

Nicky Smits

You only live twice

Structure and agency in funerary materiality and post-mortem identity:

A case study under funerary professionals in Malmö, Sweden



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Front page picture: All Saint's day candles by A. Bremborg, obtained 16/04/2017

You only live twice;
Once when you're born,
And once when you look death in the face.

- Ian Fleming, You Only Live Twice

But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered Country, from whose bourn

No traveler returns, Puzzles the will

- Shakespeare's Hamlet, act III scene I

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1 Introduction

When asked to imagine a traditional Western funeral, there is a big possibility that one thinks of a wooden casket, a priest, white lilies and silent mourners in black. The last decades has brought an uptick in attention for alternatives to the traditional Christian funeral ceremony. While this is not the universal norm, the use of ‘traditional’ shows the viewpoint and bias of contemporary European and Northern-American science and media. These alternatives are, for instance, the rise of cremation and allowing non-Christian funerals on cemeteries¹ (Kaufman and Morgan 2005), but also natural or green burials (Davies and Rumble 2012) and alternative spirituality within Christian funerals (Peelen and Wojtkowiak 2011). The development of new personalization possibilities promises self-expression, eco-friendliness or ways to transform oneself into things such as trees and jewellery and thus never really, truly die. These possibilities give the dying or deceased and their family the chance to live twice, as the title states. This is from a poem written by superspy James Bond in which he explains that the second life, when you look death in the face, is a last chance to think your life and over and decide how it was. I find this applicable as the planning of a funeral, when one squarely stares death in the face, is a last chance to show one’s life and identity.

In traditional ethnography the anthropology of death is focused on exotic and ‘unusual’ death practices such as reincarnation, resurrection, exhumation and reburial (Robben 2004). These practices are then compared to the ones ‘we’, the Western and English-speaking scientific community with Christian roots, see as standard. While researching these ‘exotic’ practises challenges some parts of the existing bias, for instance the discrete and linear concept of life and death (Kaufman and Morgan 2005), it also emphasizes their exotic and unusual nature thus maintaining their reputation as exceptions that prove the rule of ‘our’ death practices being the standard. The lack of comparative and context specific case studies of modern societies is often critiqued (Walter 2005), as it upholds the idea of a funerals in modern societies as homogenous and inhibits reflections on aforementioned bias. Recent research about contemporary death practices come from countries which are known for endo-anthropology such as USA and Great

¹ Aforementioned bias is also clear in the intermingled use of ‘cemetery’ and ‘graveyard’. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a graveyard is a burial ground associated with a church, while cemetery commonly means ‘a large burial ground’. Ofcourse, ‘burial ground’ also excludes non-burial funeral practices.

Britain, but there is still little known about contemporary European funeral rituals. With this thesis, I add one case study to the collection.

The main theme of this thesis is the relation between identity and death, specifically the creation and expression of death identity. My research started out as research into the use of alternative funerals as an expression of identity in Malmö, Sweden. The use of the word 'alternative', beside clearly showing derivation of the norm and thus a very existent and rooted norm, covers many options such as secular and/or multi-cultural, personal and creative funerals. I envisioned these alternative funerals as individuals and small companies advocating for freedom of choice within an environment of top-down, archaic and traditional institutions. This was based on a very early stage of research into funerals and myself getting caught up in my own dreamlike idealism befitting a young social science student, which made me imagine an international movement of incredibly personal, artistic funerals, throwing off the shackles of big religions and conventional practices.

In reality, religious and conventional practices often still exist for a reason, whether that is practicality or preference, which makes my mindset very demeaning to religion and my research population. After I entered the field I did a complete revision of my research questions, I moved to the other extreme with the possibly overly critical idea that my idea of every funeral needing to be incredibly personal seemed to tie into a neoliberal and capitalist compulsion to have every aspect of life and death be an expression of personal identity, a clear commodification of death and mourning. This idea almost mirrors the accusation that the funerary industry is a greedy industry only focused on making money of poor, grieving individuals. When I actually went into the field, I managed to escape both views in favour of a less complicated reality. A couple of things changed throughout my research in Malmö. First, the alternative funerary options were not as widespread as I expected, and when I found some, they did not stray very far from 'traditional' funerals. Second, there were no easy camps of pro- and con- traditional funerals, or a clear-cut between religious and non-religious actors, and every actor holds their own agency within the role they fulfil. Third, I realized I overlooked the grief that comes with death and lost view of the classic role of the funerary professional: practical assistance in a time of need. I found, possibly unsurprising to all except me, that people found comfort in the beaten path of tradition and collective identity.

Research question

The question I set out to answer is ‘How do funerary professionals influence the expression of post-mortem identity in funerary materialities?’ Funerals are often used to express identity (Armstrong 1987 in Kaufman and Morgan 2005, Davies and Rumble 2012, Armstrong 1987 in Kaufman and Morgan 2005). I explore how the concept of death identity ties into processes of individualism, secularization and commercialization. I explain death identity as post-mortem identity to clarify the fact that this identity is created (for use) around or after the death of the person it belongs to², either by themselves or by others, often with religious and/or funerary professionals. This identity is created in a certain mindset and surroundings that may highlight and ignore certain aspects of one’s identity. I focus on the creation of this post-mortem identity and its expression through funeral materiality, objects used in the funeral or at the grave. The focus on the material aspect of funerary culture is to give a concrete point to focus on in the abstract and large concept of death. These objects are often vessels for the memorialization of a person, which ties into expressing identity. By analysing and discussing materiality, one can look into professional’s notions of how identity of the deceased, as presented by the bereaved, should and can be expressed. This is a complicated matter, including how and which actors are involved, how they influence the concerned materialities, and what power they have over the process of constructing and expressing post-mortem identity.

The funerary professionals’ notions is relevant because, as mentioned, death identity is often created by clients and funerary professionals together, with the professional offering options in personalization and guiding the clients through the process of organizing a funeral. They are, as it were, a filter between the market and the client, and operationalize old and new materiality and personalization in a way they deem fitting. How and which materialities they offer can be influenced by many concepts and actors, which is why I use the anthropological concepts of structure and agency. This way I can look at power structures and the professionals’ margin of manoeuvre. Structure and agency are two parts of the same system. Structure is defined as a social system that is constituted by individuals (Giddens 1987 in Sewell jr. 1992), which shapes individuals actions (and as such are to some extent constrained by rules or other individuals). In my research the structure is an amalgamation of Swedish culture and society and the funerary

² Because of my focus on individual identity I focus on individual deaths, not caused by outside violence or conflict or otherwise imbued with trauma. This means that I do not focus on mass deaths or stillborn children.

industry. Individuals can, individually or jointly, actively use this structure to create or transform structure (Sewell jr. 1992) or in this case, their funerary practices. I focus on how funerary professionals see and shape their margin of manoeuvre in relation to the rules or expectations of the funerary industry (and as such the corporation-client interaction and expectations of both sides). This means it looks at the relation between funerary professionals and clients, funerary professionals and the companies they work for and with, and the relationship between the funerary industry and other institutions that might influence it.

The theoretical relevance of this research lies in the possibility to add one more contemporary European case study to the small collection that currently exists, so the whole can be used by later researchers to look at differences between western, Christian' societies. By doing this, we can hopefully gain some understanding in the processes and concepts that influence the funeral rituals and the industry and the ethnocentric bias within the research. A holistic, anthropological view is especially interesting with contemporary relevant concepts such as immigration, political participation and identity politics, which influence most legislation and customs, including funerary customs. Research in Sweden is interesting because of its reputations as modern, secular and individualized country, which seems to clash with it's very religion-based funeral rites within a commercial funerary economy, as shown by Walter (2005). In 2000 the Swedish state church was abolished, creating questions about secularism, the new place of the church in society, the future of the welfare state and the related services that were traditionally offered through the church (Gustafsson 2003).

Methodology

This research is based on ten weeks of ethnographic fieldwork, between February and April 2017, in the city of Malmö, Sweden. While this thesis is the product of my data it is influenced by joint research, with my companion's focus being the experience around death practices of Swedish citizens. This fieldwork consisted of 26 interviews (most of which semi-structured) and 13 informal conversations with 33 funeral professionals, such as funeral directors, religious specialists who officiate funerary services and other professionals employed by organizations in the funerary industry such as cemetery maintenance, musicians and administrative personnel. I focus mostly on funeral directors, but researched others partly because to not overlook other influences and get a comprehensive overview of relations and interaction. I supplemented my data with participant

observation in the form of attending funerals, visiting offices and attending mass, physical and social mapping, photography and photo analysis, and text analysis. Methods were chosen based on Dewalt & Dewalt (2011) and Boeije (2010). Because of the corporate character of my population, the classic method of participant observation and ‘hanging out’ to build rapport, followed with multiple in-depth interviews, was not a feasible method. Most of my population was found by simply calling the numbers listed on the websites, or calling a companies’ switchboard and letting myself be redirected and noting down numbers given by numerous secretaries, which is a very modern interpretation of the snowball method.

My main ethical concern is the privacy of and respect for the dead and grieving. Death is a very emotionally charged subject for many people and funerary professionals move in an area that is often very foreign to others outside of the field. I wish to reassure readers of my ethical considerations when entering this foreign area, as to not appear lacking respect for the dead or the privacy of the bereaved. As I followed professionals into their field, readers may feel uneasy when realizing that my data was obtained by attending funerals of people unknown to me or spending time next to the caskets of the recently dead. For funerary professionals, death is not as charged a subjects as it is for many others, and I took my behavioural cues from my population. When attending funerals, I sat hidden in the alcove for audio and light equipment and did not have contact with the attending mourners, as to not impose on them. Even though all church funerals are technically public and as such I did not need permission, I did ask the ceremony leader and/or the funerary professionals. I did not receive direct permission from the bereaved, as I had no way to contact them before the funeral and again, did not want to impose.

Outline

In order to answer my research question, I first define the relevant concepts and give some background of materiality, death identity and involved power structures. After that, I discuss the relevant background of and theories applied to Swedish society. I have summarized my main empirical chapters as the three levels of analysis as to make it easier to trace influences from the largest level, such as the Swedish society and law, the former state church and the funerary industry, via companies and organizations, to the funerary professionals. First I map the actors involved, institutional ties and their relations to each other. Second I analyse the origin and formations of both funeral services and the materialities used in funerals, which connects both levels through

organisational or company involvement and the freedom or limitations therein. These two chapters are used to show the structure the funerary professionals work in. Lastly I look at funeral professionals, an actor I originally saw as an operationalization of an institution, before I took their own agency as professionals and individuals into consideration. I analyse their agency and their influence on and handling of the materialities to map how they contribute to post-mortem identity.

2 A theoretical underpinning of death

To understand the empirical research, it is important to understand the concepts and definitions I based it on. First I give an in-depth overview of the definition of materiality I use, as to shine light on the objects I look at, and how materiality relates to post-mortem identity. As materiality is formed and interpreted in a context, and can thus be imbued with influences, I give an overview of the socio-historical western and Christian context of funerary materiality. After that, I explain which identities can be expressed through materiality, and I introduce the concept of deathstyle, which hinges on new ways, techniques and objects to express identity. This brings me back to the actors involved in expressing identity and the power they hold, as the funerary professionals are situated in the structure and agency of their profession.

Defining materiality

The ways people view death and the deceased are executed in funerary rituals and practices (Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008:3-4). These are intertwined with materiality, as materialities are used to make the abstract notion of death more concrete (Hockey 1996:47) through making the symbolism of these rituals tangible (Turner 1975 in Hockey et al. 2010:6). These materialities are contextually and relationally defined, based on personal significance. They give the opportunity to examine personal ideas about, the proper and accepted ways of, and power relations around the expression of post-mortem identity. Another reason to look at the creation and expression of post-mortem identity through the lens of funerary materiality is because of its use as operationalisation of personalisation by funerary professionals themselves. These materialities are offered and presented by funerary professionals, who base their supply on what they deem usable and appropriate. Thus, the materialities offered can be seen as and form the accepted way of expressing post-mortem identity.

Graham (2016:4) describes material culture of the dead as a set of objects varying ‘from headstones, keepsakes and mementos to more transient or ephemeral forms that are manifested in text or displays of commemoration at grave sites or monuments.’ These objects are of symbolic meaning, often presenting the deceased and his or her identity and used to make the deceased imperishable (Graham 2016). In this research the term I use the term ‘materiality’ instead of ‘material culture’, as the latter is ‘generally defined as objects manipulated and manufactured by

humans' (Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008:4). Materiality is defined as 'material objects and things that are involved in and variously influence social development', (Fahlander and Oestigaard 2008:4), and so can also be objects that are not man-made, such as flowers or spaces. I choose to include music in materialities, as it seems essential in funerals, with both strong historical evidence of the use of music in funeral contexts and personal, cultural and/or spiritual meaning for the bereaved (Adamson & Holloway 2012). The personal character of music is easily tied into the expression of identity and showed up too often in my research to ignore. Defining music as materiality is complex because its digital form, but I follow the theory that 'digital media cannot be stripped of its materiality because of the material constraints that underlie computing infrastructure' (Kumar & Parikh 2013:2863). In this research I focus on materiality that is produced specifically for funerary uses or transformed into funerary material by assigning it meaning in funerary rituals. The use of these objects are influenced by the individual preference and but are also formed by traditions and influences.

Traditions and influences

The contemporary Western concept of and tradition around death is influenced by its Christian roots. Ariès (1981) writes about the late middle ages, when the idea of separation of the body and the immortal soul gained traction. He describes two developments taking place: an early idea of the soul as identity and the trend toward the privatization of death. Death was shifted away from the domestic sphere by outsourcing the care for the bodies and the ceremony to the church, allowing a funerary industry to develop.

Walter (2005) describes two important changes in modern funerary practices. The first was a growing urban population caused by the industrial revolution, which needed a new management for the expanding number of corpses. Technological forces such as public health requirements, mobility and secularization detached the population from the traditional funeral customs and created a dependency on specialists (Walter 2005). The nineteenth century health care and hygiene standards improved significantly, allowing death to become relatively less present and familiar (Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe 2010:2). Society became ashamed of death and developed a fear of the corpse, turning death into a taboo (Ariès 1981). The second change was in the late twentieth century, when a demand for more freedom, choice and individuality started reforming the different bastions of institutional power (Walter 2005).

The current idea of a traditional funeral is based on the early twentieth century, small-scale religious funerals where the professionals were often the local priest and coffin-maker (Bremborg 2006). In these services there was a strong divide between the care for the dead body and the emotional and spiritual aspect of loss. The mid-century funerary industry has been critiqued as being sterile, impersonal and commercialized, starting with Mitford's 1963 exposé of the funeral industry as a money-making scheme (Mitford 1963 in Kaufman and Morgan 2005). Many recent ethnographic studies, from the 1990's onwards, show a change in how funerary services are practiced and seen, as the focus lies increasingly on personalisation, individualisation and humanisation the dead body. Funerary services have also broadened: from taking care of the dead body and organizing logistics to more ceremonial, administrative or legislative and counselling functions (Bremborg 2006). Many societies might be considered secularized, but still have ingrained religious practices or ideas, as is the case in my research. However, originally religious practices might be so culturally ingrained they are seen as cultural, instead of religious (Reimers 1999). The death standards are also visible in the legalities that underpin funeral options; for instance the legalization of cremation, which is not universally considered a proper Christian funeral (Davies 2010). It is logical to conclude that legislation influences the possible forms of funerals, as theology-based legislation might be less permitting for practices from other religions because of ingrained religious traditions and influences. Bremborg (2006) researched Swedish funerary professionals and their interpretation of their profession. She mentioned funerary professionals changed to focus of their profession away from the dead body and towards grief management. The shift she describes is mirrored in other countries, such as Canada (Emke, 2002), France (Besanceney, 1997) and Britain (Davies, 2002). This inspired me to research whether other changes in funerary culture are mirrored in Europe. I specifically look at Davies and Rumble's (2012) concept of deathstyle, in which they describe alignment of death preferences to life preferences in a secularized, individual-consumerist age: a new way of expressing identity through death.

Expressing identity through death

Just as people use the materiality of funerary rituals to make the abstract notion of death more concrete, both the rituals and the deriving materiality can be used to assert, challenge and renegotiate social identities and memories (Chesson 2001). These rituals and materialities give

authority and legitimacy to the perceptions of a certain reality. The use of ritual in liminal phases, such as the time around a death, is an instrument to control and transform reality: the ritual is a moment to preserve and create social identity (Peelen and Wojtkowiak 2011). In classic ethnography the social death of a person is often seen as a rite de passage, a transformative stage in which the individual leaves the living and joins the community of ancestors (Chesson 2001). Reimers (1999) states that having a similar funeral to that of their ancestors implies the incorporation of the dead and the mourners in the ancestors' community. The arrangement of the last farewell and post-mortem memory can be regarded as part of the presentation of collective and/or individual identity (Goffman 1967 in Reimers 1999). Individuals can claim both individual identities and group memberships (Chesson 2001). In an article about the funerals of migrants in the country of arrival, Reimers (1999) states that the place and form of the funeral marks a new migrant identity. Where classic anthropology and the research into cultural identities as marked by funerals is pointed towards collective death identity, new research is also focused on using funerals to mark individual identity.

Kaufman and Morgan (2005) state that the late-modern idea of dying is of an experience that could be evaluated and inflected with value. Because of this, the dying became witness to and creator of their own identity (Armstrong 1987 in Kaufman and Morgan 2005). Death in the privileged, Western modernity is often seen as very personal and even a taboo, to the point where there is a debate about many societies as being death-avoiding (Toplean 2013). There is a trend in anthropological research towards seeing death as at odds with social context and 'made up of outworn traditional rituals and sterile professional practices' (Hockey 1996:57), as disconnected with the traditional context because of a secularized and individualized society. This implies an increase in importance of personal identity because of the breakdown of the religious scaffolding of traditional society, or maybe a breakdown in the religious scaffolding because of the importance of personal identity. The secularized, individualized and consumerist Western society that is sketched out throughout the literature, coupled with the immense freedom of funerary choice mentioned in Davies and Rumble (2012), imply a great deal of control over one's own death. This means different options in materialities and rituals and ceremonies with the appropriate degree of personal spirituality (Peelen and Wojtkowiak 2011).

Davies (Davies and Rumble 2012) proposes the concept of deathstyle as a way of describing death preferences in a changing world. He sees modern burial options, such as cremation or green

burial, as a way of aligning lifestyle and deathstyle. Aligning them can explain the assonance or dissonance in values of life and death and the sense of integrity in identity: an environmental activist would probably like an eco-friendly funeral. Davies states that it is evident that many funerary options are based on change and control, fitting to our individual-consumerist age (Davies and Rumble 2012). In this sense, the deathstyle is a continuation of identity after death. While Davies suggests a goodbye to religion because of the growing secular confidence in the self, others such as Toplean see a continuing reliance on ‘the weak, fragmented or broken religious symbolic resources’ (Toplean 2013:21) because religious paradigms are the only ones that have succeeded to turn death to good account (Toplean 2013). Davies’ and Rumble’s research is largely based in Great Britain, and most often cites British or American cases of supporting research. While they take consumerist motivation and the neoliberal market into account, their label of contemporary society and thus the contemporary funeral industry as individual-consumerist suggests a more positive view on consumerism than Mitford’s 1963 essay on the funeral industry mentioned before, as they emphasize the possibilities of information culture and personal freedom. This might be because of differing cultural contexts or changes in for instance the funeral industry, what the public expects of funerals, or greater societal changes. These actors, and others, all exist in the same network but hold different degrees of power.

Actors and power structures

Peelen and Wojtkowiak (2011) mention the interaction between self-created rituals and those offered by professionals, which signify that the freedom of choice in ceremony and materialities is not only constrained by practicalities and legalities but also by a certain professional menu of choice, wherein the professionals’ idea of what are possible or appropriate forms of expressions might differ than the ideas of the dying or bereaved. The actors involved in the planning and execution of a funeral are thus not only the dying or dead person, but also the professional institution and the legal and practical guidelines they adhere to. As negotiating identity is done through interaction, one has to remember the relations between the living, the (wishes of the) dead and the community that are at play in mortuary rituals (Chesson 2001). There are more influences outside these interactions, as Hallam et al. (2005:19) state that ‘the embodied self is free to reconstitute along the line of its own choice, but adrift among competing influences of fashion, science, medicine, and media.’ There is also the issue of the overarching state practices, biosciences

and biotechnologies that govern the forms of living and dying (Kaufman and Morgan 2005). This is the Foucauldian idea of biopower: the technologies for managing populations and the influence of political authorities to wield influence through the production of knowledge and regulation of information, about vital processes such as life and death (Foucault 1978 in Kaufman and Morgan 2005). This is relevant to funerals because funerary corporations could be these societal institutions that hold social control through their expertise, connections and knowledge. Foucault challenges the idea of power as agency or structure by seeing it as dispersed and ingrained in the 'regime of truth'. This the naturalized idea of how the world is supposed to work, shaped by scientific discourse and institutions, reinforced through among others education, the media and politics (Rabinow 1991). This means that the power is ingrained in everyone's own way of thinking. For funerals, this could mean that clients, professionals and their organizations all actively work to keep the established order as it is, even though there are many new options available, because they feel it is correct.

Giddens originally coined the term 'the duality of structure', by which he meant that structure is both the medium and the outcome of the practices which constitute social systems, as it shapes and enables the practices people use to constitute and reproduce the structure (Giddens 1987 in Sewell jr. 1992). As mentioned before, agency is the actions of individuals that can create and transform culture. This is tied into Giddens' idea of dualism as the enactment of structures by knowledgeable human agents, who are capable of using their capacities, formed by structure, in creative or innovative ways to form or transform structure. The understanding of agency as a part of structure is important because structure as a term implies stability and rigidity and loses, besides agency, also its dynamic character (Sewell jr. 1992). In short, structure means the tendency to reproduce, knowingly or desired or not (Sewell jr. 1992). It also gives agents a means to transform itself, and thus structure and agency are in a reciprocal relationship. It is important to remember this, as it is easy to sketch the individuals and institutions as battling for power. In this research, I look at how professionals see and actively use their agency I relation to their structure – whether that is to change or uphold it.

Conclusion

To understand how funerary professionals influence the expression of post-mortem identity in funerary materialities, it is necessary to understand several concepts and definitions. First, I defined

post-mortem identity as an identity created (for use) after death, presented at the funeral. I defined funerary materialities as objects used in the funeral or at the grave, as they are constructed or used to symbolize post-mortem identity. As these materialities are used to operationalize personalization within funerals, they can be seen as the commodification or operationalization of personalized funerals. The creation and use of funerary materialities are influenced by cultural and religious norms, laws, and interpersonal interaction.

Western, and thus Swedish, funeral traditions are formed by a long Christian history, in which death moved away from everyday life, allowing specialists to set up shop. Modern funerary professionals have shifted away from care for the physical, to also add psychological and (alternative) spiritual services. There is more attention for individual identity, instead or beside collective identity, within funerals. This ties into the concept of Deathstyle - an alignment of lifestyle and death. This concept is tied to secularisation, individualisation and consumerism.

The selection of materialities and services that a funerary professional offered might be influenced by many actors in different degrees. This professional menu of choice might be with degrees of creativity, freedom, inspiration, guidance, advice and constraint for a multitude of reasons. This can be legal and practical guidelines, interpersonal interaction, cultural and societal norms and (inter)national politics. What materiality professionals offer, how they offer it and how they practice their function is influenced by how the professional is positioned within their structure-and-agency framework. It is important to remember that structure and agency have a reciprocal relationship, and agents hold some power to reproduce or transform structure. By studying funerary professionals in the process of construction or use of the materiality, information can be gained about the relation the funerary professional has with the influencing factors, and how the professional is an influencing factor themselves.

3 The socio-historical context

As stated before, funerary rituals and their materialities are often rooted in religious practices. Jacobsen (2013) points out there is a lack of research on the Scandinavian death practices and how these relate to the overall prosperity, strengthening individualism and consumerism in Scandinavia. Sweden's reputation as one of the most secular nations in the world is an often researched subject and relevant to my research, as it is expected that the degree and form of religiosity is part of Swedes' identities and thus reflected in the materialities. Even if this reflection is not by explicit choice, it might be through ingrained power structures, such as the church or state. First I give an overview of the changes in relations between the church and the state and religiosity in Sweden. After that, I give a short history of the Swedish funerary industry finally I sketch a visual of the Malmö, my research context.

Church-state relations and semi-secularism

Sweden's secular reputation seems at odds with the high integration between the church and the state. Af Burén (2015) states that this is the typical Nordic, Protestant pattern of secularization, together with the low presence of explicitly religious ideas in the public discourse. An overview of changes in state-church relations is useful in understanding this.

According to a history of state-church relations by Gustafsson (2003), the national church of Sweden officially became Evangelical-Lutheran in 1593. Priests held, beside their ecclesiastical duties, also the role of civil servants. Until halfway the 19th century, the situation could be summarized as 'an absence of any form of religious liberty and the total identification between the state and the church', at national and local level (Gustafsson 2003:51). Changes in the 1850s included the official acknowledgement of other churches alongside the state church, the right to leave the state church for a limited amount of other Christian denominations and the establishment of the Swedish parliament and the Church Assembly. The Church assembly was meant for ecclesiastical consultation, but also had the right to veto government propositions. In an administrative sense, every Swedish citizen was a member of two geographically identical units: the parish and the secular borough (Gustafsson 2003:52). Both had the right to levy taxes. The parish handled matters concerning education, public child-care, and funerals. The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of the international Free Churches Movement and trade unions and

Social Democratic Party of the Labour Movement. Both movements were against the position on the Church of Sweden and their cooperation produced legislation that supported civil alternatives to the previously mandatory wedding- and funeral ceremonies of the Swedish Church.

The twentieth century was a period marked by processes of democratisation and modernization of the Swedish society (Gustafsson 2003), with a large nation-based enlightenment projects tasked with creating a more modern, progressive Sweden (Af Burén, 2015). The goal was to form Swedish citizens into modern individuals who severed their ties to the 'traditional' way of life (Berggren and Greiff, 2000 in af Burén, 2005). In the 20th century, the Social Democratic party used this image for nation building. The ideal of the educated, modern individual overpowered the social control of the church, but the church stayed involved in modernization processes. Af Burén (2015) states that Swedish secularism is rooted in these processes. According to Gustafsson (2003), The Church of Sweden presented itself as a 'folk church' and less of an agency of the state. However, a change in the organizational structure resulted in a new entanglement of political parties and church representatives.

Gustafsson (2003) states that the process that ended in the abolishment of the Swedish state-church started around the time of the Religious Freedom-act of 1951, where Swedish citizens could leave the state church without joining another denomination. One of the few remaining social functions was lost in 1991, when the responsibility for civil registration was transferred to the taxation authorities. The proposal for the final change of relations included a specification that all of Sweden would remain divided into parishes. The state would help collecting a tax-like income-proportional membership fee and would provide the church with grants for maintenance of historic churches. The Church remains in full responsibility for the provision of funerals and maintenance of cemeteries, also for non-members. This would ensure that everyone would be guaranteed a dignified funeral in accordance to their own beliefs, paid for by the aforementioned fee. Gustafsson stated that this decision means that funerals, while frequently linked to a religious ceremony, is ultimately a public a social duty.

The abolishment of the state-church took place without ceremony, and membership figures of the church were hardly affected, just like after any of the previous changes (Gustafsson 2003). Just like in the modern parliament, most of the seats in the Church Assembly were held by Social Democrats. Gustafsson specifically states that statistics showed that at the time of writing, while the church may have gained greater liberty from the state, it has not gained greater independence

from the Swedish political system. Af Burén (2015) describes the disestablishment as symbolic, which Gustafsson agrees with. He argues that it was less of a 'separation of church and state' and more of a 'change of relations between church and state', because while the state-church had increasingly become more obsolete as Swedish society had become multicultural, the Swedish people hardly noticed a change, since the work of the church has not changed at all.

Af Burén's states that contemporary religiosity has new form, influenced by globalization, secularization and individualization (Frisk and Åkerbäck 2013 in Af Burén 2005). While in 2013 65,9% were members of the evangelical-Lutheran Church of Sweden, in the European survey 80% of Swedish citizens did not participate in any religious practices or consider themselves religious. Instead, like in the other Nordic countries, they see membership as if linked to national identity (Gustavsson 2000 in Af Burén 2005) because of its connection with history, culture and tradition (Sundback 2000 in Af Burén 2005). Because the Swedish attitude towards religion can be seen as transcending the religious-secular binary, Af Burén speaks of semi secularism: people who neither go to church or get involved in any alternative spiritual activities, nor are actively indifferent or opposed to religion. She sees them as a middle group that cannot be categorized as religious or secular.

The Swedish funerary industry and identity

While the Church of Sweden owns most cemeteries and crematoria (Walter 2005), the funerary industry remains commercial. Bremborg's (2006) research about Swedish funeral directors shows the aforementioned broadening of funerary services. Not only is there more focus on personalization and individualization within the services provided, the Swedish funerary directors have also moved away from the dead body and moved into personal bereavement counselling. She describes the path from local collaboration between craftsmen and clergy to modern businesses as similar to the overarching Western trend, but does state that there are, at the time of writing, no international chains or do-it-yourself organizations. 60% of all funerary businesses were privately owned and member of the Sveriges Begravningsbyråers Förbund and 30% were owned by Fonus, a co-operative that began as a working class alternative funeral company.

Research into alternative funerals seems to be split in two groups. One is traditional 'multi-cultural' funerary options within a society with another cultural and/or religious background, which is often Muslim funerals in a (formerly) Christian society. Another group is the non-traditional

funeral based on personalisation on identity. Most research about funerals as expression of identity in Sweden is focused on collective and ethnic identity and fall within the first group. Reimers (1999) writes about graves as cultural communication and construction of ethnic and cultural identity. Her research is in Göteborg, but focuses mainly on the identity construction of immigrants, where the focus is on belonging to a collective and less about individual identity. Andrews and Wolfe (2000) write about the graves of Bosnian, Turkish and Iranian Muslims in Malmö in a very similar way, with their findings concluding in the use of graves as communication in the politics of belonging and showing a Muslim identity rooted in European culture (Andrews and Wolfe 2000:15). There is a lack of focus on individual identity that is clear in the secularization research mentioned.

Multicultural and young Malmö

My research is based in Malmö, as it has a relative young and multicultural population and thus has a relatively large chance to be open to variety and innovation in the context of death. Petersson (2013) found this variety in her interviews with Malmö citizens and Reimers (1999) pointed towards the changing (collective-to-individual) functions of funerals under first- and second generation migrants in Malmö.

Malmö is the capital of Sweden's southernmost province Skåne, and the third largest city in Sweden, with a population 300.000 inhabitants (Statistiska Centralbyran Svenska 2016a). It is closely connected to Denmark, with a cultural connection from its history as Danish property until 1658 and a physical connection through the Öresund bridge between Malmö and Copenhagen³. The Öresund bridge was opened to public use in 2000 and has been credited with connecting Sweden to the world, not only as a means to commute or travel but also as a bridge to European influences, with close connections to Germany, Poland and the Baltic states⁴. The Öresund connection caused Malmö to transform from a small industrial town to its current population, its reputation as a young and diverse knowledge centre and business centre⁵. Malmö

³ Malmö.se "The young and global city." <http://malmo.se/Nice-to-know-about-Malmo/The-story-of-Malmo/The-young-and-global-city-.html> (Accessed December 3, 2017)

⁴ Skane.com "Two countries connected by one bridge." <https://www.skane.com/en/two-countries-connected-by-one-bridge-the-oresund-bridge> (Accessed December 3, 2017)

⁵ Malmö.se "The story of Malmö." <http://malmo.se/Nice-to-know-about-Malmo/The-story-of-Malmo.html> (Accessed December 4, 2017)

is often advertised as a multicultural melting pot with more than 170 nationalities represented⁶.

Statistically, 43% of the population in the City of Malmö⁷ have a foreign background, with roughly 31% born outside Sweden and 11% Swedish-born with foreign-born parents (Malmö Befolkningsboksstatistik 2015). Within the group of people with a foreign background, the biggest groups are from Middle east (Iraq, Iran and Turkey); the Balkan (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Romania) and eastern Europe (Poland and Hungary) and Denmark – but the Danish tend to be ignored in further interpretation of this data (Statistiska Centralbyrån Svenska 2016b). Less culturally significant, but just as illustrative is the fact that 49% of the population of Malmö are under 35 and singles or single parents account for 70% of households. However, not everyone is equal in this melting pot (Malmö Statskontoret 2013).

Fredlund-Blomst (2010) wrote about the limitations of multiculturalism as a policy of incorporation in Sweden. She describes Sweden as a country with a failing integration policy. Fredlund-Blomst points towards the bureaucratic structure of the welfare state and more precisely housing projects as one of the causes of the pervasive level of segregation. According to statistics, most of the diversity reflected in statistics is aggregated around the periphery of Sweden's biggest cities, amongst which Malmö. Her empirical study of press representation of Rosengård, a suburb in Malmö, as a "immigrant ghetto" argues that due to the level of physical and social segregation the media plays a crucial role in providing information to the public. The negative light in which the media paints Rosengård plays a role in perpetuating stereotypes, stigmatization, and fostering traps of alienation (Fredlund-Blomst 2010:13). As she concludes, the lack of interaction between 'native' Swedes and immigrants causes the threat of the unknown, encouraged by media, to form into social exclusion and alienation (Fredlund-Blomst 2010). An example of this bleak situation is the fact that during my fieldwork, it was very hard to reach the Jewish population in Malmö because of security lockdown following anti-semitic harassment and repeated attacks on the Jewish cemetery since 2009.

⁶ Lonely Planet "Malmö". <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/sweden/skane/malmo> (Accessed December 4, 2017)

⁷ A note about population numbers: The Swedish civil registration handles numbers about Malmö as Malmö-Stad, the municipality of Malmö, consisting of Malmö and eleven neighbouring localities. However, these will not skewer the percentages much, as only roughly 30.000 people are spread over other localities. These differ from an urban area with 10.000 people to a rural community of about 50 people.

⁸ for more information on these attacks, which were firebombings, see <https://www.thelocal.se/20090113/16882>. In December 2017, after Trumps' recognition of Jerusalem as capital of israel, a demonstration took place on the Malmö central square took place in which the Jewish population was threatened with mass murder. For more, see <https://www.thelocal.se/20171209/anti-semitic-chants-reported-at-malmo-demonstration>.

Conclusion

Although Sweden is officially a secular country, the church and state have a complicated, close relationship and Swedes seem to have a specific, quite widespread form of religiosity. Funeral directors in Sweden have focused themselves more on counselling instead of traditional funerary functions, which might infer less attention for materialities and personalization. The fact that research into expressing identity through funerals is focussed on non-Christian religious and/or cultural collective identity might imply that there is no interest in individual identity, or simply there is no research about it. Malmö lends itself to this research, as a young and varied demography is one in which change is the most visible. While it is not the young people that are dying, they are involved in planning funerals, and there is a bigger chance of the funerary professionals being young too, which might influence the organizations they belong too.

4 Involved actors and institutional influence

In this chapter I introduce the network of actors involved with funerary materiality and their ties to larger institutions. I do not only show the funeral directors, but also other actors. While most personalisation options are offered by funeral directors, the other actors also offer some, which makes their influence relevant. After that, I show the relationships among the professionals. Doing this, I map the interaction and enmeshment within the network to show the type and role of the actors. This gives a background of all actors, as to shine light on the position of the funerary professionals and sketch out the structure these professionals work in. First, I illustrate this network through a vignette.

A young man, dressed in slightly too short suit pants and a white shirt, struggles to fold a large collapsible cart. A woman in a full suit standing beside him looks out over the small graveyard and absentmindedly jingles the keys in her hand. They have just used the cart to wheel a casket out the side door of the church and in the hearse to bring it to the crematorium. The young man puts the cart in the boot of the car and the woman gets in the driver's seat and starts the motor. The man walks in front of the car to the gate, gravel crunching underfoot. A figure up ahead waves at me to come over. I walk past several gravestones, surrounded by orderly hedges. The graves are decorated with a single candle or spring-time flowers; tulips are popular. The man who waved me over is the organist. He wants to tell me about the organ. It's new, the best in Malmö, and he is very happy to be able to play it. I follow him inside through the large, dark wood doors and up the stairs to the organ. Two funeral directors have placed the new casket on the stand and have arranged large ribbons and flower pieces around it. One of them is very focused on lining up the candle holders symmetrically. The organist tells him he's a perfectionist, but he doesn't seem to notice. I nod to the other one, who is talking with the priest. The priest is still dressed in casual black clothes, only marked by her white *Prästkrage*. The sacristan is on her knees, ironing spilled candlewax out of the carpet. Set in the back wall of the church is one colourful leaded glass window, contrasting nicely with the whitewashed stone walls and brick altar and

floors. The organist startles me by playing a few bars of the Imperial March. The priest laughs at me. I shoot a look to the coffin, and the sacristan smiles and assures me that Gunnar was a joker and wouldn't have minded. I sit down in my spot near the railings and look into the sunshine streaming in through the windows, dust particles dancing in the beams. The hired singer will be late, as always, I hear.

Involved actors

The obvious group involved in funerary materiality is funeral directors. Sociologist and current Church of Sweden priest Anna Bremborg researched funeral directors in Sweden from 1998 to 2002. To explain which organisations are involved in the creation and expression of funerary materiality, I build on both her findings and vocabulary, as I use the words funeral director and funeral office for the Swedish titles of *begravningsentreprenör* and *begravningsbyrå*⁹ (Bremborg 2005:271). She found the funerary services market divided between two dominant parties: the *Sveriges Begravningsbyråers Förbund* or SBF, translated as the Swedish funeral office association, and Fonus. Fonus is a co-operative that started as an alternative for funerals for the working class in 1945, while SBF began in 1922 to facilitate the funerary industry in the buying and selling goods (Bremborg 2005). Now, SBF offers education and a membership journal, and seems to be the only regulation as there is no civil authorization or licensing from the Swedish state (Bremborg 2005).

Bremborg (2005) states her research is based on SBF funeral offices. These consist mainly of privately owned, small family businesses which are responsible for more than half of all funerals. I found similar results relating to SBF and Fonus, but a lot more private and non-associated businesses than the small number Bremborg mentioned, often within a niche. The two private funeral businesses I interviewed were both opened in the last five years. Like Bremborg (2005), I found no do-it-yourself organizations. It is obvious funeral directors would be against a DIY funeral, but similar mindsets exist in other professionals. An administrator of the Church of Sweden remarked: 'Very occasionally relatives call me directly to organise a funeral themselves, but I ask them if they thought about transportation etc. There is a lot to do and you can do some

⁹ For in/dept information about the original translated terms and their associations, see Bremborg (2005). She mentions statistics, but as I do not have new numbers to compare or a large enough sample to generate any, I do not mention them.

yourself but you cannot do everything. Some things only the *begravningsbyrå* can do.’¹⁰

A new phenomenon has entered the market: internet-based funeral corporations. I found three that operate in Malmö. Since these companies are both new and unwilling to take part in research, I have little data about these. Multiple funerary professionals described internet-bought funerals as bare-bones and budget, which implies that they are a part of the network, but have little impact on post-mortem identity since they specifically abstain from personal touches and thus materiality. However, one funeral director co-operates with two of these companies, but states he does not approach them differently, thus there being no difference in materialities.

Funeral directors have different functions. One of these is legality. One funeral director described his business as mainly family - his mother is a part-time receptionist and his brother is the practice’s lawyer. Funeral businesses often employ a lawyer, or have a contract with one, to take care of the will and relevant business. While on the phone with the *Familjens Jurist*, the biggest lawyer cooperation in Sweden, I was told it was owned by Fonus but operated as an independent business. It is also important to know that funeral directors do not own morgues and are not in charge of embalming or cremation. While they are often in charge of the logistics of moving the deceased between the place of death, morgues and the place of ceremony, deceased are kept in morgues in hospitals, the crematorium, or attached to a church.

The second group of actors are the religious specialists and other ceremonial officiant. These are relevant because they offer a small amount of personalisation, like music. Bremborg (2005) stated that the ministers of the Church of Sweden have a dominant position in the field of rites; she cites that a Church of Sweden funeral service is the major reason not to leave the Church (Bäckström et al 2004 in Bremborg 2005). A priest of the Church of Sweden stated that ‘People want to stay a member for the important parts of life such as baptism and funerals. It’s all free if you’re a member and you know it is done well.’¹¹ Bremborg (2005) mentions that only a small number of funerals were either secular or held within other churches or religious traditions. I found quite a lot of secular funerals, but it is a logical conclusion that the numbers of non-Church of Sweden funerals has risen considering the influx of immigration and, as mentioned by the same priest, the low number of people joining the church at a later age. There are multiple religious communities in Malmö: A Catholic church, a Macedonian orthodox and Serbian

¹⁰ Interview 07/03/2017

¹¹ Interview 17/02/2017

orthodox church, a specifically Bosniak and a 'general' mosque, a small Jewish community, a number of Pentecostal or 'free churches', and some smaller religious groups. There seemed to be an uptick in secular funerals, which are called *borgerlig*. Bremborg (2005) talks about a growing movement of families that have the funerary director officiate the ceremony and mentions that ministers may run the risk of being set aside. Almost all of the funeral directors I talked to mentioned either them or a senior colleague officiating funerals. The only exception was a Fonus employee, who stated that both she and her colleagues don't officiate, but they do have a few *borgerlig* officiants they contact. I think that the rise of secularism, and the individualism and consumerism mentioned by Jacobsen (2013), have changed the funerary industry quite a lot since Bremborg's (2005) research.

The third group of actors is cemetery maintenance and administration or *Kyrkogårdsförvaltningen* (hereafter called KGF). Their influence are not only relevant because of their role as state administration but also because they offer grave materialities. They are an example of the overlapping church and state roles. Technically, the Church of Sweden owns all crematoria, and it cares for the bodies of all Swedish citizens regardless of membership (Bremborg 2005). These crematoria are run by KGF, which is technically part of but not run by the Church of Sweden. An employee stated:

“The Malmö part of the church kept the cemetery management, but we have a separate board. We can't and don't ask about religion, we're only maintenance. We do the crematoria and the public parts of the cemeteries. The public maintenance is paid by taxes.” [...] We also care for the Muslim and Jewish part of the cemetery – they hired us. It's compulsory to maintain graves, but we have a service with designers and such for individuals.”¹²

Walter (2005) argues that funerary industry control fits into types. He calls these 'ideal types', but mentions that countries often have mixed models. He argues that Sweden has a 'pure' type of religious institution, which means that what happens to the deceased is determined not by profit or convenience but religious requirement. The complicated ties between KGF and the Church of Sweden would support this statement, but one has to remember the (possibly changed

¹² Interview 15/03/2017

since Walters time of writing) functions of the funerary directors. Multiple funerary professionals argue that the place of the church in society is more of a cultural and social institution than a religious one. A Church of Sweden priest said “A lot of people are not active but think it’s a good tradition and their parents belonged, so they are a member.”¹³ A funeral director stated “Sweden is almost an old communist country, a lot gets taken care of by the government. In our case it was also the church, but the church took that care only for practical reasons and there is no religious side. They do a lot of social work.”¹⁴

It’s a strange position, to argue that an industry in which the church owns a lot of the organization and land is not religious. I do not entirely agree with Walter (2005), as I think the care for the deceased is determined by practicality. In this case it seems like while there are many religious ideas that still influence the industry, it seems the integration of church and state has configured in such a way that religion keeps out of the public discourse, as Af Burén (2015) says that happens often in secular Nordic countries. I argue that the Church of Sweden does not hold direct power anymore over the commercial and administrative (or municipal) actors, but they are influenced and intertwined by the historical, societal and legal context.

Interactions and relations

To visualise the physical space in which the actors move, I provide a map (see figure 1). As can be seen in the map, all SBF offices are in or on the periphery of the city centre. Two of the SBF offices, the far right and top, are the same business with the same owner. On the Fonus website is mentioned that the goal is to have one office in every neighbourhood, as to be able to “serve all demographics”. One of the private offices only did immigrant funerals, which involved sending caskets back to the country of origin, and is located between ethnic stores. The new private offices are in the centre too, but in newer neighbourhoods, which is a nice coincidence. The eastern pink and grey dot are the big cemetery, which houses the main KGF office, the crematorium, multiple chapels and the Islamic, Catholic and Jewish cemeteries. The other cemeteries are churchyards. To give a chronological overview of the contact between actors, a Church of Sweden priest told me:

¹³ Interview 17/02/2017

¹⁴ Interview 09/02/2017

“People die in the hospital or at home. The doctors call the tax office to issue a death certificate. The relatives go to the *begravningsbyrå* and they phone the officiants, in my case *pastorsexpeditionen* [the Church of Sweden administrators]. They book me, the church, the organist. I call and/or visit the relatives to speak about what they want, what the deceased was like, what they can expect. The *begravningsbyrå* does the rest. We work together well, we do the ceremony and they make sure the flowers get there, the coffin gets there, the relatives are seated and greeted and taken care of.”¹⁵

Of the singers that are booked for church funerals, the most popular one is a man who is also a pastor in a big Pentecostal church. All non-Church of Sweden funerals are booked through the administration of KGF. The employee in charge of the administration states,

“Only Church of Sweden funerals can be done in churches, but we do have chapels that are available for everyone, as long as they’re okay with how they look. We had to make one completely neutral but the rest have some things left. People don’t really mind. If people do the funeral at some other place, we take care of the cremation, digging, moving and such.”¹⁶

One funeral director mentioned, “I can officiate the funeral, I do that a lot. I can also call whoever you want – orthodox priest, rabbi, name one.”¹⁷ Most non-traditionally Swedish religious or cultural communities have a favourite funeral business they work with. A retired *chevra kadisha* or Jewish burial society member mentioned,

“We have a special routine because we are a small community, we can’t afford our own car and such so we cooperate with the Church of Sweden [ed: KGF]. We have a special duty number to a close friend of mine, [Specific SBF funeral director]. He's a Christian, but he knows more than many of us of how it

¹⁵ Interview 09/02/2017

¹⁶ Interview 10/04/2017

¹⁷ Interview 09/02/2017

should be. He contacts the rabbi or *chevra kaddisha* and others.”¹⁸

An exception to the process is the Bosniak community, who have their own funeral business. A Bosniak imam states he is contacted by the family themselves and sets the process in motion. He stated, “I ask if they want to have the funeral in Sweden or Bosnia and I send that to *begravningsbyra* in Stockholm that does embassies and such. I get the death certificate and contact KGF for the burial.”¹⁹ The imam added that he does funerals through funeral businesses too: “Sometimes the Romani want us to come and wash and do the ceremony but not pray. [Same SBF funeral director] does other Muslim funerals, I know him well.”

When asked about the relations with others in the industry, one Church of Sweden priest said, “While it is forbidden, some priests or hospitals and such have their favourite funeral businesses and might mention them to families, but never force that.”²⁰ When talking about her favourite business, she said, “[they are] very funny and friendly. We are from different organizations but it’s a collegial atmosphere and we have in-jokes like every office. It’s a

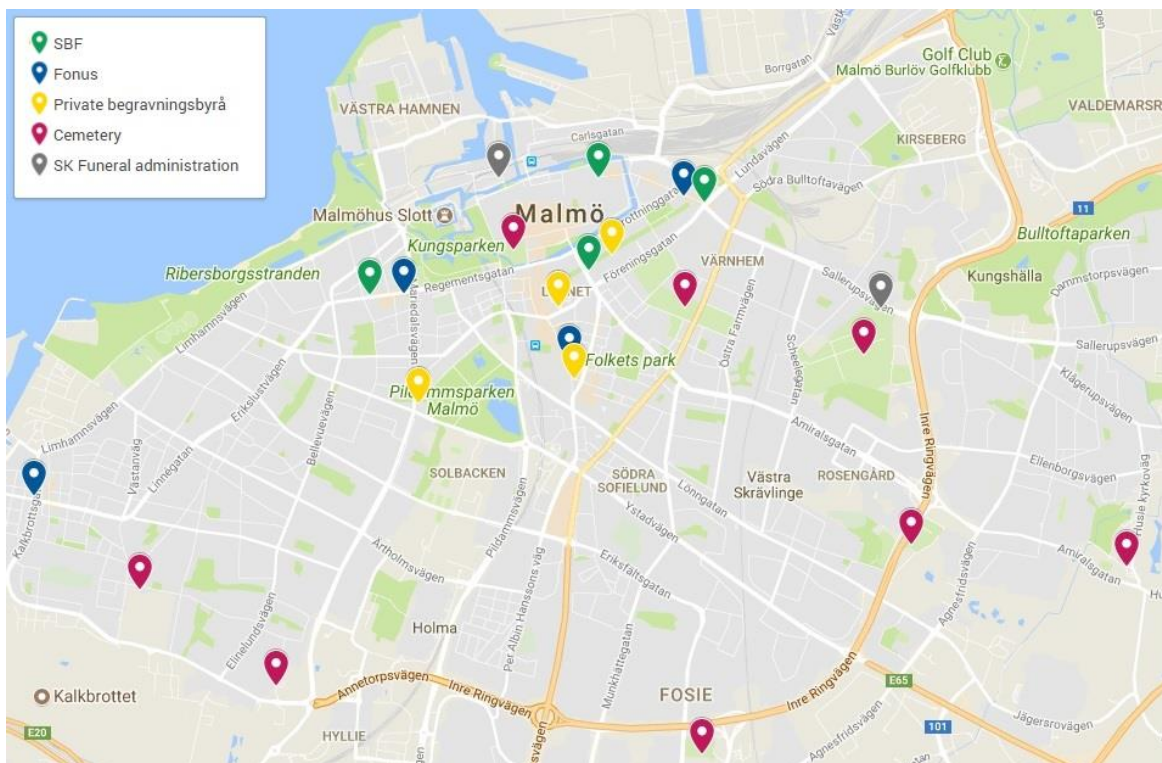


Figure 1: Map of relevant locations (Smits through Google Maps, 2017)

¹⁸ Interview 03/04/2017

¹⁹ Interview 07/04/2017

²⁰ Interview 09/04/2017

profession like any other in that way.” While helping to carry a coffin back into a hearse, a funeral director mentioned “we might be a different company but we help [company] just as well, we are all colleagues and don’t compete in that way.”²¹ Another funeral director said, “Everyone knows each other. We have parties sometimes and we’re friendly, everyone specializes in slightly different things.”²² Often actors have a background in a different part of the industry. A funeral director from a private business mentioned she used to be a funeral singer and worked for Fonus for a while. A catholic priest told me he got to know the Catholic church while working for a funeral business, which enabled him to feel this calling to become a priest. Two funeral directors told me that they studied to be a priest himself for a while. A negative opinion most funeral directors and the religious specialists seem to share concerned internet funeral businesses. A Church of Sweden priest stated, “In real life there's a third person that executes it, and that's not good, because they don't have the touch that a classic *begravningsbyrå* has.”²³

²¹ Informal conversation 04/04/2017

²² Interview 10/04/2017

²³ Interview 07/03/2017

5 Origin and formation of goods and services

In this chapter I discuss the services and materialities that are available for personalisation and how one would come in contact with them as a customer. I see this as the context the funerary industry and involved institutions have provided for the funerary professionals, as most of these objects are either required, part of a tradition or provided by a company, and not created by the professionals themselves. These materialities and services are influenced or formed by standards, options and limitations from actors other than the professionals. I discuss this as these materialities are the operationalisation of identity, as formed through ideas about what is proper and acceptable, influenced by the Church of Sweden and Swedish state regulation. First I show what materialities are provided for use during the ceremony, then I show the grave materialities, as they have different options. I illustrate this by my experience of waiting for an appointment.

The receptionist tells me the boss knows I'm here, and he'll be right with me. I smile at him and turn back to the display of stone that caught my attention. They seem to be samples of gravestones. It's a large stand with stone squares, all slightly different materials or finishes. A couple of them look like marble, a couple have a wave-like surface. Most are a little rough. There's a red one on the bottom that looks like glass. I think about the sample bowls of gravel I saw at *Kyrkogårdsförvaltningen*. I never knew there were so many different colours and types of stones. Perched on top of the stone display is fake rock the size of a plate. It's a waterproof lamp that runs on solar energy, the tag states. I return it to what I think is its place, on a shelf next to the other lamps and candles. A large rack beneath the shelf holds booklets with pictures of the sea, country roads, crosses and birds. I spot a booklet about the different types of graves. There's one called '*Död och Himmel*'. I leaf through a book with poems about saying goodbye. A man approaches me and offers me a firm handshake. He is dressed in suit pants, a light blue shirt and a tie. He has a ink spot on one of his cuffs. 'Please, sit.' I get seated in a comfortable grey chair. "Can I offer you anything?". He leaves the room and I look around. I count five houseplants - two big ones in opposing corners and three orchids lined up on a cabinet. A bouquet of tulips and daisies stealthily hides a box

of tissues. One of the walls is covered in a muted but flowery wallpaper. There's no clock – I wonder whether that's a metaphor about the eternity of death. Probably not.

Profiling of services

I mentioned that some materialities are offered by other actors than funeral directors. I discuss KGF in the next paragraph, but I do not discuss religious professionals here. I do this because their services are not profiled, as they are not commercial.

Fonus and the SBF businesses both have a specific design for all their offices. Fonus offices, for instance, all had a Easter-themed window displays in some windows and a message amid a collage of pictures and children's drawings in others. Although this message was about personal funerals, multiple offices had the exact same drawings and pictures. SBF offices also had some very similar displays between offices, but not identical. Their displays were centred around more abstract subjects to do with death, for instance pharaoh's and coins for Charon, the ferryman of the mythical river Styx. Both offices' displays were either explicitly or subtly focused on what I would like to call standardized individuality: a standard message which promotes individuality, but attractively designed in a standardized way.

As I mentioned in the vignette, most offices had funeral-related objects in their window sills such as urns, candle holders, vases and stones samples. Another very popular choice was flowers or plants in all forms: bouquets, potted plants or dried flowers artistically arranged in baskets. Inside offices plants were also a very popular choice. Most had simple bouquets on their tables, house plants scattered around the office, and pictures of flowers or landscapes on the wall. Birds are a popular second choice. When asked about the abundance of nature, I was told that "It's simply nice to look at. Everybody likes plants"²⁴. Another funeral director added: "It's a neutral choice, but most of all it looks calming and reminds people about the circle of life, but in a nice way".²⁵

Almost all offices had large signs that made it clear that they were funeral offices and that they were available 24/7. An exemption is the SBF funeral business that the imam and *chevra kadisha* member mentioned, who states "the best advertising is doing a good funeral. When you

²⁴ Interview 09/02/2017

²⁵ Interview 09/02/2017

have that trust, others come to you. I do not want to brag about our size, having a small and intimate feel is better for the customer.”²⁶ Most funeral businesses are located in shopping streets or on other central points. None of the decoration, place or signage seemed to hide their function or subject matter. This was striking to me, as many people had told me that the Swedish, or people in general, tend to be death-avoiding, as Toplean (2013) calls it. One priest cited this death avoidance as reason for many demure funerals and the tradition of close-casket funerals. My theory is that the death avoidance is mostly in relation to conversation, not view.

The classic image of a funeral entrepreneur is, as one funeral director states, “The old white man in a black suit. I don’t want to be that”²⁷. She is a fashionable young woman who recently started her own funeral business with her husband. She is specialised in *borgerlig* funerals and does not advertise her profession on her office either, as she states people that want her service come to her. Indeed, most funeral director were white and in a suit. Quite a lot were women, also dressed in business or business casual, often in black and white. Most religious specialist, when meeting customers wore casual clothes. One of the priests, wearing air-max, told me “I can wear what I want, usually black and white. It has to be appropriate of course, and it always wear my [clerical] collar”.²⁸

As mentioned before, not all funeral businesses advertise their services. When SBF and private businesses do, it is usually only on the internet, as they found that to be the only effective way. The *borgerlig* funeral director stated, “I am above the average price, but we don’t have prices on our website. I tell people that when they call, when we have that personal connection. If they want the cheapest funerals, they can go somewhere else.”²⁹ The private businesses that do advertise in public places mostly have their niche and found a place that reached their niche directly. Another funeral director stated, “One of my good colleagues does a lot of immigrant funerals because he’s an immigrant himself – he might have put some folders up in stores or churches.”³⁰ The only advertisements in public places I saw were bus posters from Fonus. Like other funeral businesses, they promise to be what you need, in the time that you need, how you need it. Their bus stop poster states ‘How do you summarize a life?’ and gives different examples about personal touches: a special song, a poem, or another small but important detail. I find the

²⁶ Interview 10/03/2017

²⁷ Interview 10/04/2017

²⁸ Informal conversation 05/04/2017

²⁹ Interview 10/04/2017

³⁰ Interview 12/04/2017

way these funeral companies profiled themselves quite telling. Fonus' advertisements, with their attention for personalizing funerals, or aligning your deathstyle with your lifestyle as Davies and Rumble (2012) call it, is very much in line with the international literature. There is a lot of attention for the mentioned control and personality in materiality, fitting to the 'individual, consumerist age' Davies and Rumble (2012) mentioned. As Fonus is a large business, slowly becoming international by opening offices in other Scandinavian countries, it is quite logical they are more aligned with the literature, as they are more (global) market-oriented and thus focus on new ideas from the UK and US. The SBF funeral directors all described themselves as being family businesses, reliable and knowledgeable of what people want. They don't say they are traditional, but their appearance suggests it. Their offices and websites, with the subtle and neat design, promise this too. The private businesses differ, but most seem to match to the niche they fill, such as the small *borgerlig* business in a modern office building, only open by appointment.

Personalised ceremonial materialities

As mentioned before, the freedom of choice in ceremony and materialities is not only constrained by practicalities and legalities, but also and a menu of choice. To shine light on the latter, I asked what the funerary professionals offered as possibilities. This way I hoped to see what are considered 'appropriate' materialities and identities by the funerary director. I wanted to see whether that matched other parties' ideas, such as the community, as Chesson (2001) mentioned, and organizations they might belong to. Like Graham (2016) states, these objects are headstones, keepsakes and mementos, displays of texts on graves with symbolic meaning that present the deceased's identity – whether that is an individual or a group identity.

I mentioned the small amount of materialities that is chosen with religious specialists. Most religious specialist stated that beside speech, and sometimes music, there is little space for personalization within their ceremonies. The Bosniak imam stated "I know what to do and people know that."³¹ The retired *chevra kadisha* member added "we do the same things every time. Music is not an option, as it is against tradition and instruments aren't allowed in orthodox context. We don't have singing either but sometimes it happens and I won't stop it."³² A Pentecostal pastor added "The personalised things are not common. Our funeral is like the

³¹ Interview 07/04/2017

³² Interview 03/04/2017

Church of Sweden funerals but more about our singing and praying. We might have some flowers and a picture, maybe some toys if it was a child.”³³ A Church of Sweden priest stated,

“There is a very set order in which we do things, at least two hymns, the speech and the earth on the coffin, the lord's prayer and the blessing. Maybe some others. its otherwise it's not *Svenska Kyrkan* service. Some things you can opt out of, but there are strict rules. Flowers are important, the kind doesn't matter, but it's usually roses. Occasionally children put drawings or someone puts a newspaper if the person loved that, something personal. It's like a performance, it's well thought out. People want what they're used to, what their parents and grandparents had.”³⁴

Another added, “People based their choices on what they have seen before in funerals. New things are some photographs and maybe music the person loved – from a CD or Spotify. But you need a coffin and hymns, not much more.”³⁵ All agreed that listening to their story and offering comfort where more important.

In materialities offered by funeral businesses, I found that many choices were based not on adding new things, but slightly customizing existing things such as flowers, coffins, candles and stands, and music. The only things that were added were not things people bought at the funeral business, as an SBF funeral director said:

“The body is a shell and it should be taken care of in a proper way but it is not important for the memorialising. We are practical people, the service is the remembrance, not the things. Selling ash necklaces and fingerprints and such is not popular, also it hasn't been possible to keep ashes and such by law. Swedes are modest, people want a stone with a name for remembrance, the moment with the music and flowers and a picture, those are important. The personalization are in the ceremony, the music, the colours. A customer that loves our soccer club might want the casket in our colour.”³⁶

³³ Interview 09/04/2017

³⁴ Interview 07/03/2017

³⁵ Interview 09/03/2017

³⁶ Interview 09/02/2017

Some personal objects are not bought at the business but brought from home. He adds, “Maybe someone loved train models, so we put one on the casket.” A Fonus employee mentioned most personalization she did was the coffin, flowers and the obituary. She stated “In obituaries you can change the text and symbol. Sometimes the person loved dogs. Sometimes they are religious and want a cross. The sun and birds and hobby things are very popular.”³⁷ She added that people also opt out often: “It is expensive, it’s about 3500 kronor [€341,36 on 2/7/2018]. If people are very old and don’t have many people around, they don’t see the use. Some people do not want flowers and want to do it themselves.”

Many people who have *borgerlig* funerals want similar things to a church funeral. A Church of Sweden priest mentioned, “Young people and people from the forties leave the church, often for economic reasons. which is not really a reason because it’s not expensive, but there are saving adverts who push them. The problem is then that a lot of family members are still members and when that person dies, they want a church funeral, and we can’t do that because they left.”³⁸ A private funeral director added,

“I have about 50/50 church and *borgerlig* funerals. But they want similar things – for instance the hymns. [Other private funeral director] has the more creative funerals, a lot of other people want not creative. For instance people who left the church because they never go there, but they didn’t think about funerals and the right to be buried there. A lot of people want to have the funeral in one of the Church of Sweden chapels.”³⁹

When I asked a Fonus employee whether people add things, she said “yes, but not the big things. I had a funeral that didn’t want the casket, just the urn. But I will say that all funerals are following the tradition, because people feel like it is supposed to be done that way.”⁴⁰ But, she added, “There are people who think out of the box too. I had a funeral that wanted no things, no

³⁷ Interview 08/03/2017

³⁸ Interview 07/03/2017

³⁹ Interview 12/04/2017

⁴⁰ Interview 08/03/2017

guests, only a photo and a civil officiant. They were very anxious because they thought they were very strange.” A SBF funeral director stated, “When you are not affiliated with the church you have to be more creative. The memorialisation is keeping the things from life - glassware, jewellery, a car.”⁴¹

A private funeral director mentioned that the choice in and quality of materials increased in about ten years, which is partly because of the Öresund bridge and the physical and metaphorical connection to mainland Europe. He states, “There is a shift from Swedish materials and companies to more import. [...] Back then everything looked the same, in colour and design. But it is mostly immigrants who choose the American stuff, it’s not that popular with Swedes.”⁴²

In my theoretical underpinning, I wrote about funerals as a symbol of belonging. While I stated that while some funeral businesses like Fonus advertise with personalization in the way that aligns with Davies and Rumble (2012), I think the belonging is an important value that is expressed in these personal materialities. I mentioned Reimers’ (1999) article about immigrant burials, in which having a similar funeral to that of their ancestors implies an incorporation into this community of ancestors. I theorize that not only the immigrant burials are based on the confirmation of a communal identity of belonging, but most religious, and some non-religious ceremonies are. The difference is that the non-Church of Sweden and especially the non-Christian traditions are stricter, as is known that happens with cultural identities in contrasting environments. As many funeral directors have stated they are a member of the Church of Sweden for cultural reasons, not religious, it is very likely that this is what Reimers (1999) spoke about when she stated that secularized societies still have such ingrained religious practices of ideas that are seen as cultural. The materialities that are offered are often the same or similar to what is used in church funerals, which I theorize is because the Lutheran values have become cultural for many Swedes, as Gustavsson (2000, in Af Burén 2005) stated. In this way, I think the Christian roots are very influential in funerary materiality, mostly because it keeps the use of other objects at bay through the norm of modesty.

(De)personalising graves

While many people gave different numbers, they all agreed that almost everyone chose

⁴¹ Interview 09/02/2017

⁴² Interview 12/04/2017

for cremation over burial. One SBF funeral director added “All Muslims, Jewish and orthodox are buried and I think that’s the 10% that does not cremate.”⁴³ One would think that the turn toward cremation in the Church of Sweden would be a problem, but apparently it was easily accepted, as one priest stated: “People wanted it, so ceremonies were changed to accommodate urns.”⁴⁴ One of the examples of personalised materiality is eco-friendly and/or green burials (Davies and Rumble 2012). When asked about that, a SBF funerary director answered,

“Cemeteries are already natural areas so there are no green burials, because almost everyone is cremated and there are only natural materials in the ground. The green burial has always been a tradition, the Swedish landscape is green and beautiful. Also, again, the ash regulation thing and also the cemetery regulation, nobody can just start a new one, only the church can here.”⁴⁵

The Swedish state regulated the materials urns and caskets are made out of to make everything as eco-friendly and biodegradable as possible, the crematorium manager told me. While the board that regulates this has gotten some suggestions about cardboard coffins, they have not allowed them for safety reasons. One private funeral director stated that while the laws around cremation remains are very strict and there are not very many options for creative goodbyes, scattering ashes into the sea has become very popular. While interviewing him, a woman came into his office to offer him the use of her boat for such services. He accepted happily and translated the card she handed him: “Scattering ashes in the Öresund – we can help. We have a spacious back deck with place for the ceremony. We can take up to 11 passengers.” He stated “It has become common that people want to throw the ashes into the sea. Sometimes coast guards are willing to help, but it’s better to have private options.”⁴⁶

Unexpectedly, a big trend in Swedish funerary culture is a complete turn away from personalization. In a conversation, Bremborg stated that in the time since her research, she’s seen a spike in funerals without ceremonies: “I think the internet funeral businesses are born from that,

⁴³ Interview 09/02/2017

⁴⁴ Interview 17/02/2017

⁴⁵ Interview 09/02/2017

⁴⁶ Interview 12/04/2017

as it is advertised as a way to have a funeral without hassle. People don't seem to want to make something special out of the funeral."⁴⁷ Another priest stated,

“More and more people do not want a service, a ceremony, which I think is sad. I think that people need rituals and ceremonies. It's good for you. [...] I think it is because of lack of time to gather people, there's a lot of pressure. Or it is too hard for people, they do not want to think about it or handle it. I think the fear of death is bigger than it used to be. The most common answer is 'we can't gather the family' because people are spread out and they do nothing.”⁴⁸

Another popular option is (partly) anonymous graves. In a booklet publicised by the Church of Sweden (Svenska Kyrkan 2013) the following options are mentioned: a coffin or urn grave, an *askravplats* (a grave for cremated remains), an urn wall and a garden of remembrance (*minneslund*, in casket or urn). In an urn wall and *askravplats* there is a nameplate and individual places for flowers and such, in the *minneslund* there is none. A *minneslund* is a field with some form of art and a centralised place for flowers, candles and gifts. Relatives cannot attend the burial in a *minneslund* and do not know where the body is buried. For all these options, relatives pay KGF for complete maintenance and decoration of the grave and have little (for the urn wall and *askravplats*) or no (*minneslund*) say in the appearance. A KGF employee, who was raised in Ireland, stated that she thinks it is nice because “At least you always know you're taken care of - In Ireland, graves are overgrown with weeds.”⁴⁹ Another employee added “It is about convenience, old people do not want to be a burden. But often the relatives, the children, regret it because it is totally anonymous and they do not have anywhere to put stuff because you do not see a name.”⁵⁰ One funeral director thinks that “it is because people get older, or move away, and cannot or do not want to care for a grave.” In an interview, Bremborg stated, “I think it is because the current generation that's dying generation is about 60 or 70 year old, which means they grew up with the Swedish idea of... socialist modernity? That idea of fitting in and being

⁴⁷ Interview16/03/2017

⁴⁸ Interview 07/03/2017

⁴⁹ Interview 10/04/2017

⁵⁰ Interview 15/03/2017

part of the community, but not being part of the church, I think that is what calls people to the *minneslund*.⁵¹ This too is very much in line with the classic idea of social death as a transformative state to joining the community of ancestors (Chesson 2001) and Reimers' (1999) article about immigrant burials. However, it goes against the grain of the literature about the increased importance in personalized identity and materialities in an individualised and consumerist society, in a way that I can only explain by weakly pointing towards the concept of *jantelagen* and the socio-democratic and religious context of Swedish history. I can only guess that the nation-building modernization process (Gustafsson 2003) to make Swedes sever their ties to the 'traditional' way of life (Berggren and Greiff, 2000 in af Burén, 2005) I mentioned in my contextual chapter has somehow made this possible.

⁵¹ Interview 16/03/2017

6 Professional practice and agency

In this chapter I look at professional agency through their practice of their functions and their view on their profession. In the previous chapters I discussed the network of actors and influences funerary professionals work in and the materialities that can be personalized, to show the structure the funerary professionals work in. Now, I analyse how the professionals use their agency to shape their profession, by seeing how they present materiality and how they see and work with given rules and regulations. I theorized that materiality is an operationalization of personalisation, and thus the way professionals present and use materiality is telling about the agency of the professional. After this, I discuss the (dis)similarity in marketing and practice of their role and their views on their role and influence in the expression of post-mortem identity. First of all, I illustrate my point with a reflection on professional's agency.

A middle-aged man with an unassuming face sits behind a large desk made of dark wood. All the furniture in the room is large and dark. There's a thick and grey shag carpet on the floor and two comfortable looking armchairs with matching side tables and lampshades in a corner. Above them is a large painting of a cabin and a lake. I spot a hymn book on one of the chairs. There's a large, copper coloured cross right behind him. I can't read the text on them as the blinds are partly drawn. It's quiet, even though I can see people outside if I turn around. The man end his phone call and it's clear he's noticed me looking around. "Excuse me, business is booming. What are you looking at?" I comment on the cross. He smiles and explains he wanted his office to look old-fashioned because that how he is. He hates IKEA, even though he is Swedish, he jokes. I suppose it's a quality thing. It's funny, because he was just telling me about his inventions, trail-blazing processes and very creative florist. I think about the Church of Sweden priest I've spent the most time with. The first time I saw her she had an haircut with a shaven side I immediately became jealous of, very precise eyeliner, light blue nail polish, black skinny jeans, ear piercings and sneakers with a shimmery coating. I'd never expected them to be what they are, maybe the other way around. I've judged a book by its cover, I suppose.

Presenting materiality, rules and limitations

As mentioned before, a Church of Sweden has certain rules about the parts and sequence that mostly serve to make it easier for the officiant, but also for the attendees. When asked about rules, a Fonus employee said “I have checklists. When and where and what objects. The obituary system has a format I can’t go outside of. It would be a few thousand more [laughs]. For the funeral order I have a computer program that has categories that I follow.”⁵² She stated that she does not have to follow all the rules, but they give her more clarity and confidence to practice her work, which can be stressful and sensitive. A private funeral director, that does not have the organisational guidelines that Fonus has, mentioned his main limitations as practical:

“I started this company because I saw things that were wrong in the funerary industry. People want to see their loved one, not the mass produced coffin. There are material limits, but you can always make it better. The limits are often to do with structural integrity or safety. For instance coffin colours because some have a dye that is too flammable, or they are the wrong wood that KGF won’t allow. There’s limits to how personal you can make a box, so the little things matter.”⁵³

A SBF funeral director agreed that most limitations are practical, like the ones mentioned above. He mentioned,

“Many rules have changed, mostly because of new faiths. But for instance we can’t do a traditional Hindu burial because of laws. We try to adjust so it can be as close as possible. Instead of the eldest son putting fire to the body and pyre, he is allowed to push the crematory oven button and they can be present when it burns. Then they can take the ashes to the Ganges or they can spread it in circling water – for instance in the Öresund.”⁵⁴

Most funerary materiality is either presented with a physical example, booklets or digitally, but when these are shown differs. A Fonus employee mentioned she has booklets for

⁵² Interview 08/03/2017

⁵³ Interview 12/04/2017

⁵⁴ Interview 08/03/2017

caskets, obituary symbols, and some photos from flower setups or other well-received materials from past funerals. She mentioned they will be putting up a screen on the walls of the meeting rooms so she can show them there. A SBF funerary director stated, “We try to avoid menus. I think it’s better to have a discussion to see what they actually want.”⁵⁵ He mentioned that people want ‘the usual’: “Sometimes people ask what others choose and I hate that, their farewell should be personal.” A Church of Sweden priest said a similar thing, as she stated that they ask people what poems or music they want, and offer the possibility for CD’s from home, but people tend not to want personalisation. She said, “They want something that’s safe and that the people that are coming to the funeral know. It’s a comfort.”⁵⁶

A private funerary professional said he also shows booklets, or pictures on the computer, but he only shows a selection after people have talked about what they want. He also stated he is planning to build a showroom in another office which will hold caskets and other materialities so people can touch and see some in real life – plus, he will be able to make small alterations such as handles. It will be the first one in Sweden, he says, and everything will be even cheaper and faster. That’s a priority for him, he states: “I put the prices with caskets. Nobody else does that, but I know customers do not want to ask the price.”⁵⁷ He also stated that he likes to look abroad for new materiality options, because he wants to make funerals special, which could not happen a while ago. He tells a story about a now retired funeral director: “when people asked for new things he said no, that’s not the custom. We’re not like that. Our florist made a high heel shoe flower piece last month. I also want to use a motorcycle tank as an urn. I saw it on the deadliest catch.”

I argue that the funerary professionals use their agency to show the materialities in a way that fits their specific business and goal. I mentioned the rules and guidelines a Fonus employee liked to follow, which I theorize is partly because Fonus is a hierarchical corporation, and partly because she is reasonably new to the industry and thus does not trust her experience like the senior directors do. I do think that the market-focussed corporate ways of Fonus forms the way their employees profile their materialities, because they are more focused on offering all options. The SBF offices and some private offices are more focussed on using their experience in the field to choose what materialities they show clients, which means they offer a smaller selection, which

⁵⁵ Interview 08/03/2017

⁵⁶ Interview 07/03/2017

⁵⁷ Interview 12/04/2017

they perceive as more fitting to their clients: they use their knowledge and experience to feel what the client needs to make the process easier. The private funeral businesses are all in a way focused on bringing freedom to their clients, in different ways. While one director shows all prices, the other does not do that at all. As the *borgerlig* director stated: “I have long conversations with my clients, no catalogues, only the internet. We figure out what they want together. When I know that, and their budget, I ask them to trust the professionals and rely on the people who know what they are doing, to do what they do best.”⁵⁸ I argue that all funeral directors actively use their agency to select materialities that they perceive as the appropriate expression of identity, which is shown by the fact that the funeral director who is most focussed on freedom is also insistent on her knowledge and interpretation.

Most professionals who I asked why they are in the funerary industry state they love it, even though it is hard and stressful. It seems to be hard to enter the funerary industry, as there is no formal education, and as one funeral director stated: “you can’t apply to existing businesses because there’s no movement. It’s a job for life. I’m could only start a business because I hired a professional to teach me.”⁵⁹ A SBF funeral director states “There’s two ways to get into the funerary industry: you inherit it or it just happens. With me, it just happened. I’m still enrolled in university. I’m 60.”⁶⁰ A private funerary professional states, “It’s very hard to open a funeral agency if you don’t have any previous experience, you can’t get any information at all. It’s like a secret society.”⁶¹

The last two chapters were mostly about structure, but I do not want to paint the professionals as powerless in the face of it. In my first chapter, I mentioned that Bremborg (2005) saw no do-it-yourself-chains and I quoted a KGF employee who stated that it is impossible to organize a funeral without funerary professionals. With the description of the impenetrable world of funerary professionals added to this, I want to link this to the idea of biopower I mentioned in my theoretical underpinning: the overarching institutions, technology and politics that wield influence through the regulation of information (Foucault 1978 in Kaufman and Morgan 2005). There, I argued that funerary corporations could be societal institutions, with social control held through their expertise, connections and knowledge. In a sense, the funerary professionals use their

⁵⁸ Interview 10/04/2017

⁵⁹ Interview 09/02/2017

⁶⁰ Interview 08/03/2017

⁶¹ Interview 12/04/2017

agency to uphold the status quo because they profit from it, it is the way they support themselves, Even though the structure created by larger institutions such as the state and church are not perfect, the funerary professionals (and of course also the corporations that process materialities) know these structures best and have no intention to change them. In light of the duality of structure (Sewell jr. 1992), their agency is not only limited by the structure, but they also actively use their agency to mould this very structure, in ways that might change or uphold it. As I predicted, clients, professionals and their organizations all actively work to keep the established order mostly as it is, even though there are many new options available, because they feel it is correct. I do add that some things are changing, for instance the use of internet and influences and materials from other countries.

View on function, influence and post-mortem identity

It seems that funerals where the deceased died young are personalized the most. A SBF funeral director stated, “It’s different with funerals of young people. Losing your mother is a natural thing, but losing a child is a unnatural thing. You haven’t had time to collect memories so you need to make things.”⁶² A Church of Sweden priest added,

“I had a funeral of a little girl that had been sick a long time. Personalizing a funeral then becomes a way to get through the grief. The coffin was painted with flowers, we listened to Disney and we let go of pink balloons. On this awful day, they got what they wanted. I'm very glad we can provide that as a church [now] and we don't have to say no we can't play Disney, we have to play Bach, because then you alienate people.”⁶³

It seems that in this case personalising materialities is a method for grief counselling. As Bremborg (2005) stated, funerary professionals mostly focus on their role as grief councillors. She only wrote about SBF businesses, but it rings true for other funeral directors and religious specialists as well. This influenced their use of materiality, as they see it as a way of conversing about helping the bereaved deal with the absence of their loved. Many professionals see the rise

⁶² Interview 09/02/2017

⁶³ Interview 09/02/2017

of personalisation and materiality to express post-mortem identity as described in the literature but remain focussed on their role as grief councillor and guide through a confusing and stressful process. I argue that most use the personalisation of materiality as method in their grief counselling, as they use the process to get people to talk about the deceased, which makes the funeral a closing statement in the conversation, imbued with the comfort and guidance of the professional.

All professionals feel they are there to make sure the bereaved get the funeral they want to, but some are more personally involved than others. A Fonus employee describes her process:

“When [the bereaved are] choosing the casket, I often leave the room for a short while. I show them the different ones we have and leave. I could have more influence if I was a salesperson and I wanted them to buy the expensive one – I could tell them more about it, show pictures of an example funeral. But I don’t feel that’s good. I want them to choose what’s right for them and I don’t want to influence them. It’s an economic thing too. It’s sensitive sometimes because they are very expensive ones. It’s very personal.”⁶⁴

A Church of Sweden priest stated:

“Being Lutheran means we are people who are good enough to take care of our own relation to god. If someone says they don’t want a funeral, I think it’s sad and I think that maybe the [dead] person did want that but I can’t say you are wrong because they are adults, they can handle their own life. You’re there to give them comfort and hope in a difficult situation.”⁶⁵

Most others state their role is exactly to influence clients, and do not see this as imposing their opinion onto the bereaved, but as guiding them through the confusion to what they want. A private funerary director stated “I see my role as a sort of mind reader. They have a picture of what they want but can’t put it in words, so my job is to easily get it out for them. I can influence

⁶⁴ Interview 08/03/2017

⁶⁵ Interview 17/02/2017

a lot, but I want to see what they really want.”⁶⁶ A SBF funerary director states it’s important to ask people to describe what they mean:

“Sometimes people say they want a traditional funeral. Then I want to hear from them what they think it’s traditional, as it’s hugely different. That’s just their way of getting a personal funeral. I’ve seen it all, so I can do suggestions based on what they tell me. But you have to assess what people would find important enough to personalise, as you don’t want to give them too many or too hard choices. It’s our job to do the things for them they don’t want to do.”⁶⁷

The funerary director that specialises in secular funerals said she wants to convince people to do a *borgerlig* funeral, even if they doubt it at first, because she feels the freedom and personal touches of a *borgerlig* funeral make people truly happy. She states, “But people who come to me want to be creative, usually. It is a process in which we are both very involved. We get to something perfect together. That’s what they hire me for.”⁶⁸

Regarding the importance of expressing post-mortem identity, all funerary professionals agreed it is a way to process fear and grief. A Fonus employee stated “The personalisation is important because it’s part of the grieving process that the bereaved go through. A proper goodbye helps close it for them.”⁶⁹ A Church of Sweden priest mentioned that the process of talking about what people want her to say or sing seems more important than what she actually says: “People often don’t want to pick a hymn and such, they want me to do it. They picked something else and they’re done.”⁷⁰ Another priest mentioned materiality explicitly when she said, “Materiality is to honour the deceased. People spend a lot of money, a couple of thousand crowns, on flower arrangements (1000 krona = €95,66 on 2/7/2018). Sometimes people say don’t spend money on flowers, give it to cancer research or such, but they still spend a little money on flowers. It’s a sign.”⁷¹ An employee of KGF mentioned a complaint he had recently gotten. It was

⁶⁶ Interview 10/04/2017

⁶⁷ Interview 08/03/2017

⁶⁸ Interview 10/04/2017

⁶⁹ Interview 08/03/2017

⁷⁰ Interview 09/03/2017

⁷¹ Interview 07/03/2017

about a Santa statue that someone put on a grave, and the people who visited the neighbouring graves found it very ugly. He said “It’s important to people that the graves looks proper, and sometimes it’s about an ugly Santa statue. It’s a symbol, because people can’t change anything about death but they can change grave decoration, so they focus on it.”⁷² One SBF funerary director told me about his personal theory that personalization happens because of a lack of something else. He states,

“There’s a big difference between the city and the countryside. In the countryside more people attend the funeral because people are members of organisations or a network or whatever. They retired, spent ten years playing golf and bridge and such and now the entire club, and their partners’ club, and all their old neighbours and everyone shows up. In contrast to the city where there are more flowers and everything is more expensive and special. I won’t say what put people are missing something and filling it that way.”⁷³

One funerary professional succinctly summed up my ending argument, so I will end with his wise words: “Every funeral is personal in a way because everyone is unique. People think they have to be ground breakers but that’s not necessary. We tell them you can feel secure in the tradition. People can do as much, or as little as they want. This is not a time for extra stress.”⁷⁴

⁷² Interview 15/03/2017

⁷³ Interview 09/02/2017

⁷⁴ Interview 12/04/2017

7 Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have look at the structure and agency involved in post-mortem identity, as expressed through funerary materiality. I have made the argument that professional's agency should be looked at, as I feel the role of the professional is often overlooked in questions about freedom of expression and the neoliberal market. The professionals service bridges the gap between market and consumer, as they operationalize and utilize the new concepts and objects in the context of their profession. I have not only researched funerary directors, but also other actors, as some also offer materialities and above all, I want to sketch a complete picture of the funerary industry in Malmö, Sweden.

The funeral industry in Malmö consist of only a small group of people who all know each other. They have either close relations to one another or have previously belonged to one of the other groups. The church, the state and the administrative services are all intertwined. The church does not have the explicit power over funerals anymore but because of the intertwinement everything goes as it was historically determined by the church. The offices and clothing of most funeral professionals have a very business-like appearance. Most businesses have only online advertisement or are relying on word of mouth. Fonus is a large business and more marked oriented, and is thus advertised like a big company. They use market tactics which are also visible in the global market. All advertise with personal touches, as Davies and Rumble (2012) mention is currently the trend around the world. On the other hand the SFB offices are more traditional and family businesses. The claim that they have been doing this for generations and therefore know how they should be caring for their customers. Through this they take over the decisions of their customers. And the non-associate business are started because they saw a gap in the market which they could fill. They practice their own idea of how funerals should be done. However, this does not mean that they leave more room for personalization as is stated in most literature. They have the freedom to do it as they think it should be. They either do not participate with the established funeral business, or they do it in their own way, which is in the end quite similar because they belong to the same structure, which they fill differently.

There are a lot of materialities which can be personalized, but the professionals rarely offer them. The different businesses differ a lot in the what and how they offer personalization. So the funeral professionals do use materialities, not as way of personalising funerals but rather

as a way for themselves to gather information of their customers and as a method for grief counselling. The way they offer materialities align with the sort of business they run, as funerary professionals actively use their knowledge and options, their agency, to form their business how they want it, and what they want it focused on.

The laws concerning the way in which human remains should be treated are very strict. This causes constraint in the way a funeral can be personalized. This does not seem to be very influential because the largest trend surrounding graves are partially or completely anonymous graves. This seems to go against the idea of personalization which is argued to be the worldwide trend. This also means that the practicality of the grave and the belonging to a larger community might be more important than personalization. Due the popularity of cremations a lot things have had to change in the Church of Sweden, which they did seemingly without resistance. However, it seems to be harder to adjust to this trend for non-Christian funerals; I theorise this is because of the enmeshment of state and church and the way laws have been shaped by the Lutheran church.

The availability of materiality is a whole other issue than the way in which it is used. Funeral professionals use their own agency to present newly available forms of funerals in a certain way. Fonus, for example, present it in a catalogue so their customers can chose out of a selection. The more traditional businesses see themselves more as guiding agents and want to discuss the options with their clients and present themselves as the ones who know what's is best for them. So although the funeral industry is mostly focussed on given forms of funerals the funeral professionals are the agents who determine how these forms are presented to the public.

According to the funeral professionals the way in which they influence their clients is part of their job. Because they see themselves as the ones who can guide people through the process of dealing with their past away loved ones. They are more than just salespeople, even Fonus with its market orientated methods, as they see their role as comfort and guidance in hard times.

The question I posed is 'How do funerary professionals influence the expression of post-mortem identity in funerary materialities?' I argue that funerary professionals influence the expression of post-mortem identity in two ways: in a direct and an indirect way. I see materiality as symbols and operationalisation of identity. I argue that funerary professionals are an important part in the process of forming post-mortem identity, as not only are they simply present, they are a soundboard and an guide of which parts of identity are appropriate or possible to be expressed.

The indirect way is through the form and availability of materiality, which is influenced by the Swedish state and the cultural norms, which are both heavily influenced by the Lutheran Church of Sweden. Directly, the professionals influence the expression through the role as guides through the grieving process. As part of their guiding process, they use their knowledge, experience and creativity to make a selection of appropriate materialities to offer the bereaved. As they are voices of authority in this situation, is it logical that their choices influence the bereaved.

With this thesis, I wanted to bring attention to the agency of funerary professionals, as I feel the role of the professional is often overlooked in questions about freedom of expression and the neoliberal market. The professionals service bridges the gap between market and consumer, as they operationalize and utilize the new concepts and objects in the context of their profession. Their role in the negotiation of identity through materiality is (at the least) is that of a provider of goods and services, and thus their ideas of what is possible and appropriate. They are knowledgeable agents that use their agency in a way that is appropriate to their structure, and thus they shape their structure. While there is a lot of research about the influence of and the gap between the market and consumers, I think there has not been enough attention to the people filling that gap or representing that influence. With this research, I hope to add a contemporary European case study to the small collection that currently exists. The current collection is far from exhaustive and hold an ethnocentric bias, as most are focussed on the UK or US, which has a different socio-historical background. A larger range of case studies could be used to look at differences between western, Christian' societies, to gain understanding in the processes and concepts that influence the different funeral industries. My research is of course not sufficient to understand Swedish funerary culture. For instance, I could not research the internet funeral corporations, who can heavily impact the funerary industry. The opinions of the bereaved are lacking, who are the only ones who can shine light on the possibility to organize funerals without a professional. There is also the case of the *minneslund*, which can be described as an accepted form of an anonymous mass grave.

Davies and Rumble (2012) present an image of a vast amount of creative funerals, with many possible options for personalisation. I found that funerals in Malmö were mostly modest, with very similar forms in both Church of Sweden and secular funerals. This can be explained by the socio-historical context and the role of semi-secularism (Af Burén 2015) in Swedish society, but it still in contrast to the literature. I also disagreed with Walter's (2005) categorisation of

Sweden as a religious model, which I argue is more municipal, although with religious influences. Overall, I found that research into post-mortem identity has a strong separation in research into communal and personal identity, in which the research into communal identity, like Reimers (1999), is focused on immigrants. In my introduction, I stated that classic ethnography, in focussing on exotic rituals, upholds the idea of the non-Christian funeral traditions as non-standard. This ethnocentric bias, I find, appears too in this research, because it sketches the immigrants, with their non-Christian funerals, as one-dimensional 'others', as it pitches personal versus collective identity. I argue, together with my research, that the freedom of personal expression is also the freedom to express a collective identity. Especially in trying times like the death of a loved one, it might be comforting to lean on the sense of belonging that a funeral similar to the funeral of your ancestors brings. The funeral professional can be someone by your side that knows how to deal with the painful reality of death, who knows how the process is supposed to go. In this case, the expression of personal identity is not a priority, because you want to hand over the responsibility of making tough decisions to somebody else.

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