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The Anthroposemiotics of Jokes in Funeral Rituals

Humor as a mask for humans in the face of death

Abstract: At the present time in Venezuela a practice commonly occurs at funerals celebrated at funeral chapels or in family houses that certainly can be said to have already become part of the funeral ritual: Those attending the funeral tell jokes. Although it seems a contradiction because a funeral is a serious event where people have lost a loved one, the jokes have come to acquire a symbolic range within that ritual. This paper aims to explain precisely, from an anthroposemiotic perspective, the presence of jokes at funerals as a mask for the human being before the phenomenon of death. The theoretical and methodological contributions of Van Gennep (2008), Peirce (1987), Auge (2000), Turner (1988), and Freud (2005) are used, as well as the technique of participant observation from the ethnographic method (Mauss 1947; Guber 2006; Kottak 2007), based on an introspective-experiential epistemological approach (Padrón Guillen 2001, 2003). In conclusion, it can be said that jokes told in these *non places* can be translated as a mask, which has become another symbol of the funeral ritual, the unconscious intentionality of which reveals the fear of humankind before a natural and inevitable phenomenon that is a reminder of the finiteness of human beings and expresses the desire to break the direct *death/pain/depression* relation.

Keywords: funerals; funeral rituals; jokes; mask

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"Death is only the beginning…"
Egyptian High Priest Imhotep
The Mummy (Stephen Sommers 1999)

1 Introduction

The *Dictionary of the Spanish Language* defines *death* as the cessation or termination of life, the time – according to traditional thought – when the "separation of body and soul" occurs (Real Academia Española 2001: 1550). This conception is extended by the North American philosopher Todd May (2009), by stating that death is the end of life and, therefore, the end of all experience; but this end is not an end or an objective in itself, but simply an interruption that is also inevitable and uncertain.

Although it is considered a tragic, arbitrary, and meaningless phenomenon, May emphasizes that dying is the most important – but not the only important one – of all the facts faced by the human being, precisely because it threatens and represents the end of all other facts of a human's existence. In this way, death gives meaning to life, insofar as each person structures his projects on the basis of the awareness of his mortality.

However, in almost all religions there is a common aspect that calls into question what death is at the end of life, as they highlight the people's survival of their own death, thus giving effect to the idea that "most cultures have a concept about a life after death" (Winick 1969: 435). In fact, May (2009) mentions that in Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, the soul of the dying person is judged and, according to the manner in which he has lived his earthly life, he will be sent to heaven or hell to continue his life on another plane. This judgment is also carried out in Buddhism and Hinduism, as the soul reincarnates many times, where the karma of a person's previous life will determine their next life. Whereas Taoism considers that each life is a kind of wave of a great cosmic ocean, to which everyone returns when they die.

In fact, it can be said that religions arose, in part, to deal with death; in effect, the genesis of religion is attributed to the idea of a universal and primitive fear of death (Boyer 2002). As Boyer (2002: 328) affirms: "All religions, or so it seems, have something to say about death. People die but their shadows remain, they die and await the Final Judgment or they return in another form."

Despite that promise of surviving death that religions offer, the truth is that this topic does not cease worrying humanity, especially when everybody becomes aware of one thing: "Death is always with us. It rounds us. It accompanies us at all times. We are never far from it, because it is inevitable that it happens and we cannot control the moment when it will happen" (May 2009: 51).

That is why, throughout history, man has managed to escape the power that death exerts over his life. Hence, in the funeral rites of different cultures in

antiquity, humans conducted certain funerary rituals, for example, dressing in mourning (Van Gennep 2008) or using masks that represented or idealized the face of the deceased (Doblado 2006). Among these evasive strategies is a practice that is currently observed at Venezuelan wakes in general: the phenomenon of jokes being told for both relatives of the deceased and people who were close to them, for which they are located in a specific place (in a *profane* space), for instance in the candle chapel[1] or the family room, which does not threaten the serious and sacred character of the funeral.

Figure 1: How many of us have not been witnesses or perhaps participants in the famous "jokes at the wakes"? (Taken from http://seunantidoto.blogspot.com/2011/03/los-chistes-en-el-velorio.html) (14/03/13).

This work pursues precisely the central objective of explaining the practice of joke telling at wakes as a mask humans wear before the inevitable and recurrent phenomenon of death. These are the following specific objectives:

a) to explain the use of the mask as a symbol in funeral rituals;
b) to explain the presence of jokes as a mask for the unconscious before death;
c) to describe the physical space used for jokes, both in candle chapels and in family homes.

1 Private space hired specially to celebrate funeral rituals simultaneously with the families of several deceased who do not share any type of kinship relationship between them.

2 Theoretical and methodological foundation

This research was carried out from an anthroposemiotic perspective, using the ethnographic method (Mauss 1947; Guber 2006; Kottak 2007), specifically, the technique of participant observation, as well as employing a field diary and a conversation poll with some of the attendees at funerals in Venezuelan cities such as Maracaibo (Zulia state) and Valera (Trujillo state), following an introspective-experiential epistemological approach (Padrón Guillen 2001, 2003). An anthroposemiotic perspective is spoken of because a human cultural practice that generates meanings is approached (the jokes as a part of the funeral rituals).

On the other hand, the epistemological foundation of this study lies in the so-called phenomenological or introspective-experiential approach (Padrón Guillen 2001, 2003), since it considers that knowledge is the product of interpretations of sociocultural symbolisms with which the members of a social group approach reality. That is: "knowledge is an interpretation of a reality as it appears within the spaces of subjective consciousness (hence the qualification of *Introspective*)" (Padrón Guillen 2001). It is an act of understanding that emphasizes the notion of subject and subjective reality. In fact, in this epistemological approach, the most appropriate way to access knowledge is:

> ... [through] a kind of symbiosis between the researcher subject and his object of study, a kind of subject-object identification, where the object becomes a lived experience, felt and shared by the researcher (hence the qualification of *Vivential*). (Padrón Guillen 2001)

According to Padrón Guillen (2001, 2003), the idea is to grasp the true essence of the object (or subject), "beyond and above its appearances of *phenomenon* (hence the qualification of *Phenomenological* and the expression *phenomenological reduction*)" (Padrón Guillen 2001). This is why that approach focuses on aspects such as the development of sociocultural experiences (for example, the jokes at Venezuelan wakes), interventions in vivential spaces (like candle chapels or family rooms), and in real, problematic situations (the loss of a loved one), among others. Therefore, it addresses as an object of study the symbols, values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, etc. to arrive at the subjective symbolic construction of that social and cultural world, which manifests itself as that practice of telling a joke as another symbol of funeral ritual.

It can be said that this is an interpretive-symbolic approach, where reality depends on the way in which the subject sees it and thinks about it, since knowledge is the product of his internal intuitions, experiences, and of his own consciousness. Hence, the resulting theory will not be based on the so-called

scientific universals, but is "a kind of definition or translation of the way in which social groups and individuals perceive the facts from their own internality or from their own conscience" (Padrón Guillen 2003). That is, it is a *phenomenological-interpretative theory* adjusted, in this case, to the Venezuelan context. That is why it is reiterated that it is rather an act of understanding a certain phenomenon, like that of jokes at wakes approached in the present investigation as a mask of the unconscious.

In accordance with the aforementioned epistemological approach, the theoretical and methodological contributions of Van Gennep (funerary rites, rites of passage) (2008), Turner (*symbol* notion) (1988, 1999), and Peirce (symbol/thirdness) and Auge (*not places*) (2000) are used to explain this cultural phenomenon, starting from the notion of *joke* (and its relation with the unconscious) pointed out by Freud (2005). Also, the methodological approaches of Del Fresno (2011) related to Netnography are used to address some testimonies on the topic of jokes at wakes that were found in so-called *cyberspace* (*online* world or virtual *terrain*) where *cyberculture* is developed, in order to compare them with those obtained in the *offline* world of human everyday life, during conversational surveys carried out at wakes. Del Fresno defines Netnography as:

> … a new discipline or an antidiscipline or an interdiscipline or, simply, a theory *in construction* and development to understand the social reality that is taking place in the *online* context where millions of people coexist, express themselves and interact daily. (Del Fresno 2011: 17)

It can be said that this theory *under construction* is an adaptation of ethnography to the study of this new *being there* that cyberspace represents and therefore, it uses its main field techniques of "participant observation and observation, conversation, deep interview, the analysis of social networks, the genealogical method, the life stories, the documentary analysis" (Del Fresno 2011: 54). However, the novelty of the matter lies in the fact that today it is no longer necessary to move toward remote and isolated exotic communities to investigate them, because now it is possible to concentrate on certain and very unique *online* communities that are part of this new space "without place," as well as facilitate non-participant observation – if this is required at any given time – without breaching ethical norms, that is, avoiding questionable hidden participant observation, since those testimonies are available there and presented before the entire world that circulates through the *cyberspace*.

3 The mask as a funeral symbol

Although May (2009) highlights that death is always hovering around all the spaces of the daily life of human beings, the truth is that this topic does not stop worrying people, despite the awareness that humans may have of the finite nature of existence. Hence the evident attitude of pretending to ignore the tragic truth that signifies the final point of the earthly passage of man, because "most [...] of us, we do not try to integrate mortality into our lives. We seek precisely to disintegrate it" (May 2009: 60), and for that reason it is ignored to reduce its impact, and the future is planned as if death were never to occur. It is a contradiction that is reflected in the following statement:

> It is better that we are mortal creatures, but there is not a good time to die. Our mortality shapes our lives; it gives them coherence and meaning. It makes valuable the moments that constitute them. But it is also true that death threatens all this. It is good that we are going to die, but it is never the opportune moment to do it. (May 2009: 106)

However, when death inevitably occurs, it always produces a *shock* among the relatives and friends of the person who dies, for which reason they react to the death of *others* as if it were a fact that only affected those *others*; or in some cases, they also seek to mask that painful situation.

But as the idea of death still scares many, the same happens when you see it reflected on the face of someone who has died, since "it is not only death itself, but the nonsense that it seems to distil, which causes us anguish" (May 2009: 60) and that is why the most common way to deal with this point is to run away and want to avoid it. For this reason, since ancient times, different cultures have tried to erase that trace of terror, pain, absence, and emptiness, for which they have applied some strategies such as funerary art (Doblado 2006). A classic example of this is found in ancient Egypt (3000 BC), with its colossal architecture for temples and tombs, where "the mansion of the dead takes on more importance than the house of the living" (Doblado 2006: 12), which gives an idea of the relevance that the topic of death had for this culture.

This funerary art also involved Egyptian sculptures, which emphasize achieving a certain realism in representation of the deceased, especially in relation to his face, although most of the time it was idealized in accordance with the status or power of the person. In fact, Finol and Montilla (2004) point out that "very old funeral traditions, in different places around the world, use the funeral mask to cover the face of the deceased."

This practice reveals the fear of facing death, which is why it is necessary to "decorate" the deceased, giving the mask a funerary symbol rank, in the terms

proposed by Turner (1988) when considering the symbols as the basic components or "molecules" of ritual. Societies employ such funerary symbols as cognitive tools to order the universe and as "evocative devices whose use is intended to elicit, channel and domesticate strong emotions such as hatred, *fear*, affection and pain" (Turner 1988: 53, italics added), which in this context are derived from the loss of a loved one. These symbols are, moreover, imbued with intentionality and have conative features, since they produce a certain effect on the receiver of the message (that is, those attending the funeral).

As Becker (cited by Finol and Montilla 2004) states, this custom of covering the face of the deceased with a mask is widely spread throughout the world, where the skull (together with the face) is symbolically equivalent to the celestial vault. This was a way of expressing the correspondence between the part (the human microcosm) and the whole (the universal macrocosm), where the mask sought to hide the ugliness represented by cadaverous decomposition, expressing something like a transition, the return of the microcosm to integrating itself with the macrocosm from which it emerged.

On the other hand, Pérez-Rioja (1997) considers that this feigned physiognomy superimposed on the true one by way of the mask was not a mere accidental magical resource or a transitory ornament, but a sacred object whose symbolic meaning is to protect a transformation or metamorphosis:

> All transformations – Cirlot observes – have something profoundly mysterious and shameful at the same time, since the equivocal and ambiguous occurs at the moment when something is modified enough to become *another thing*, but it still remains what it was. Therefore, metamorphoses have to be hidden; hence, the mask. (Pérez-Rioja 1997: 296, italics added)

Such a kind transformation involves the Peircean notion of *symbol* as "a *Representamen* whose Representative character consists precisely in a rule that will determine its *Interpretant*" (Peirce 1987: 270). That is, the funeral mask is a sign that represents its semiotic *Object*, because there is a social convention determining that the art at the funeral ritual hides the cadaverous transformation, simulating the person's physiognomy. This makes the sign something arbitrary at the beginning, but necessary by convention (Merrell 1998, 2001).

In fact, that conventional character of the *symbol* where the relation is based on a law, rule or a social habit means the Peircean *thirdness*, because the mask is a representation or a tribute to the deceased: what it is respect to the *firstness*, or the pure quality, sensation, feeling, defined as a pure possibility or a *can be* (the mask itself), and what is respect to the *secondness*, or the semiotic "real" (the mask of the funerary ritual). So this *thirdness* serves like a mediating

function between the *firstness* and the *secondness* promoting transformations, evolution, and the vital growth of semiosis processes. That is, *thirdness* works as a translation of one sign into another one, and is an equivalent to the probability, or *it could be* (Peirce 1987; Merrell 1998, 2001), and that's why the mask is usually an idealization of the face of the deceased.

But this symbol of the funerary ritual that the mask represents had a transformation through the time, which places it in today's world as the makeup used by professionals in the *thanatopraxis* industry in order to prepare corpses for the wake. The difference is that the mask not only created that second and feigned physiognomy, but also hid the true physiognomy of the face, with the intention of hiding the ugliness of death, "while the makeup currently used tries to transform the face, so that it becomes clear that it expresses itself in how pleasant it should be" (Finol and Montilla 2004) for family members, friends, and attendees in the ritual. In this way,

> ... makeup for the deceased has become fundamental for society that wishes to transform death into the image of a lively, lush, impeccable face; that the last pain felt by the deceased is hidden behind a technique, which has been used for the living and that today becomes a mask of life that hides death, a very ancient technique used by the natives. (Finol and Montilla 2004)

In fact, it can be said that this technique has its antecedent in the same evolution of masks used in theatre since its early beginnings as a cultural expression, when in the East the fixed mask made with different materials was left aside and replaced by the mask painted directly on the face of the actor, a mask-makeup that was used to express the feelings or emotions consistent with the story of the work. It is a practice that has been present in many cultures since antiquity, where painting the face was a sign of struggle (combat), love, identity or promise (Canavese 1999).

Today makeup-mask technique has had such a positive impact that currently it is very common to hear among the attendees at the wake expressions such as "he/she was pretty (or beautiful)," "he/she looks just the same," "he/she seems to be sleeping," since it is no longer a matter of hiding the identity and replacing it with another as the mask did in the past, but maintaining and even revamping the original identity. The idea is to maintain and show the real identity of the deceased, but to use makeup to hide the ugliness of death (a face without color, with possible marks of wounds, bruises, etc.) and leave the dead with a pleasant appearance for all those attending the funeral. What is intended is to give death a natural range to resemble life, recreating life to "hide" and "overcome" death, which, as in the keynote highlighted at the beginning of this section, undoubtedly follows the pretence

of denying or ignoring the phenomenon of death. In other words, all those attending the funeral continue using the mask before the restlessness and the fear that death produces, representing the deceased as if he was still alive and in a deep sleep.

This is reminiscent of the belief in a "life after life" held by some ancient civilizations like the Egyptian, in whose imaginary "death was interpreted as a deep dream, from which the deceased would awaken to an analogous existence to the earthly, without changes in their social condition" (Guidotti and Cortese 2002: 284–285). Hence, the funerary trousseau – from prehistoric times – included everyday objects and even the court of kings, officials, and servants had their graves adjacent to the tombs of the high monarchs, to ensure that they continued with their work in "the beyond."

In fact, the mask not only served to scare the evil spirits and thus protect the soul of the deceased, but also had the function of connecting the spirit of the deceased person with the "other world" and honoring it. These Egyptian masks of the dead were inspired by the features of the deceased, but in reality they were idealized images of the latter (Arquehistoria 2013).

This practice of honoring the deceased has also been used in the contemporary world with famous figures after death whose masks passed into posterity, such as those of Napoleon Bonaparte, Beethoven, Lenin, Alfred Nobel, Alfred Hitchcock, etc. (Rememori 2011). Even today "thematic funerals" have been created, so called by a funeral rites organizer and thanatological, Ricardo Peculo, who explains that the idea is to turn the wake into a tribute to the deceased. In this way, if the deceased played golf, the funeral room is decorated with balls alluding to this sport; if the person liked fishing, this practice is recreated, similarly reflecting it in the coffins:

> There are some coffins decorated with pictures of the team soccer that you choose. You can place photographs on the coffin, or you can paint it with some color that you choose. Peculo also introduced other novelties, such as ecological boxes for cremations, and smart tombstones with a QR code in order to allow people to see *online* information, photos and videos of the deceased. (La Nación 2013)

4 Joke, mask, and unconscious

According Van Gennep (2008), there is a set of ceremonies that have their own object which goes beyond being just simple rites of passage, that is, these ceremonies go beyond their general purpose of contributing to the change in state or the passage from one situation to another, from a magical-religious or

profane society to another, from one world (cosmic or social) to another one. In that sense, "the ceremonies of marriage involve rites of fertilization; those of birth, rites of protection or prediction; those of funerals, rites of defense; [...], etc." (Van Gennep 2008: 26), so that all these detailed rites come to be juxtaposed or combined with the rites of passage described here: *rites of separation* (preliminary rites), *rites of margin* (liminal rites), and *rites of aggregation* (postliminary rites).

Hence it can be affirmed that jokes at a wake – as a detailed ceremony – in effect become part of the funerary rites of passage. The latter reveal that it is in the funeral ceremonies where the *rites of separation* reach their greatest development, because in this stage the deceased is being taken out of the world of the living. Of course, this does not mean that the other two components of the scheme fail to manifest themselves, since the *rites of margin* (mourning and prohibitions or taboos imposed by society in these cases) and the *rites of aggregation* (passage of the deceased to the world of dead) also are expressed.

It has already been said that funerals may include rites of defense, which are assumed to be equivalent to those actions (sacred or profane) with which humans seek to protect themselves from evil, something like driving the evil away from their life. Jokes at wakes point toward this goal, serving as rites of defense against this disturbing *life/death* change in state that reminds humans of their finite character. Therefore, that "very brief saying or story that contains a verbal or conceptual game capable of moving to laughter" (Real Academia Española 2001: 536) is used as a resource to "mask" that evil represented by the phenomenon of death so humans can continue in that daily attitude of denying (or ignoring) death in order to give prevalence to life.

In this way, jokes adopt the same function as the funerary mask of antiquity and the makeup mask of today, because the joke tellers not only seek to defend themselves from and drive away an evil spirit (the spirit of death), but also seek to maintain the everydayness (pretending that nothing has happened) of a state that has been altered and try to give a "pleasant face" to the painful situation that is experienced at that time. That is why jokes serve to help the participants "forget" that death is permanently stalking, that at any moment death can be present, and that it will surely appear, even if one does not have the certainty of *when*. In relation with this, Van Gennep points out that:

> Such changes of state do not occur without disturbing social life and individual life, being precisely the objective of a number of rites of passage, to lessen the harmful effects of these disturbances. (Van Gennep 2008: 28)

And if the meaning of the mask was to pretend an identity, while that of makeup is to maintain the original identity, but ultimately to also pretend that the person were still alive, it is possible to conclude that jokes at funerals retain that objective of simulating, making seem or making be, which is nothing more than a "useful" deception for those who participate in that rite of defense.

In fact, although some of the informants see the action of telling jokes as inappropriate behavior, others highlight certain positive aspects similar to those that have already been mentioned. Some of them raise the following points:

Rafael Araujo considers that wakes are a comedy, a joke, a mockery: "... Of course, that's why some people attend funerals, only to say something like: 'Did you see what the deceased looked like? Have you seen his wife? She acts as if nothing has happened; he was a bad man; have you seen Maria? She is far too fat; and that little girl is pregnant...' And so on." In other words, Araujo considers the jokes just as one more component of the hypocrisy that he sees predominating at funerals.

On the other hand, Aracelis Cristalino alleges: "I suppose that these people who tell jokes at funerals are not very affected by the death of anybody. If it is so, I think that they tell jokes in order to make the obligation to attend the funeral like a pleasant time, and also to be able to stay there longer."

But Maria Iragorry thinks that people tell jokes at wakes because they do not care about the deceased or respect the relatives: "Today funerals have become more a social gathering, and these jokers have lost the sense of family mourning ... Yes sir, unfortunately."

However, Milagros Araujo sees a kind of therapeutic function in telling jokes at funerals: "I think [people tell jokes at funerals] to make this painful situation less dramatic." This idea is also supported by Alice Cristalino: "I have always thought that telling jokes at funerals is somehow very inappropriate behavior... I really do not know what to say about it ... I think maybe mourners could tell jokes because of the nerves of the moment, or as a way to release tensions."

These opinions are not far from what was recorded among the informants from *cyberspace*, who are identified according to the number of the comment that responds to the question asked by one of the participants in the thread on the page (who calls herself "Tota"): "Why do men tell jokes at wakes?" (s/a 2009). She herself begins: "Wakes are a party for men. They tell jokes, they kill themselves with laughter, and they look at the girls' asses." Then other users follow:

> # 3 BUfff, fortunately you do not live in the US, because there when someone dies it seems that it is a wedding or something because of the amount of food they put, besides looking at girls' asses as you well say.
>
> # 6 Have I had a sex change without knowing it...? At two wakes that I've been to (my grandmother's and my grandfather's), my uncles started telling jokes, and I do not know if it was nerves or what, but there was no way to stop laughing. At the funeral it was something else, okay, but at the wake and after the funeral, that was the party...
>
> # 7 # 2 I have a Cuban friend who told me that in Cuba, wakes become parties starting at 12 o'clock at night. At first they are all sad, until someone says, for example: "Hey, do you remember what rum the deceased liked?" "Yes," replies another. And they buy rum, and they start drinking. Then they put on music because the deceased liked to dance and after a while, it becomes a party. He told me that he and his friends would sneak into wakes to tie up incautious inebriated relatives.
>
> # 8 I guess the sorrow will be felt along with a mixture of survival instinct, surprise (if it is a quick death), and culture, although another factors also have an influence such a the proximity, age, and mode of death. But I do find it curious how many feelings you can feel in a couple of days. The last one I was at was for someone very close, and on the one hand I was sad, because I knew that you were not going to be able to see the deceased anymore, although on the other hand, great joy, since I was able to see members of my family that, due to circumstances, I had not seen for years.
>
> # 9 Surgeons also make jokes during a surgery. I think the fear of death pushes us to escape with laughter.
>
> # 10 # 8 It is just Christian hypocrisy.

As can be seen, in both the offline world and the online world there are some points of coincidence regarding the role played at that time by jokes at wakes as a mask to face the phenomenon of death, even if evasively. Now it is necessary to see if that mask is conscious or if it is related instead to the unconscious.

Among the different meanings that appear in the book by Sigmund Freud (1916) entitled *Wit and its relation to the unconscious*, the joke is defined as a subjective comedy, which skillfully and consciously gives rise to the comic (of a certain idea or situation), where "the subject of the comic is the hideous element in any of its manifestations" (Freud 1916: 4). In addition, it is a disinterested judgment, a simple game with ideas, the ability to find hidden analogies or to form a unit with representations that are disparate (contrast of representations), the succession of momentary bewilderment and immediate clarification, all characterized by brevity and the fact that it always brings something hidden.

Hence it is possible to deduce that it is precisely "the ugly" that manifests itself in that painful situation, meaning that losing a loved one serves as the genesis of jokes at wakes. So the presence of jokes gives rise to that something hidden in the unconscious of some of the participants in the funerary ritual. This undoubtedly has a close relationship with those reasons that have already been mentioned about the anxiety that comes with facing death. In fact, the psychologist Landaeta H. (2013) has highlighted the relaxant effect that laughter has on emotionally vulnerable people (such as the deceased's relatives), as well as the joke's mockery of what is socially acceptable (the extreme seriousness that is always expected to be met at every wake). That is why Freud adds that:

> The object of attack by wit may equally well be institutions, persons, in so far as they may act as agent of these, moral or religious precepts, or even philosophies of life which enjoy so much respect that they can be challenge in no another way than under the guise of a witticism, and one that is veiled by a façade of that. (Freud 1916: 160)

In this way, jokes at wakes unconsciously transform themselves into a kind of rebellion against everything that represents authority under the figure of conventions, norms, precepts, or taboos established for funeral rites, becoming a release from the yoke exercised by that authority. Therefore, such jokes can be taken as a facade in that they hide what they have to say in the background, especially what is prohibited as an attack on that authority. This is because they involve a mockery or criticism that likens them to dreams in terms of their unconscious content, which reveals a willingness to do (or say) in accordance with that fear of death and the desire to ignore it in order to strengthen the value of life.

Hence Freud considers that all forms of humor to which the human being resorts offer something similar to what he called *greatness of soul*, "in the energy with which the subject clings to his habitual being, turning his back on all that leads him to death and may soon provoke his despair" (Freud 2005: 236). So Freud corroborates the approach made here about jokes at wakes, that they function as a mask of the unconscious before the phenomenon of death, seeking to free their practitioners from the tension that comes from having their mortality called to consciousness.

In fact, the joke is assumed as one of those many masks mentioned by Turner (1988), whose variety is determined by the multiplicity of ways in which cultures build that "second face" in relation to the first, which ratifies the conception pointed out by Geertz (1991) that man is an animal that symbolizes, conceptualizes, and looks for meanings. One of those meanings is that jokes

serve as a means so that the participants in the funeral rituals can experience a certain pleasure, although in that moment of their lives they are also experiencing the painful effects produced by the loss of a loved one. Hence, it is taken for granted that:

> For wit, the comic, and all similar methods of gaining pleasure from the psychic activities, are nothing but ways to regain this happy – the euphoria – from one single point, when it does not exist as a general disposition of the psyche. (Freud 1916: 354)

In other words, the joke as a mask at a wake comes to fully comply with one of the functions that Freud attributes to this laughing-stock resource, by making accessible again those sources of human pleasure that have been blinded thanks to the action of a certain repressive process, as is the case of the taboos established by society for funerary rituals. That is why it is considered that "wit, on the other hand, is the most social of all those psychic functions whose aim is to gain pleasure" (Freud 1916: 286), whose mission is to remove some obstacle (related to those coercive impositions of a ritual).

5 A *non-place* for a joke?

Despite the important role that jokes play in helping to alleviate the tension that comes when facing the phenomenon of death, it has already been shown above how some of the informants stated that they consider the telling of jokes at wakes to be *an inappropriate act or showing disrespect* toward the deceased and the deceased's relatives. However, this is a reality that today occurs in various parts of the world and has become a symbol of funeral rituals in Venezuela.

In fact, there are even those who dedicate themselves to this *work,* for which they make a request for some *donation* in money, which is complemented by the liquor provided by other attendees at the funeral. This is precisely the work of Salomon Noriega Cuesta, also known as "Chivolito," an old man of 78 years who has been telling jokes in Barranquilla (Colombia) for more than 50 years, which has earned him the byname *El bufón de la muerte* (*the buffoon of death*). He is usually invited by the same mourners, because his presence is a guarantee that the deceased will have enough company, and that is why the saying "a wake without Chivolito is not the least bit funny" has become so well known (Salcedo Ramos 2013).

But perhaps that rejection expressed by some of the informants is associated with the idea that a wake is not an appropriate occasion for people to laugh. In other words, for them, the jokes (and the explosions of laughter that

they cause) contravene the rules established by tradition for all funerals: When someone loses a loved one, convention dictates that the seriousness of the situation should be maintained; pray, accompany him, and mourn him in his last goodbye instead of laughing. That is, they assume that a funeral is a *non-place* for a joke, although not at all in the terms that Auge proposes, but rather in the approach of Michel de Certeau. When de Certeau "speaks of 'no place,' it is to allude to a kind of negative quality of the place, of a kind of place in itself that imposes the name given to it" (Auge 2000: 90), which means that a wake *is not* the right place to tell jokes and laugh, since death is something serious.

Auge defines *non-places* as those typical spaces of the contemporary world – where the excesses that give rise to what he calls *supermodernity* predominate – which are characterized by the anonymity of those who converge in them, and where the subjects find themselves in transit for a certain time (and circumstance) of waiting, as is observed, for example, at airports before the departure of an airplane or at train station or the metro when they arrive, as well as in large shopping centers or *malls* (Mosquera 2011). That is, a *non-place* is "a space that cannot be defined either as an identity space or as a relational or as a historical space" (Auge 2000: 83).

According to this Augetian conception, a wake would not be considered a *non-place* in his terms, since the characteristic of this concept is the anonymity, the solitary individuality, and the being in transit of the people. This last aspect means that such places that represent *non-places* are used exclusively for the accelerated circulation of people and goods that pass through there.

However, Auge's approach may well be adjusted in part to the idea of the wake as a *non-place* for jokes if one can consider that in this space where the funeral is celebrated there is a situation of "transit," but now taken under the notion of the rites of passage of Van Gennep (2008). This situation of "transit" implies that the deceased is in a phase of margin (or transition), meaning that he is between two worlds: He has not finished leaving the world of the living, but he has not yet been definitively incorporated into the world of dead, for which he can be the subject of activities where *the sacred* converge (the sequence of rites that will help in his transition from one state to another, such as prayers) and *the profane* (where the jokes would fit).

On the other hand, although those participating in the funeral ritual are related in some way to the deceased (family, friends, acquaintances, etc.), it is also true that often times not everyone knows each other. Thus, it is possible to observe the emergence – even partially – of that other distinctive feature of *non-places* pointed out by Auge (2000): the anonymity, which probably ceases to be so in the candle chapels if these anonymous participants (who are anonymous

just for someone) sign the book that for such purposes is usually placed at the entrance to the room where the remains of the person rest.

In order to ratify the above, it is enough to mention the division made by Montilla V. (2002) of those spaces in which funerary rituals are carried out in the *sacred* and the *profane*, whether the ceremony is carried out in a candle chapel or in a family room. This allows an appreciation of how the jokes are located far from the sacred space, which shows some consideration for the deceased and for the mourners who accompany him in that space where he is the main protagonist. This idea is reinforced by one of the informants, Sara Labarca, who states that the joke tellers "go to a room apart for respect, but they tell jokes to avoid talking about death, and thus they feel they can *escape* from it by laughing" (2013).

In the candle chapels, the description made by Montilla V. (2002) reveals that the *sacred space/profane space* dichotomy, where the former is represented by the room contracted especially for the coffin containing the deceased to be placed in while they carry out the proper funeral rituals that will help him in his transition from the world of the living to the world of the dead. This is where the various symbols of the ritual are displayed that refer to the idea of *sacredness*, starting with the name of the room, which normally corresponds to that of some saint or religious motive, the altar, the candelabras, the wreaths of flowers, religious images, etc.

This sacred place is a closed space (a private space) in relation to the space of the other deceased for whom vigil is kept in the candle chapel, and in relation to the profane space of the candle chapel. Seriousness and respect prevail in this sacred place, but the profane space is constituted by a series of public spaces (open spaces) such as the places where people drink coffee, smoke, and talk, the resting room for relatives of the deceased (where they usually talk to the closest deceased's associates), as well as the various internal and external corridors that the candle chapel has, where people also congregate. In fact, it is in these public spaces where the manifestation of the sacred is broken, since they are used especially for entertainment purposes, for social interaction with the relatives of the other deceased, or reunion with family and friends. Specially, this profane space also serves as a genesis of the jokes, because there "people act differently with respect to those who are located in the sacred space" (Montilla V. 2002: 87).

This spatial distribution of the sacred and the profane change when the funeral ritual takes place in a house or a family room, where at first the presence of a single deceased who occupies the main room of the house is highlighted (unlike at the chapel, in which it is usual to keep vigil over several deceased at the same time). The room becomes the central space of the funerary ritual, so

that it undergoes a transformation from a private (closed), daily, and profane family space, to a public (open to all those attending the ritual), extraordinary, and sacred space, since this is the location of the altar that accompanies the coffin, the candlesticks, and religious images.

This contrasts with the profane space of the family room pointed out by Montilla V. (2002), which encompasses the kitchen (in which the coffee and the food that is going to be served is prepared), the backyard or black plot (and lateral area) of the house (a place for social interaction and reunion between friends and family who come from other cities), and the porch or front of the house (spaces for the sharing of the youngest). Of these profane spaces, the backyard or back plot (and lateral area) of the house is striking, because some actions are performed there such as smoking, drinking liquor, playing dominoes, and laughing when "the jokes or conversations held in life with the deceased arise" (Montilla V. 2002: 91).

This *sacred/profane* dichotomy is well defined by the abovementioned character "Chivolito" from Barranquilla (Colombia) to successfully carry out his *praxis* as a joke teller at funerals, as evidenced by Salcedo Ramos (2013) describing his routine:

> Usually, Chivolito arrives at the wake at eight o'clock at night. He offers his condolences to the mourners and sits in the living room, next to the coffin. There he remains silent for a while, with his disconsolate face. It is his way of expressing respect for the religious ceremony. Then he goes to the courtyard or toward the outside of the house – it depends on where the audience is – and begins his function, which usually lasts until dawn. [...] *Far from being humbled by death, men challenge it with humor*. (Salcedo Ramos 2013)

But the interesting thing of everything outlined until now is what lies at the bottom of all these activities carried out in the sacred and profane spaces of the funeral rituals, which is well worth emphasizing. The mourning, the prayers, or the makeup-mask present in the sacred space, as well as the protagonist joke-mask of the profane spaces, represent the action of a mask that pretends to ignore the phenomenon of death, and thus to exalt life as a central value of humans. These are two alternative symbols belonging to the funerary ritual whose purpose is precisely "*to deny death* because in that way it affirms life and, affirming life, it takes control over the adverse circumstance, over anguish, over chance and nothingness" (Finol and Fernandez 1997: 217).

6 Epitaph: Death is a joke

According to Boyer (2002), from Paleolithic times (and even among Neanderthals themselves), the first modern humans buried their dead, because something had to be done with the corpse: embalm it, bury it with flowers, burn it, etc. All these activities when "they decorated the corpses, buried the bodies in specific positions, or buried their dead with flowers, horns or tools, support the idea that the cult of death is a very ancient human activity" (Boyer 2002: 328).

From this cult were derived the different funeral rituals reported by anthropologists in different parts of the world, which show the fear and respect that people feel toward the phenomenon of death, despite the awareness that people have of the universal, inevitable, and untimely nature of it. Also, such rituals began to play the role of assisting the deceased in their transition from the world of the living to their incorporation into the world of the dead (Van Gennep 2008), besides having effectiveness in the social interaction of the participants (relatives, friends, and acquaintances of the deceased) and in the restoration of social order (momentarily broken by that tragic situation of losing a loved one).

In fact, Muir points out that, for example, for the Irish of the 15th to the 17th centuries it was a religious obligation to attend the wakes "and they adhered to an established series of intensely emotional phases of crying, *jokes*, insults to the corpse, drink and food" (Muir 2001: 52). These activities are designated *domestic mourning rites*, which were of great benefit to the emotional health of the survivors and participants in general at the funeral, because as professor Radcliffe Brown (mentioned by Turner 1999: 10) says, "funerals are more concerned with the living than with the dead," or as Boyer (2002) would say, they are more concerned with the consequences for the living if people do not give proper treatment to the corpses, according to the different stages of the ritual.

Hence, Finol and Finol (2009) point out that all communities are in constant search of symbolic responses which allow them to endure, resist, and negotiate the inevitability of death. "Certainly death, despite being a constant presence in life, has always anguished human beings" (Finol and Finol 2009: 134), and that is why funerary cults emerge as strategies to establish and update collective imaginaries, in order to make life prevail as a value in the face of death.

Among these symbolic responses is the use of jokes at Venezuelan wakes as a mask with which attendees not only seek to hide the natural anguish produced by the presence of death, but which also help in that mentioned

process of supporting, resisting, and negotiating the inevitability of death. This is done with the idea of catalyzing the restoration of social order that has been broken with the loss of a loved one, in addition to promoting social interaction and group cohesion (creating a sense of identity and belonging).

Hence Finol and Finol (2009) see in the ritual a powerful machine for the creation, updating, and manipulation of symbols. They point out that it is in ritual action where macro-symbols (like that of the joke-mask) update their potentiality and guarantee their cultural performance, their symbolic efficacy, insofar as they fulfill their purpose. In short, it is a funerary practice that is based "no longer on the materiality of the body but on memory, on memory and on communication strategies that seek to maintain the positive meaning of life above the negative meaning of death definitive" (Finol and Finol 2009: 87), besides expressing the desire to break with the direct relationship *death/pain/depression*.

Those communication strategies in which the jokes are inserted reflect certain attitudes and beliefs that people have about life and death, whose expression arises when they are incorporated into the funerary ritual, regardless of whether it takes place in the spatial context of a candle chapel or a family room, where the *profane* space arises to tell the jokes, far from the *sacred* ritual space in which the deceased lies.

Such representations of life and death that humans manifest through jokes at wakes ratify the role of culture as:

> ... a historically transmitted scheme of significations represented in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions and expressed in symbolic forms by means with which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life. (Geertz 1991: 88)

Of course, these symbolic representations do not cease to have an arbitrary character as the symbols that they are, as Agelvis (1998) emphasizes when he says that the sign is a construct. This conclusion he reached when considering the definition of Umberto Eco on the *sign* as anything that could be a significant substitute for any other. Thus if a sign is a construct, so also is the Peircean symbol defined as a sign (social habit, custom, or law), such that "then it can be used to tell 'lies', or to 'make people laugh' and 'worry'" (Agelvis 1998: 16).

In this reasoning, the idea of the mask-joke at wakes is implicit as a lie or deception, precisely because it pretends to hide, among other things, the fear of the phenomenon of death, which refers to awareness of the mortality of humans, and the inevitability of death, although there is no certainty of when. Thus, if a sign is a lie because it is a construct that even serves to make people laugh, then

that joke-mask is also a lie, because it is based on the series of signs with which it was made. And if death is a reason for the jokes at wakes, is it possible to conclude that death is a joke and, therefore, is also a lie, in order to give validity to the beliefs of many ancient cultures regarding death as a continuity of life?

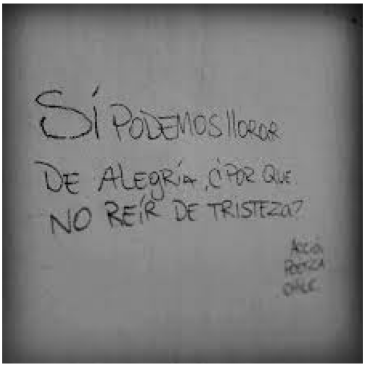

Figure 2: If we can cry with joy, why not laugh with sadness? (Taken from www.pinterest.es/518336238341042) (19/02/18)

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