THE COMFORT OF STANDARDISATION IN THE FACE OF FUNERAL PLURALISM

The Oldest-Old Individual Organising Funerals in a Public Funeral Centre

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Abstract

Losing a close relative in old age is nowadays a very common occurrence. But what does it mean in practice to organise a funeral for someone over 80, in a context characterised by the pluralisation of our relationship with death and the dead? This article tries to shed some light on this question. Based on an ethnographic study carried out in Switzerland on bereavement of oldest-old individuals, it focuses on the moment of funeral organisation between the oldest-old mourner, his or her relatives, and funeral professionals. It highlights, on the one hand, the effects of a particular context, that of a public funeral centre offering a (conditionally) "free of charge" regime, and, on the other hand, a particular mode of negotiation based on consensus, simplicity, and comfort, which is not unrelated to the age of the bereaved, during elaboration of funeral practices.

Keywords: *funeral practice, oldest-old individuals, Switzerland, pluralisation, ethnography*

Experiencing bereavement in the evening of life is commonplace. As Lalive d'Epinay and his colleagues note, "the older a person gets, the more they become a survivor" (Lalive d'Epinay, Cavalli, and Guillet 2010, 302). Long biographical trajectories, particularly in old age, are punctuated by the gradual disappearance of relatives, siblings, friends, spouses and, more rarely, descendants. While the experience of loss among the elderly is well documented (Naef et al. 2013), the organisation of funerals and the treatment of the deceased by the oldest-old persons is quite different: What position do they adopt in a funeral context increasingly marked by a pluralisation of relationships with death and the dead? Our article sheds some light on this question based on empirical material from the research project "Necropolis. Funeral transition and mourning in old age"[1].

After a brief presentation of our field and our research methodology, we first comment on the thesis that a subjective and reflexive reappropriation of the diversity of funeral services and death at large (Boisson 2020) is underway, in most European societies at least. By focus-

[1] Project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, no.192750 (https://data.snf.ch/grants/grant/192750). This research was conducted between April 2021 and March 2025 by the two authors, with the valuable participation of Catherine Gaignat as a research associate, particularly for part of the data collection.

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ing attention on the "free of charge" (subject to conditions) regime of a Swiss public funeral centre in an urban environment, we then show that when organising a funeral—in this specific context—it is less a question of negotiating and making choices in the face of the plurality of funeral services than of bringing viewpoints together towards a horizon characterised by three components: consensus, simplicity, and comfort. Finally, this makes it possible to highlight certain logics of standardisation that remain at work in a period of funeral transition (Cuchet, Laubry, and Lauwers 2023), particularly among people over the age of eighty.

Studying the Funeral Transitions and Mourning of the Oldest-Old Individuals

Through observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews, we documented the issues relating to the relationship with death that people over the age of eighty have when organising the funeral of a loved one, from their first meeting with the funeral directors until the end of their first year of mourning. The resulting descriptions form the basis of our analyses and our generalisation. They are based on immersion in the funeral environment and on an iterative and repeated process of meetings and exchanges with various protagonists. Between 2021 and 2025, we conducted research in French-speaking Switzerland that included more than fifty observations of the preparation of bodies in dedicated funeral spaces, farewell ceremonies, burials, and the delivery of urns or scattering of ashes. We conducted 33 interviews with various types of professionals working in the funeral sector. This process allowed relevant themes to emerge, which were then further developed and discussed in the form of hypotheses during subsequent interviews (Olivier de Sardan 2008).

In order to support the demonstration proposed in this article, two data sets collected as part of this research project are used. The first concerns one of the ways in which we entered our field of research. The recruitment phase gave us the opportunity to conduct 48 observations of the initial interviews between the funeral counsellors, the oldest-old funeral arranger, and their relatives. These observation periods also allowed us to open informal discussion spaces of discussion with the funeral counsellors regarding the progress of these interviews and on their way of apprehending them. It should be noted that, at the outset, we were concerned about how to find an appropriate place among relatives and families during these specific moments of mourning. In practice, we found that our requests were mostly accepted and welcomed with kindness, which did not, however, entirely dispel a certain unease on the part of the researcher.

The second corpus corresponds to the monitoring of fifteen situations[2], in particular the 53 biographical interviews conducted with the main persons concerned and their relatives during the first year of mourning. These interviews, conducted using a qualitative narrative approach, have the dual advantage of providing a detailed description of life trajectories and of understanding how people attribute meaning to their experiential life (Chase 2005). They

[2] At the end of the recruitment phase, 15 families agreed to take part in our research. We therefore have a series of interviews (between 2 and 4) with the bereaved in their first year of mourning, as well as with some of their relatives.

also gave us the opportunity to question the way in which these different people experienced the organisation of the funeral and to gather their reflexive and retrospective views on how it unfolded.

The Renewal of Relationship with Death and the Dead: The Ageless Plural World

If there is one thing on which professionals, experts, and scientists agree, it is that there have been profound and successive transformations in our relationship to death. These cultural changes in our perception of death (Blauner 1966) are primarily the result of a broad process of secularisation and individualisation in our modern societies. This transition, which Giddens would retrospectively describe as the "radicalisation of modernity" (Giddens 1991), in which collective identities would disappear in favour of reflexive identities (Beck 2001), both reflects and supports the idea of a social denial of death (Ariès 1975; Thomas 1975). As mourning becomes a personal and private affair, relieved of the weight of the social norms of yesteryear dictating behaviour within communities (Gorer 1965), funeral rituals—subject to the same influence—decrease accordingly, even tending to disappear. In the French-speaking context, the theories of disappearance (Baudry 1999) and miniaturisation (Urbain 1998) of death support and extend this general observation.

This radical mutation of our relationship to death (Clavandier 2012) is simultaneously fuelling new theoretical frameworks for interpreting the contemporary relationship between the living and the dead (Berthod 2025). The notions of "revival of death" (Walter 1994), "intimisation of death" and "death in itself" [la mort en soi] (Déchaux 2000; Déchaux 2001), or even "narrative reconstruction" (Seale 2009) denote the consequences of the processes of "detraditionalisation" (Heelas, Lash, and Morris 1996) and individualisation of death from the perspective of renewal. These authors emphasise the fact that "the paradox of the era is in this mixture of individualism and the call to resocialise death" (Déchaux 2001, 161 [our translation from French]). The forms and meaning of these reappropriations, relieved of the weight of symbolic orders and social norms, have consequently become the concern of the reflexive individual (Beck 2001) and are aligned with the development of reflexive practices by professionals active in end-of-life care (Boisson 2020). They are constructed subjectively or intersubjectively, based on a diverse stock of cultural scripts.

From Funeral Traditions to Personalised Rites

Far from disappearing, our northern European societies are witnessing the emergence of renewed funeral practices. As Déchaux suggests, extending Walter's remarks here, "current subjectivism creates the conditions for a fragmentation and individualisation of conjuratory practices" (Déchaux 2000, 158 [our translation from French]). The postmodern individual would thus assert his authority in the face of the declining force of traditions (Walter 1996), drawing or not from a structuring stock of past funeral practices. In a context where "death in itself" is favoured, funeral practices borrow from the ideal of "personalised rite" (Déchaux,

Hanus, and Jésu 1998). For various authors, this personalisation phenomenon is the main characteristic of contemporary funeral rituals (Cook and Walter 2005; Caswell 2011; Holloway et al. 2010). This notion of personalisation would testify as much to the authority of the self as to the production of unique, unusual, or even different funerals centred on what Walter describes as the "secular religion of self-fulfilment" (Walter 1990, 220), when funerals—the eulogy in particular—emphasise the personality and characteristics of the deceased (Bailey 2013). The funeral industry has therefore aligned itself with these new requirements by developing an ever-increasing variety of options available to commemorate the death of close relatives (Crabtree 2010), favouring the development of "a system of supply that consists of presenting a multiplicity of services to encourage the family to make an 'à la carte' choice" (Caroly and Trompette 2006, 5 [our translation from French]).

The many possibilities for physically and quickly reducing bodies (cremation, aquamation, promession[3]), for territorially burying human remains (cemeteries, forests, lakes, and mountains) and for maintaining digital traces of the deceased, as well as for treating and presenting the bodies (thanatopraxy, humusation), bear witness to this growing diversification of funeral practices. As a result, the transformations and innovations in the field of funerals increase the number of possible combinations for caring for the deceased, displaying them, and providing them with a final resting place. They therefore contribute to the pluralisation of relationships with death and the dead in our society.

However, the specialised literature draws attention to the importance of not confusing the processes of individualisation and personalisation with those of deritualisation and resocialisation in death. For Davies, the search for and the social construction of meaning associated with postmodern funerals[4] is identified in the mixture of traditional and innovative, secular, and religious elements (Davies 1997). While tradition is no longer the dominant authority in this area, it is far from no longer exerting any influence (Garces-Foley 2003). Following on from this remark, Bailey argues that while funeral practices can be chosen and constructed in a reflexive manner, they rarely result from a purely individual decision. Studies on the organisation of funerals show that decisions in this area are the result of various influences: the wishes of the deceased, of the relatives who organise, of other relatives as well as of cultural and social norms (Bailey 2013; Szmigin and Canning 2015). This organisation is not exempt from a set of power relationships, particularly with regard to those who plan it. Some research emphasises the decisive role of funeral directors (Howarth 1996; Holloway et al. 2010) and their ability to limit or even control the choices offered to the bereaved. The habit acquired by these professionals of offering personalised funerals does lead to a form of standardisation resulting in "mass produced individualisation" (Walter 2006, 7).

The forms taken by the Western funeral transition (Cuchet, Laubry, and Lauwers 2023) are thus fuelled by a diversity of expectations and needs of people who are certainly reflec-

[3] New techniques are appearing to transform the deceased using heat or cold, via physicochemical processes (hydrolysis for aquamation or "freeze-drying" for promession, for example). These processes then make it possible to reduce the body to fine particles. It should be noted that in Switzerland these practices remain marginal or even illegal, and that this description of the diversity of current funeral practices is far from exhaustive.

[4] By postmodern funerals, we mean funerals that are free from the weight of old social norms, in which the "reflexive individual" (Beck 2001) approaches the funeral in a more subjective way.

tive but always caught up in a complex matrix of social relations, social and cultural norms, and institutional structures.

And What About the Question of Age and Generational Effects?

This broad description of the overall context of the renewal of our relationship with death, in which we place most of our reflections, nevertheless remains very unrelated to the question of age and possible generational effects. Although Ariès and Gorer mention the late experience of death as a factor supporting the emergence of "forbidden death" (Ariès 1975; Gorer 1965) and a simplification of funeral practices, this thesis appears, however, to be a "period effect"; a profound historical transformation driven by certain social groups but affecting all age groups indiscriminately, as does the latest transition observed towards a personalised relationship with death.

Are these transitional movements experienced in the same way depending on the age and generational anchoring of the people arranging the funeral? The American study of newspaper articles published since 1970 concerning the funeral industry proposed by Beard and Burger argues for a generational effect: "this generation [baby-boomers] wanted a more customised service for their parents and for themselves than previous generations, and this has led to a plethora of industries and services aimed at providing such" (Beard and Burger 2017, 58). The question remains as to whether the oldest-old persons demand and comply with this new requirement for personalisation. Does the "timing" (Elder 1999)—in other words, the fact that the experience of the death of another occurs at an advanced age in the life course—influence the ways in which a relationship with death and the dead is constructed?

Based on a twofold observation—the predominance of the funeral arrangements being approached from the perspective of a commercial and market-based study, without taking into account the age of the funeral arranger—it seemed interesting to us to put this trend towards pluralisation into perspective in the light of the preparation of funerals carried out by elders within the framework of a public funeral centre[5]. This centre offers free standard services to people who meet the conditions, de facto restricting the ability to choose unless relatives decide to pay for other options.

We therefore hypothesise that this "free of charge" regime as well as the age of the funeral arrangers determine the scope for negotiation and condition the opportunities for individual reappropriation when arranging funerals.

Contextual Effects: Between Pluralisation and Standardisation

The pluralisation of relationships with death and the dead can be clearly observed from our field data. The diversity of practices can be seen in the organisation of funerals and the mean-

[5] Until 1866, the practical organisation of funerals was a private matter. Following numerous reports of abuse, the local authorities decided to create a public funeral service responsible for organising funerals, assisting bereaved families and managing the city's cemeteries and other mortuary facilities. This public funeral service became free of charge when the law on cemeteries came into force on 20 September 1876 (Davier 2007).

ing associated with them by the oldest-old bereaved and their relatives. Whether they are carried out with or without a religious ceremony, secular; whether they involve simple contemplation or are carried out by default[6]; whether they lead to a burial or a cremation, in a concession or a grave in a row or even a cinerary tomb; whether they involve the scattering of ashes in the garden of memories, in private or public places, or simply the preservation of ashes at home or in more personal and intimate spaces, all these different ways of planning emphasise the importance of personalising and appropriating the funeral register.

Regarding the treatment of the body, some remain attentive to the presentation of the body and the importance of ornaments —"one does not die without shoes" notes a mourner— while others prefer to resort to more ordinary clothes given the ephemeral or even futile nature of their use: "in any case, it [a new shirt] would have burned", notes another interviewee. The care administered to them is sometimes appreciated, while at other times it is denounced as a "tasteless" theatricalisation of the living in death, as documented by Hardy (Hardy 2007).

In the canton studied, the offer of funeral arrangements is provided by four main operators, three private funeral directors, and a public funeral centre. The latter deals with the vast majority of deaths, as this funeral counsellor points out: "You know, it's a factory here. We handle 3,000 bereavements a year, while [name of a private funeral company] handles 300." (Interview with a funeral counsellor, 19 April 2022)[7]. This unequal distribution can be explained first of all by the fact that this public funeral centre has the only crematorium in the canton. Furthermore, the "free of charge" regime functions in some respects as a "capture mechanism" (Trompette 2005).

While the general context clearly fuels the diversification of funeral practices[8], it is worth noting for our argument that the specific context of this public funeral centre induces a certain form of standardisation in the layout of funerals. This observation is reflected in various indicators. The first relates to the way in which interviews are conducted by funeral counsellors:

> *Phillipe[9] [funeral counsellor] recognises that there is a lot of repetition between one situation and the next. According to him, 60–70% of the interviews concern the organisation of cost-free funerals: "There is something very mechanical about it. I often use the same phrases, the same formulations according to a very formalised framework".* (Extract from the field diary, public funeral centre, 21 April 2022)

[6] The term "by default [d'office]" used in conjunction with ceremony or scattering indicates that—in the administrative jargon of the public funeral centre concerned—these actions are carried out by funeral directors who take the place of relatives when the latter do not wish to be present.

[7] All the verbatim quotations in this article have been translated from French into English by us.

[8] It should nevertheless be remembered that certain explicit desires to break with funeral practices still perceived as too traditional are not so easily implemented. In this regard, the analysis proposed by Benkel and colleagues (Benkel, Klie, and Meitzler 2020) of the transformation of ashes into diamonds offers an interesting counterpoint to this question of diversification. This specific practice, although very marginal, highlights the limitations that may be encountered by those seeking a more radical alternative to what a public funeral centre—such as the one we observed—can offer.

[9] All the first names mentioned are pseudonyms.

The second factor underlying this way of conducting the interview with the bereaved relatives is the restriction of choices for planning the funeral. While the cost-free arrangement allows the choice of the method of disposal of the body (cremation or burial) or one or other of the various forms of celebration and methods of handling the ashes, it restricts others, such as the use of a concession, columbarium, or cinerary tomb. These limitations are perceived, both by funeral counsellors and by some mourners, as facilitating the arrangements of funerals: "The more you open up, the more expensive it is. And the more complicated it is for the family," says a funeral counsellor (Interview with a funeral counsellor, 27 April 2022). One of his colleagues shares this impression; he is convinced that leaving too much choice in organising funerals does not benefit families. In his view, standardisation—which is equivalent to limiting the range of possibilities—reduces the uncertainty[10] associated with these situations (Cusin 2004, as cited in Trompette 2005). The sister-in-law who came from the United States to plan the funeral of one of her spouse's brothers shares this opinion:

> *The niece notes that the organisation of funerals here is very structured, very fast, and with few choices available to the relatives. Which she says she appreciates once again. In her opinion, there are much more commercial practices in the United States.* (Extract from the field diary, public funeral centre, 28 April 2022)

The standardisation of funeral practices imposed by the "free of charge" regime thus mitigates the commercial dimension of this exchange (Bernard 2009). The bereaved person seems less at ease in their role as demanding customer and the funeral counsellor is less obliged to play their role as salesperson. This redefinition of the relationship results in a weak adaptation to the potential particular requirements of the bereaved, as shown in the following extract concerning an 84-year-old woman arranging the funeral of her deceased sister:

> *She requested that the body be prepared at the funeral centre and then transported to the deceased's home, as she wished. Her funeral counsellor explains that it may be difficult for this public funeral centre to fulfil this request. He advises this relative to use a private funeral director. He adds that using these companies allows for more flexible arrangements.* (Extract from the field diary, public funeral centre, 19 April 2022)

It should be noted that it is nevertheless possible to obtain services that are not covered by the "free of charge" scheme: choosing a more sophisticated urn or a niche in a columbarium, for example. Services that are not covered by the "free of charge" regime must be paid for[11], which is part of the trend towards standardising practices:

> *Alexis and Dominique wish to organise a secular ceremony for their deceased brother. The funeral counsellor then explains that an officiant must be chosen as soon as possible and that*

[10] For Cusin, the notion of uncertainty refers to the anxiety of making the wrong choice among consumers who are aware of their limited knowledge and the complexity of funeral services.

[11] With the exception of the choice of coffin which, when it does not correspond to the offer proposed, cancels the cost-free nature of all services.

the cost of using an officiant is not covered by the "free of charge" regime. Dominique then realises that the cost of the officiant is quite high (more than 1,000 CHF/£ 875) and declares that they—she and her brother—cannot afford to pay it. The deceased's brother and sister then opt for a musical meditation. (Extract from the field diary, public funeral centre, 22 May 2023)

Two contradictory contexts—one general, involving the pluralisation of funeral practices, the other specific, involving the limitation of choices that guarantees the free provision of services—therefore tend to overlap in our examples. Funeral counsellors and relatives therefore seek to contain or even resolve this contradiction based on a set of arguments and justifications, presented in the following section, which appeared repeatedly both in discussions relating to the funeral arrangements and in the one-on-one interviews we conducted.

A Three-Component Horizon: Consensus, Simplicity, and Comfort

The central element that emerges from our observations of the first meetings between oldest-old mourners, relatives, and funeral directors in charge of planning the funeral is the convergence of positions that is established according to a three-component horizon: consensus, simplicity, and comfort.

Consensus and the Primacy of the Will of the Oldest-Old Bereaved

Consensus appears first and foremost to be the usual method of negotiation. This period of negotiation around the organisation of the funeral is not one of sustained confrontation in the face of the diversity of funeral options:

A funeral counsellor, Bertrand, asks if it is indeed Silviane—the deceased's sister—who wishes to be the funeral arranger. Jeanne steps in: "She will play this role!" She adds that her spouse never expressed any particular wishes regarding the funeral. [...] Bertrand then asks how they imagined organising the ceremony. Silviane explains that she would like it to take place in the church of her brother's home town, with a priest. Jeanne instead opts to organise a musical meditation in one of the chapels of the funeral centre. Charles—the brother of the deceased—has no particular opinion on the matter. After Bertrand explained that organising a ceremony with a priest outside the centre's chapels was not covered by the "free of charge" regime, Jeanne convinced Silviane to go along with her wishes. 40 minutes after the start of this exchange, the deceased's granddaughter arrived. Bertrand summarised the decisions that had been made, but the young woman cut him off: "It doesn't matter to me. Whatever suits my grandmother will suit me too." At the end of the meeting, Jeanne wants to pay the bill directly with her credit card, which does not seem to please Silviane, who would have liked to contribute to the funeral expenses. (Extract from field diary, public funeral centre, 2 June 2023)

These different sequences of the interview reveal two elements that help to guide decisions in the search for a consensus. The first—the scope of which we have already discussed in the previous section—relates to the constraints imposed by "free of charge" regime. In this context, the expression of choices and dissent is less pronounced.

The second results from the convergence of positions on the decisions made by the bereaved oldest-old person. Even in situations of emotional vulnerability, relatives do not substitute themselves for, and even less oppose, the decisions of the elderly in charge of planning the funeral. The role of the descendants, particularly daughters and sons, is above all to provide support: "I was still in admiration of the way she [her mother] handled it [arranging the funeral]. I was a bit lost. She really helped us to support her, because that's what she needed. That's all she needed." (Marie, 52, daughter of the deceased, 29 February 2024)

There are several reasons for this alignment of positions with that of the oldest-old mourner. The first is purely economic. Luigi, an 81-year-old man of Italian origin, was a blue-collar worker during his working life and has limited financial resources in retirement. As the only relative of the deceased living in Switzerland, he took charge of planning his brother's funeral, a brother he did not like very much during his lifetime. He opted for a single grave and a prayer at the grave, disregarding the presumed wishes of the deceased, his niece, and his sisters, who had wanted to bid him farewell at a church service before repatriating him to Italy. For Luigi, his decision was logical because he was the only member of the family willing to cover the costs of organising the funeral.

The second reason is statutory. It can be seen in the narrative of life trajectories and family (re)configurations. When the organisational responsibility for the funeral falls to the spouse, the norm of the primacy of the conjugal (Neyrand 2002) becomes apparent, especially after a lifetime spent together. Marc, a social worker and the son of the widow who planned the funeral, expresses it very well in these terms:

> *They spent their whole lives together. The difference is that they spent 60 years together. We [the children] left [the family home] before [...] Yes, it seems perfectly normal to follow my mother's decision, because she was the one who needed it most.* (Marc, 49, son of the deceased, 21 February 2024)

The primacy of the will of the oldest old mourner signing the contract also stems from the accumulation of experiences relating to death, from the familiarisation with the funeral world acquired through the deaths of relatives and acquaintances. The advance in age necessarily accelerates this accumulation. Jeanne, a wealthy retiree living in the countryside, before arranging the funeral of her spouse, took charge of those of her spouse's father, her father, and her mother. A model of organisation gradually took shape: while Jeanne organised a burial for her father, she opted for cremation for her father-in-law and her mother. The decision was a matter of conforming to a practice that seems more commonplace to her today. Since the death of her father, Jeanne has chosen to plan the ceremony in two stages: a private moment of remembrance, followed by a public ceremony. She appreciates this way of doing things, particularly in view of her Protestant habitus. In her view, the private ceremony offers a space for the expression of emotions that the public ceremony does not allow. In another case, Richard, with a touch of humour, who has just lost his sister after arranging the funerals of

his father, mother, and brother, addresses the funeral counsellor as follows: "I am familiar with your centre. Do you do fidelity cards?"

Moreover, it is not only the repeated experiences of the loss of a family member that determine the organisation of the funeral. This requires familiarity with the funeral world, acquired through the deaths of relatives and acquaintances. After the experience of coming face to face with the body of one of her friends in a funeral home, Sarah, who belongs to the local bourgeoisie, was shocked by an appearance that, in her opinion, was no longer natural; she does not wish to go through this again. This experience also made her decide not to hold the funeral in one of the chapels of the public funeral centre, which she finds too impersonal. Paul, for his part, believes that it is a question of acoustics: the words of the speaker are lost in the echoes of these rooms, which are poorly soundproofed in his view.

The negotiation process also reflects age and generation effects. For the past thirty years, Josiane has tended the graves of her parents and two brothers in the cemetery of her home village. However, she and her partner, who ran a dry cleaning business together, have opted for the "flame", a preneed funeral contract that requires cremation. Although not entirely in agreement with the idea of "burning" and "destroying the body", she justifies her choice based on her perception of a transformation of generational attitudes to death and a deterioration in her state of health. Her only daughter, like the children of her two brothers, has never gone to the cemetery to pay their respects; moreover, given her mobility problems, which have been worsening for several years, she no longer has the strength to lay flowers on the graves of her close relatives as regularly as before. For Josiane, the worst thing is not the disengagement of younger generations from these spaces, but the image of an unkempt grave.

In short, age—insofar as it favours the accumulation of experience in funeral matters—appears to be a determining factor in the organisation of funerals and the negotiation process that supports it; as implied in some of our examples, age is also likely to contribute to reshaping funeral choices or decisions that were made or even expressed many years ago. This factor is further reinforced by life trajectory, the contraction of social networks, and health problems concomitant with the ageing process, as well as perceived differences in generational attitudes to death.

Simplicity and a Narrowing of the Range of Possibilities

The second component of the rhetoric of justification is simplicity. This notion is characteristic of most organised funerals. Bertrand, after more than forty years of working in this public funeral centre, has noticed three things: "People's preference for cremation; the desire for the simplest possible organisation; the speed with which people want to plan funerals." (Extract from the field diary, public funeral centre, 2 June 2023)

This tendency to keep things as simple as possible extends, from our point of view, the norm of consensus that is deployed during these exchanges and is articulated by the standardisation constraints of this public funeral centre. For some of our interviewees, this notion is a way of interpreting the reduction of the range of possibilities to their advantage. Josiane's daughter expresses it clearly:

> *It was particularly simple to organise. The biggest headache was choosing the music for the ceremony, to show how simple things were done. We didn't even bother to choose the priest, because that was done during the interview. So, to be honest, I don't know what it's like to plan a funeral.* (Cécile, 56, daughter of the deceased, 13 February 2023)

In other words, funeral arrangements are facilitated by the "free of charge" regime and by the coordination and orchestration skills of the funeral counsellors (Caroly and Trompette 2006). For some of our interviewees, this desire to keep things as simple as possible offers another advantage, at the risk of mitigating the confrontation with the reality of death (Bernard 2009), a point raised in particular by Annick. Annick believes that her mother's decision not to hold a ceremony and to scatter the ashes in the garden of remembrance was a form of protection, both social and psychological:

> *It was something very simple, not demonstrative [...]. We are not believers, for one thing. Then, there weren't really any friends to invite and I don't think she wanted to end up in a situation where you feel like crying. I've been to funerals, phew... It's traumatic sometimes, seeing everyone crying, seeing the general sadness.* (Annick, 49, daughter of the deceased, 29 June 2022)

Comfort For "Socialising"

This disposition to consensus, coupled with the desire to do things "as simply as possible", explains, in our view, the recourse of the bereaved to the notion of comfort when commenting on both the planning and the realisation of the funeral. This is the third and final component of the negotiation horizon that we are seeking to highlight. In short, consensus and simplicity contribute to a certain "comfort" that we recognise for ourselves and that we can project onto others in the face of the diversity of options in funeral matters. Given the extent of this diversity, de facto limited by the "cost-free" regime, "not choosing" appears to be a source of comfort. Symmetrically, this helps to eliminate the possible inconvenience of retrospectively questioning the decisions made, especially when they come from the elderly: "That's always what we say afterwards: did we make the right choices? And then somewhere it was their choice, it wasn't ours, so well..." (Marie, 52, daughter of the deceased, 29 February 2024)

We have also observed that the notion of comfort is less related to the formal and organisational aspects of funerals than to the effects they produce: allowing "everyone to come together"; "forming a community"; "sharing an emotion" by meeting the relatives of the deceased. This is what François says when he compares his grandparents' funeral with that of his father: "There was no time to share together. The mourning was not important or, rather, I missed those times of sharing together. For my father, on the other hand, it was good." (François, 54, son of the deceased, 21 June 2024) Cécile, for her part, agreed with her mother's decisions regarding the planning of the funeral:

> *For me, the important thing was not that [making my choices known], it was the logical sequence [viewing of the body in mortuary room, organising the funeral, viewing of the body*

in the funeral home, ceremony] to better understand this departure. (Cécile, 56, daughter of the deceased, 13 February 2023)

Ultimately, reconciling the three components mentioned—consensus, simplicity, and comfort—makes it possible to combine what is desired for oneself, for the deceased, and for others. As Garces-Foley reminds us, the question is "whether a funeral based on the individual taste and beliefs of the planners can be meaningful for all who attend" (Garces-Foley 2003, 290). If there is a desire to personalise the funeral, it is a question of arranging it in such a way that it is meaningful for all the mourners present at the ceremony. Josiane's daughter Marie summarised this principle very well in an interview: "But it's not that important [that she makes the decisions]. It had to be good for us, so we all tried to make sure it was good for everyone. She [her mother] made sure it was good for us." (Marie, 52, daughter of the deceased, 29 February 2024)

We could therefore go so far as to say that, beyond expressing individual reappropriation, the form of the funeral must above all induce this feeling of "comfort." In this regard, the renovation of certain funeral spaces shows that funeral centres have grasped this challenge, creating or renovating reception areas to give mourners the impression of being "at home" (Berthod, Gaignat, and Pillonel 2024).

From Pluralisation to the Notion of Comfort

Understanding the forms of individual reappropriation—now produced in a subjective, reflexive, and prudential manner (Boisson 2020)—is crucial to grasping the diversity of forms of social treatment of the dead in contemporary societies. Undoubtedly, our era is undergoing profound transformations in funeral practices and the norms that underlie them, thus contributing to the extension of the "imaginaries of the possible" (Pillonel et al. 2021) that contribute to reinventing or revisiting the links between the living and the dead. The thesis of the pluralisation of our relationship to death and the dead seems to prevail above all when all the practices—analysed over the long term of dying, death, and mourning—are put into perspective. However, this theory is less convincing when it comes to focussing on a specific but still poorly documented reality, namely the planning and practical implementation of funerals, especially when they are free of charge. Such a regime is not incompatible with the idea of personalising funerals, but it redefines its scope.

As Bernard points out, funeral arrangements "are not without tension, particularly because of the commercial dimension that emerges" (Bernard 2009, 27). It becomes even more complex when all or part of the services potentially fall under a cost-free regime. In such cases, discussions between funeral directors and relatives tend, on the one hand, to standardise services and, on the other hand, to reduce the ability of those concerned to reflect. In other words, the reduction of choices limits both the effects of the opacity of the offer and the illegitimate nature of this transaction (Trompette 2005) as well as the confrontations of points of view, which can be challenging in a context of pluralisation and diversification of practices. To a certain extent, free-of-charge services, while not entirely contradictory to the idea of pluralisation, mitigate the expression of any disagreement between the wishes of

the deceased, those of the elderly bereaved person, and their loved ones and encourage the pursuit of this three-component horizon. By emphasising consensus, simplicity, and comfort, funeral counsellors and relatives ultimately justify the use of standardised practices without openly contradicting the norms of individual reappropriation of relationships with death and the dead.

Age and generational effects, according to two interlinked reasons, further limit the scope of the thesis of a pluralisation of our relationship with death and the dead. Sensitive to the current changes in funerary practices and the emergence of new social norms, which give prominence to ecological considerations for example, elderly people generally opt for a model that includes traditional elements without departing from the requirements of innovation. For them, it is never a question of simply innovating, but of reconciling diverse expectations according to the generational roots of each person in order to arrange a funeral that makes sense to the community—especially the relatives—in order to best honour the memory of the deceased. The search for a compromise, which is not unrelated to the age of the person planning the funeral, thus helps to reduce the scope of the theories of individual reappropriation in funeral matters and, by extension, the pluralisation of our relationship with death and the dead.

To this first reason, let us add a second. If the social construction of the meaning associated with funerals is indeed the result of the oldest-old organiser's search for a compromise between the new and the old, it is because it reflects a convergence effect, in other words, the alignment of relatives' wishes with those of the oldest-old bereaved. As we have shown, the latter's decisions are legitimised by the accumulation of experiences related to the death of others throughout their lives, by the familiarity acquired with the funeral world, by family and relational trajectories, and by a certain credence given to the idea that generational differences exist in funeral matters. In this sens, the "free of charge" regime in no way eliminates the inequalities in participation that age seems to reinforce in our examples.

The space for negotiation that the planning of a funeral represents does not therefore stage an expected confrontation of viewpoints, which supports the theory of the pluralisation of relationships with death and the dead. On the contrary, when the death of a close relative occurs and its social treatment is carried out by people in old age, decisions regarding funeral arrangements are not subject to discussion.

This article is therefore an invitation to conduct further research, especially quantitative ones, in order to understand how age affects the transformation of funeral practices. This remains an open question, which undoubtedly deserves more attention. The localised nature of our analyses and interpretations makes it difficult to answer this more general question. The limitations of our approach, centred on oldest-old mourners, in the absence of comparison with younger mourners, make it difficult to highlight with certainty determinisms linked to the age of our respondents. Similarly, the ethnographic approach limits the scope of our hypothesis to the elderly people studied within the framework of this specific setting. It neglects the heterogeneity of aging processes and the effect of social and cultural dimensions on the lines of thought presented in this article.

Let us hope, nevertheless, that these will be overcome by other fields and studies sensitive to the way in which the social substrate determines the form of these individual reappropri-

ations of relationships to death and the dead. In any case, age, like other social characteristics such as gender or social position, disrupts the heuristic contribution of these global models of transforming our relationship to death and the dead by reminding us to what extent they smooth the social realities of their practical achievements.

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