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Food for finality: feeding the bereaved and 'feasting' the dead

Abstract:

While death is a taboo subject in most cultures, and surrounded by practices of prayer and purification, it is surprisingly often ritualised through the sharing of food or drink, or both. This article will consider some mythological and religious sources for connections between food and death. Then it will take a cross section of New Zealand ethnic cultures: Māori, Pakeha (European), Pacific, and Asian, and reflect on the symbolism and customs that are involved in the sharing of, or abstinence from, food, when commemorating the dead. Following on from Fischer's model of the 'five P's' of ritual analysis, namely performance, persons, period, paraphernalia and place (1996: 57-8), consideration will be given to similarities, differences, and matters of etiquette and faith.

Biographical note:

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While death is a taboo subject in most cultures, and surrounded by practices of prayer and purification, it is surprisingly often ritualised through the sharing of food or drink, or both. Paul Post notes that the American sociologist Catherine Bell:

distinguishes six types of rituals: (a) life rituals, or rites of passage; (b) calendar or annual rites; (c) rites of exchange and communion, sacrifice; (d) rites of affliction and healing; (e) feasts, festivals, and fasts; and (f) political ritual, civil ritual courts, nations, army, royalty, expressing power, hierarchy, and identity. Bell's division is based essentially on a classification of ritual repertoires. A repertoire can be seen as a complex of rituals that show a certain coherence with respect to form, participation, occasion, or context. A ritual repertoire is thus a genre of ritual. One can think here of death rites, initiation rites, rites of passage, pilgrimage rituals, disaster rituals, memorial rituals, and so on. (Post 2015)

By treating both secular and sacred events as ritual – from a rugby match to Holy Communion, from a rock music concert to a civic function, and so on – Bell considers the similarities, differences, and matters of etiquette, as well as faith, in establishing all as rituals (1997). This becomes a useful basis for considering two of Bell's distinctive categories: informal rites, with exchange and communion; and, sacred rituals concerning death, as rites of passage, with particular attention made to the sharing of food with the bereaved, even to the extent of feasting with the dead.

This article looks at some of the influences in funeral food, from a sense of ritual, both in catering and also comforting, which are common in New Zealand today; but first discusses some of the mythological, historical, and multicultural influences which have contributed to these. The paper will then take a cross section of New Zealand ethnic cultures – Maori, Pakeha (European), Pacific and Asian – and reflect on the symbolism and customs that surround the sharing of food, or abstinence from aspects of food, that are involved in commemorating the dead. Following Bell's methodology, consideration will be given to similarities, differences, and matters of etiquette, or societal and cultural conventions, as well as some aspects of faith, belief or traditional practice.

According to anthropologists such as Connerton (1989), Durkheim (2012 [1915]), and Geertz (1968), ritual has six key aspects. It is repetitive, or repeated over time; performative, involving actions with participants; distinct from every day - with specific costumes, symbols or artefacts; ordered, or organised in a specified way; staged to be observed, by more than participants; and finally, ritual is a collective experience, for participants and onlookers alike (Connerton 1989: 41). The sociologist Clare B. Fischer suggests there are 'five P's' of ritual – performance, persons, period, paraphernalia and place (1996) – while Grimes arranges ritual into seven aspects or categories: actions, actors, places, times, objects, language and groups (1995: 25-7). Whatever the nature and substance of death rituals, in commemorating the life and passing of a person, or consigning the body to the elements, across many cultures, the sharing of food is a common practice. However, as it is often disguised through the informality of friendly visits to bereaved families, any ritual aspects are often unacknowledged. Yet the sharing of food after a death contains many of the elements previously mentioned: it has 'occasion' - a death; it has 'actions' - visits, gifts and offerings of food; while 'performance' is seen in the actions of food preparation and gifting. 'Paraphernalia' is often managed through the cake tins, cooking pots and casserole dishes, even plastic containers, while 'place' and 'persons' will vary according to the nature of the relationship with the bereaved. For example, workmates might delegate one person to 'drop off' a selection of supportive and nourishing treats, while closer friends and neighbours might enter the house, paying respects to the family, or even to the body of the deceased if is available for viewing at home.

But where do these common practices come from? It is helpful to consider the religious or mythological influences for these last suppers and investigate the sources of practices which are still upheld today. Incidentally, the 'Last Supper' depicted by the painters of the Renaissance and commemorated in the Holy Communion of the Christian churches, was in fact a common practice in the ancient world *symposion* (Greek) or *convivium* (Latin) – in which people, usually men, discussed philosophical and civic matters after a meal, over wine. It is even likely that the 'Last Supper' of the New Testament was enjoyed by Jesus and disciples while reclining on benches rather than seated upright (König 2012: 121), as a form of symposium. Whatever the seating arrangements, this idea of a last feast lies at the heart of the sacraments of the Christian church, especially in Roman Catholicism where Holy Communion is often celebrated within a full requiem mass, a 'Last Supper' in honour of the departed.

Even before Christianity, the rituals concerning death were strongly embedded in Greco-Roman traditions. For the Greeks and subsequently the Romans, in addition to Hades, the God of the Underworld, there were two great gods of earth, who also feature in rituals associated with death; Demeter, 'the Goddess of the Corn' (Ceres in Latin), and Dionysus (Bacchus in Latin), the 'God of the Vine'. The worship of Demeter centred upon harvest festivals, probably involving the baking and eating of the first bread made from the new grain (Hamilton 1992: 48). However, her association with death is not simply from the metaphorical association with the death of a seed in the earth, to generate new life. It derives from a Greek myth retold by Hesiod, and in the Homeric Hymns, where Demeter neglected her role as goddess of the harvest when her daughter Penelope went missing. Demeter was heartbroken to lose her daughter, who had been abducted by Hades, and taken to the underworld. She searched for her for a year, neglecting her role as Goddess of the Harvest and sending a 'year of barrenness upon the earth' (Grant 1962: 127), a year in which nothing would grow from the earth or fruit from plants. Zeus finally intervened and sent Hermes or Mercury to bring the girl to her mother. However, Persephone had eaten pomegranate seed, (as Ovid notes, seven seeds) of the sacred fruit of the underworld, and so was bound by this act of consumption to return to Hades (Ovid [2000]: Bk V, 533-71). Eventually it was agreed that she would come back for a portion of each year to be with her mother, at which time the earth would welcome her back with waving ears of corn and the awakening of spring growth. When she prepared to return to Hades in Autumn, the earth would grieve, causing the leaves to fall or weep. And, so, the Autumn Festival at harvest was of abundance, in preparation for the drought of winter.

Dionysus was also worshipped as a death god. As 'God of the Vine' he had an affinity with the Goddess of Bread, as bread in the form of pancakes or flat bread was eaten at every meal, and was watered down with wine, especially for the wealthy (Fass 2003: 10). Dionysus, having a mortal mother (Semele) and divine father (Zeus) was not

'made' immortal until he had died in utero – when his mother was killed by Zeus' lightning bolt. He was rescued and carried in his father's thigh until being born a second time, and lived to foster the growth of viticulture and encourage excess in his worshippers (Ovid [2000]: Bk III, Il.213 ff.). Later he entered Hades' underworld, to rescue his mother from death and was subsequently worshipped as a conqueror of death (Bk IV, Il. 1-30). So, the drinking of wine and the breaking of bread is a pre-Christian social and religious ritual. Wine makes people merry, and Dionysus is worshipped through imbibement; but it also causes destruction and unreasonable behaviours, and in the earliest instances his followers, called Maenads or Bacchantes were women: 'frenzied with wine. They rushed through the woods waving pine-cone tipped wands, swept away in a fierce ecstasy. Nothing could stop them. They would tear to pieces the wild creature they met and devour the bloody shreds of flesh' (Hamilton 1992: 56-7).

Dionysus became identified with frenzy and drunken excess, by the reported action of his worshippers. However, the most significant worship of Dionysus, in which most of the Ancient Greek world became involved, occurred at harvest. At first these celebrations began in songs and dances of thanksgiving on the threshing floor; next evolved local competitions, which then grew into the vast Festival of Dionysus, or Dionysia, a national festival of worship through theatre. Over time the focus of the religious ceremony became the performance of plays, and Aristotle deftly united these Dionysian concepts in his *Poetics*, by stressing the importance of *catharsis* for the audience, of releasing or purging irrational influences through the observation of the great tragedies (Aristotle 350BCE [1895]). This sense of release continues to be at the heart of funeral practices; that most dramatic moment in the lives of the bereft, when their loved ones are finally surrendered back to the elements from which they came; earth, air, fire or water.

To the Romans dining was often associated with death: funerary art often depicted the deceased feasting in the afterlife and it was common to dine outside the tombs of deceased relatives. Some tombs had elaborate dining rooms purpose built outside them. (König 2012: 25)

The Romans also had funerary clubs where members could pay a regular subscription, which would ensure a decent burial after death. The members would meet regularly to dine in honour of their benefactors and patron deities. According to Troop, Romans dedicated the herb parsley to Persephone, and to funeral rites. It became

a staple of Greek funeral rituals and was scattered over graves during funeral ceremonies or planted over them. When funeral games were played, participating athletes donned wreaths of parsley. Romans would create these wreaths for their own funerals and adorn their graves with them. (Troop 2013)

In modern times, parsley is considered a culinary garnish, but is still respected as a medicinal herb, having diuretic qualities.

Lemuria was an ancient Roman festival which occurred on odd numbered days in May (the 9th, 11th and 13th) as even numbered days were considered unlucky. In Ovid's compendium of Roman feasts and holidays, Fasti (n.d. [1931]), he describes how in order to banish the lemures, or bad ghosts of the family, the patriarch would rise at midnight and wash his hands in water three times. Barefoot, he would walk through the

house, tossing beans over his shoulder or spitting them out in various places, repeating, 'I send these; with these beans I redeem me and mine.' The beans were intended to absorb the spirits and take them back into the ground. Small bean shaped biscuits, or 'fave de morti', are still made in Latin-based cultures in Europe and South America today, as these Roman rituals have been absorbed into modern society through Christianity, and are still recalled in Hallowe'en, Days of the Dead and the Feast of the Dead. Traditions such as wakes, mourning periods, food donations to grieving families, including favourite food items of the deceased in coffins or at graves, as well as funeral rites in Christian churches — of Holy Mass, after funeral service gatherings — all retain these elements of food for finality.

This Greco-Roman tradition is not the only source of funeral ritual in modern societies. In Māori traditions and customs in my home country, New Zealand, we see the impact of a different mythology and storytelling about death. Food plays a part in these funeral practices as well, where once again, death comes to the world through the agency of the gods.

Hine-titama (Lady of the Dawn) was the daughter of Tane-matua, the God of Forests, and Hine-ahu-one, 'woman created of earth', the first woman in Māori mythology. Tane-matua, mated with both women but Hine-titama (Lady of the Dawn) as she was then named, was not aware he was her father and they had several children. To paraphrase one version of the story, one day, Hine-titama asked her husband if he knew who her father was, and he told her to ask the pillars of the house. She knew that her husband had built the house, and then realized that her husband was actually her father. Ashamed, she ran off to the underworld and changed her name to Hine-nui-te-po. Her descent also marked the beginning of the flow of mankind to the underworld (McLintock 1966: 4).

Hine-nui-te-po then becomes the Māori Goddess of Darkness and Death, queen of the underworld, whose name translates as, 'the Great Lady of the Night'. The mythical hero Maui attempted to reverse man's mortality 'by crawling through Hine-nui-te-po's body while she slept (McLintock 1966: 4). Maui journeyed to her resting place through the forest, with three birds as companions. When he turned himself into a lizard and crawled into Hine-nui-te-po's vagina, one of the birds, the fantail (*piwakawaka*) laughed, and leapt about. The Goddess of Death awoke, felt the lizard inside, crushed her legs together, and killed him. In this way, Maui became the first man to die: 'it is said that the war dance, the *haka*, owes something to this dance of the *piwakawaka* in mythological times, or at least the single action in it of jumping from side to side while brandishing a weapon (McLintock 1966: 4).

As a consequence of this story, the fantail or *piwakawaka*, especially with its chittering cry, is seen as ominous, a harbinger of death coming to the house. In this story, Maui, a demigod, dies in the act of attempting to defy the Goddess of the Underworld, and death, and consequently the world of darkness (death) remains a reality for all humankind, or those who live in the world of light.

The term *tangi* or *tangihanga* (time of weeping) describes a Māori approach to the process of grieving for someone who has died. Here the strong separation between the world of the light and the world of the dark is upheld. Practices and protocols can differ

from tribe to tribe, but there are processes in common which enable people to express their sense of loss, not only for their loved one, but for those who have passed before them. Traditionally, *tangihanga* were held at *marae*, or meeting places or compounds. Nowadays, *tangihanga* are also held at private residences and funeral parlours. No matter where they are held, *tangihanga* or *tangi* usually take place over a number of days, beginning when the person passes away and continuing after the burial, until the rituals and ceremonies of grieving are complete.

A common belief is that the *tūpāpaku* (or body of the deceased) should never be left alone after death, so close family members (the *whānau pani*) stay with the *tūpāpaku* throughout the *tangihanga*, supported by older female relative. (Māori Language Commission 2012)

The greenery, or *pare kawakawa*, worn around the head as a wreath, has become a symbol of the *tangi* for many, just as parsley became so considered by the Romans. Kawakawa is a medicinal plant important to Māori (Jones 2007: 3) for its cleansing properties, and is used in a wide number of rituals including the launch of canoes, and the opening of houses or buildings.

Visitors travel long distances to attend *tangihanga*, to show their respect for the person who has died and to offer support to the family. It is also common practice to offer a *koha*, a gift or donation, usually money, to the tribal *marae* or family, to support the costs of the funeral or to contribute towards feeding the large numbers of visitors who might gather to pay their respects. The role of the *whānau pani* – the bereaved family – is simply to mourn (Higgins 2011: 4). The family is not expected, and in traditional situations, not allowed, to participate in food preparation as it is such a *tapu* or sacred time. Hine-nui-te-po, the Goddess of Death, presides over this time, and no mundane duties are to be conducted while the body and soul of the departed hang between life and death. After a suitable time of mourning, often three days (sufficient time for the soul to depart), while the family sits as sentinel over the body of the deceased, the *hākari* (feast) is an important element of all Māori death customs. It is the way in which the *whānau pani* are symbolically welcomed back amongst the living – from the *tapu* (taboo) state of mourning and grief, the world of darkness, to the world of light and the everyday (*noa*).

One of the most famous historical *tangihanga* was the funeral of the Māori King Tawhiao, for which a large feast, or *hakari*, was cooked in the earth in pits in 'hundreds of hangis or Maori ovens ... and before long the whole camp were [sic] discussing their pork and potatoes, their eels and kumara and bread, with a relish' (Anon 1894). It was further reported this feast included 100 tons of potatoes, 20 tons of flour, 30 tons of bread, scores of porkers (pigs), thousands of dried eels, whitebait, mussels, dried shark, and kumara (sweet potato). For all kinds of large gatherings (not just funereal), for both dignitaries or those who have been significant in their communities and for ordinary families, the *hangi*, or earth oven, continues to be a practical and effective way to feed a large number of people, and increasingly in New Zealand society, not only for Māori gatherings. In the context of the *tangi*, generosity, family, community, sharing, and celebration become important values demonstrated by the use of *hangi* as a means of food preparation, as are the 'five p's' of Fischer's model; performance, persons, period,

paraphernalia and place (1996). As with the Roman Catholic requiem mass, this practice of sharing food and drink to move the death ritual to a new stage, back into the world of light, combines etiquette and tradition with myth and/or faith.

Maori are not the only Pacific Island group to feast at the end of a funeral ceremony. According to a series of small volumes endorsed by the New Zealand Ministry of Culture and Heritage, *New to New Zealand* (Magee 2005, 2011, 2014), in the Cook Islands a light meal of pork, chicken and taro with other vegetables is served after the ceremony (Magee 2011: 3-4). While in Nuie the *po alaaala*, or traditional wake, used to be before the funeral but is now held after the funeral (Bell 2014: 8). In Tonga, Tokelau and Tuvalu, gifts of food are brought to a dying person and then to the family, once the person is deceased (Magee: 11-6). In Samoa, a *lau' ava*, or wake, is held and food gifts include tinned corned beef and cabin bread, while the members of a choir singing at the funeral are also given gifts of food (Bell 2005: 11). In Fiji, a feast can be held either forty or one hundred nights after the funeral, sometimes including the drinking of *kava*, the drink made from the narcotic pepper plant, kava-kava. In some villages, fishing and gathering wood is banned for other members of the community, so that the family can prepare for the feast without competition (Bell 2005: 6).

Asian communities in New Zealand have also brought their food customs with them, including those associated with death and funerals. Traditionally Chinese friends and family hold a shared meal or, after a funeral, if they eat together at a restaurant, order seven dishes, as seven is a number associated with death (Bell 2011: 37). Magee (2011: 21) and Bell (2014: 37) also indicate that visits to gravesides and sharing of food by the graves can be undertaken by Chinese mourners. For Korean communities, traditional food such as bowls of soup and rice are offered to visitors to the grieving household, and it is disrespectful not to accept these (Bell 2014: 43). One further food for finality in Korean communities occurs on the first anniversary of the death, when the favourite meal of the deceased is served or ordered (Bell 2014: 43). For Indian and Japanese families, no cooking is to be done by the family, no fires are to be lit in the family home, all food is brought in by relatives and friends; in Japanese families, this practice can be so important to observe that only raw food is offered (Bell 2014: 45-58). Finally, Philippine communities are also noted to share a feast to commemorate the deceased forty days after a funeral (Bell 2014: 58).

In all these cases there is a practical, as well as a spiritual, aspect to the traditions; the grieving family is given the opportunity to grieve, while mundane things of life are to be put aside for a time. Food for the family in shock is often simple, and easy to prepare or heat up; hence the reliance in European traditions of casseroles and pasta dishes. Often sweet finger food is given – cakes, slices, and pies. For practical reasons of crowd management, with guests standing or moving around to greet each other, similar finger foods, with the addition of sandwiches and savouries, are commonly on the menu at a funeral, though very few funeral homes will advertise catering as one of their services. While only the Fijian custom of drinking kava in the feasting of the dead has been mentioned, alcohol – especially whisky and brandy or fruit based spirits – is seen as comforting in more traditional European homes. The wake tradition of raising a toast to the deceased also assists in the loosening of tongues, as memories are recounted. Even though tea, cordial, and coffee might be offered at the formal gathering after a

funeral, in a public hall, funeral parlour or church hall, at the private home or place of gathering which follows it is common to drink alcohol.

In the sharing of food at funerals, the mourners, friends, and family express or demonstrate values of a community; activities which act as a reminder of a set of beliefs and proper attitudes, whether overtly held or inadvertently practiced. Despite the informality of many such expressions of support or grief, through home visits or personal meetings, the sharing of food with the deceased, or even with the dead in commemorating their favourite meals, can be seen to be a ritual act, entirely in accordance with Catherine Bell's rites of exchange and communion and rites of passage. Clare B. Fischer's descriptions of the 'five P's': exhibiting an occasion – before, during, or after a funeral ceremony; actions – giving and caring; performance – the toast, the preparation, the eating of food; paraphernalia – special dishes, drinks or means of preparation such as an earth oven or stipulations about the temperature of food; and, place – either a domestic or public situation; and persons – the mourners, the wider community and, of course, the body or memory of the deceased. At such times, mourners and their community, or circle, negotiate the awareness of death as intersecting with their everyday lives. Through simple acts of etiquette and convention, such as giving, preparing, delivering and sharing food, the friends and community are offering support in ways that link them to ancient practices, elements of faith, and symbols of culture and stories, whether they are aware of such themes or not.

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