so it becomes impossible to reach the gravesite or even the area itself.

It stands to reason that the disruption of the relationship between the bereaved and their dead, and between the frightened community of the living and the community of the dead, and the dismemberment of the dead either under torture or bombardment, and the dismemberment of the public space by checkpoints and snipers are all related to the dismemberment of society by sects, intelligence agencies (Mukhabarat-the death forces) and terror. We only need to see dismemberment as a function relevant to a particular political situation: the Assad eternity and its Islamist twin. In both cases, an eternity from top whose continuity requires dismembering the bottom and desecrating it.

Syrians wanted to change their lives, but their death was changed instead. They wanted to change their reality but their expectations were crushed. Nonetheless we should not work to return to the status quo ante, rather work to liberate our life from a religion-like state, and liberate our death from a state-like religion. This diffusion facilitated the

mix between life and death to the extent of erasing the difference all together and simplified the work of the killers. We seize the ownership of our death and take changing it upon ourselves as an expression of our seriousness to change our lives. Through struggling for a new death, we aim at a new life and a new culture.