

**FUNERALS AS FEASTS:  
WHY ARE THEY SO IMPORTANT?**

by Brian Hayden  
Archaeology Department  
Simon Fraser University  
Burnaby, B.C., Canada  
17 i 2001

A Paper Presented at the 2001 SAA Annual Meetings, New Orleans

**DO NOT CITE WITHOUT WRITTEN PERMISSION.**

This is an exploration of funeral feasts and why they are so important in many traditional cultures. In many of the traditional cultures of the world, funeral feasts constitute the single most important and costly event in the history of a family. Families frequently use all of their available resources to host extremely lavish funeral feasts (ELFF's) [or ostentation funeral feasts--OFF's] in honor of the most important family members. Many families even borrow as much as their credit will allow thereby driving them into debt for years after the funerals. Among the hill tribes of Southeast Asia, this is almost a universal pattern (slide). Even more lavish are funerals among the Torajans (slide) and Sumbans of Indonesia who are renowned for their funeral feasts. The funerary potlatches of the Northwest Coast of North America are also legendary (Slide).

In their excavations, archaeologists have tended to focus on actual graves and grave goods accompanying the dead rather than on remains of feasts held in conjunction with funerals. The graves of the rulers of Egypt, Sumer, Moche, Han, and even chiefdoms such as Kaminaljuyu, are well known in the archaeological literature. However, we can be sure that the feasts which accompanied their funerals were just as grandiose in the social realm as their burial monuments were in the material realm. In many of these societies, there is good evidence that the elites loved feasting, and there is every reason to believe that funerary feasts would have been unprecedented in scale and lavishness. This evidence comes from material remains, artistic depictions, and written records. In some instances such as the megalithic tombs of western Europe, the material remains of feasting are located immediately outside the burial chambers. In some artistic representations such as the Minoan frescoes we can see amphora of wine and sacrificial animals being carried to the funeral (slide--Marinatos). In written accounts such as those of Homer, we read about the lavishness of elite funerals with their games, sacrifices, feasting, and great funeral pyres as in the case of Patroclus. Sometimes funeral feasts were transformed into corporate affairs involving the entire community or even groups of allied communities such as the Huron Feast of the Dead. These events were usually the most important community events that existed.

The importance and lavishness accorded to funerals has always been somewhat of an enigma for archaeologists and anthropologists. Not only are enormous amounts of time and resources spent for no apparent material benefit, but some families actually become destitute in their obsession to hold impressive feasts. Moreover, all this is done for deceased individuals who are incapable of repaying these efforts or expressing appreciation. For many social

scientists and archaeologists, these [ELFF's/OFF's] excessively lavish funeral feasts constitute the height of economic and self-interest irrationality (Hodder, Isbel & , &c). From their culturalist perspective, [ELFF's/OFF's] lavish funeral feasting can only be explained in terms of traditions and inculcated beliefs that follow logics of their own. Practical and economic concerns, together with powerless individuals and families are annulled or drawn into destitute states of existence by juggernauts of cultural beliefs and traditions. For some ethnographers like Foster, it is the idea that there is only a limited amount of good and prosperity in the world which which impels other community members to impose debilitating expenditures on prosperous families in order to curtail excessive accumulations.

For other theorists, it is the need to favorably impress the dead so that as ancestors they will dispense fertility, wealth, and success on their living descendants (Friedman and Rowlands; Bender). For yet other anthropologists, it is simply the maintenance of social status within the community and the shame on those who do not make efforts to host as large a funeral feast as possible.

These explanations of such cultural curiosities as [ELFF's/OFF's] excessively lavish funeral feasts might make sense in isolated cases, especially to ethnographers whose main goal was to try to understand the internal logic of a different cultural system. However, when we draw back and begin to examine the broad range of traditional cultures, we find that these feasts constitute a recurring feature far more frequent than one might expect on the basis of irrational and random constellations of cultural values. If there were only a few such cases, we could certainly appeal to unusual values and beliefs created by happenstance, historical developments or other factors. However, the recurrent regularity of these feasts in all parts of the world makes one suspect that much more basic underlying forces are responsible for the phenomenon. Moreover, there appears to be a definite cultural pattern to the occurrence of these elaborate funerary feasts. Namely, we know of no such feasts among generalized hunter/gatherers. It is only with transegalitarian hunter/gatherers and horticulturalists such as those that potlatched on the Northwest Coast, that we begin to find lavish funerary feasts. If this kind of behavior had been entirely dictated by cultural beliefs, one would be at a loss to explain why such beliefs only characterize transegalitarian and more complex societies but not generalized hunter/gatherers.

What such underlying forces might be and why they should focus on funerals is certainly not immediately apparent either from the emic statements of those hosting the feasts or from the descriptions of ethnographers. However, recent studies of feasting from a cross-cultural and political ecology perspective have provided new perspectives and understanding of the kinds of benefits that people expect to derive from hosting feasts in general and the kinds of forces at work within traditional communities. These studies also provide key insights into the phenomenon of [ELFF's/OFF's] lavish funeral feasts. Ethnographic studies by Michael Dietler in Africa, by Michael Clarke in Thailand, by Polly Wiessner in New Guinea, and by myself in Southeast Asia have been pivotal in demonstrating how feasts are critical in obtaining political, social, and economic advantages in traditional communities. These studies have also emphasized the great diversity of types of feasts and the fact that larger feasts are complex phenomena, playing many roles at once, although there may be a main purpose for the events.

Let me briefly summarize the conclusions that have thus far been proposed concerning the advantages that hosts of feasts hope to obtain by investing in [ELFF's/OFF's] lavish funeral feasts. While the comparative study of feasting documents a diverse array of practical purposes for feasts in general (everything from atonement, to soliciting favors, to organizing work parties), the funeral feasts that I am discussing here seem to involve a much more restricted set of advantages. I must also emphasize that I am not considering all funeral feasts, such as those

of the very poor, or of slaves, or of modern Industrial funerals. Rather, I am only dealing with the excessively lavish funerals [ELFF's/OFF's] that are the social norm in many traditional societies. In these cases, the most striking aspect of the feasts is clearly their ostentation. Typically, host families attempt to kill as many valuable domestic animals as possible (slides). Domestic animals are the major means of storing surplus wealth in these traditional societies. Among hunter/gatherers, stored foods such as dried salmon or deer meat, replace domestic animals.

Another ostentatious aspect of [ELFF's/OFF's] is that hosts try to invite and feed as many people from as large an area and as high rank as possible (slides). Hosts also give away large amounts of food to special guests so that the feast may be continued in other families in a cascading fashion (slides). Ostentation is what characterizes these feasts. Even in cultures that give much lip service to egalitarian ethics and where ostentatious displays are normally viewed as socially reprehensible, funerals often constitute the exception and provide a context in which families compete without restraint to display and consume as much surplus as they can marshal. I will discuss why funerals are considered particularly suitable contexts for these displays shortly, but for now I will discuss the advantages that these funeral displays confer. [to wit: the advantages related to bringing together of large numbers of people from many potentially important regions and relationships].

What kinds of practical benefits might be obtained from ostentatious displays of material goods? We may glean some clues from general ecology. In the animal world, extra energy and resources are often channeled into the production of ostentatious physical displays. Moose or elk antlers, peacock tails and bright colors on fish are all ostentatious displays (slides) that require considerable genetic and energy investments but are unrelated to subsistence. Rather, the adaptive practical advantage of these ostentatious features is to impress other animals with the biological fitness, success, and desirability of individuals with the best displays either for mating or alliance purposes. These are generally accepted conclusions of biologists (ref). It is also important to note that once some individuals in a population achieve differential success by adopting these strategies, all other individuals are obligated to imitate them or be relegated to evolutionary dustbins.

When we observe ostentatious displays of wealth or material goods in our own culture, the goals seem to be essentially the same as elk and peacocks--that is to attract other individuals into relationships that are beneficial to those with the displays. In the case of Industrial societies, these displays may be used to attract mates [slides; sportscars, rings...], but the most lavish displays are not usually intended to attract mates, but establish economic relationships. Those producing the most lavish displays are generally corporations or headhunters out to obtain commercial exchanges. Today, we call it advertising (slides). The term, "advertising," might also be appropriate to use in reference to elk horns, peacock tails, or the ostentatious displays of traditional funerals. The benefits to elk and Industrial businesses seem fairly clear to us, but the practical benefits to be obtained from ostentatious funeral displays [ELFF's/OFF's] in traditional cultures are perhaps not quite so apparent. In order to understand these, it is necessary to examine the political and economic dynamics of transegalitarian and more complex societies in a bit more detail.

To succinctly summarize these, we can say that [the usual notions of prestige and status, with their implicit psychological/ego-gratification motivations, do not get us very far in understanding ostentatious feasts. As generally used in our society and by anthropologists, there is no practical benefit to status or prestige other than a soothing of the ego. On the other hand, when these terms are examined carefully as they are used in transegalitarian contexts, it is

clear that they are being used as synonyms for economic and political “success” (Hayden 2001)]. When we examine transegalitarian community dynamics, proven success is probably the major criteria (after close kinship) used for establishing important relationships between pairs of individuals, families, lineages, clans, and communities. Proven success translates into desirability and reliability. In transegalitarian societies, favorable relationships on a number of levels, from individuals to communities, are critical for survival, security, and sexual reproduction.

1. Endemic warfare is a common occurrence among transegalitarian and more complex societies. Archaeology and ethnography are replete with accounts of very high levels of mortality in New Guinea, the Amazon, the Northwest Coast, the California Coast, and, in fact, most areas of the world at these levels of cultural complexity (Keeley + other refs). Having strong and successful allies in these situations is critical for survival.

2. Marriage becomes a costly affair among many transegalitarian societies, and being affiliated with families that can help defray bride prices or doweries is often essential in one’s ability to marry at all, not to mention finding a productive or desirable spouse or obtaining several spouses. Without economically and politically successful kin or friends, one may never marry, or one may end up with an indolent spouse who provides poorly for themselves and their own family.

3. Drawing people into alliances is also critical for accessing and investing wealth or other more basic resources. Intermarrying families are typically among the most important of these allies, which is another reason why marriages are so important. But kin and fictive kin of varying degrees of social distance are all potential allies for these purposes.

4. Alliances are also critical for engaging in regional trade since this involves transiting across others’ territories. Alliances between families in a region are also critical in providing sponsors for household or even village relocations when these are necessary or desirable, as is generally the case among Hill Tribe swiddeners.

5. Finally, as Michael Clarke (1998) has shown in his study of the Akha in Thailand, and as is evident in Condominas’ (1977) work in Vietnam, alliances are critical in transegalitarian societies for protecting one’s self-interest against the exploitative schemes of others and against misfortunes (natural or social) that may befall members of these communities. Such misfortunes include: natural illnesses, accidents, reparation claims from damages one’s animals or children have caused, and atonement for intended or unintentional transgressions. Moreover, typically there are powerful individuals in these societies who do not hesitate to lay charges of sorcery or trumped up debts or damage claims against families if they think the family is vulnerable. In these politically-charged situations, powerful allies are critical in order to fend off destitution, ruin, and even slavery. Above all else, THIS is what politics are about in transegalitarian communities.

All of the above reasons (defense, reproduction and marriage, economics, and political self-defense) are why alliances are critically important for survival in transegalitarian and more complex communities. I argue that maintaining beneficial alliances is why ostentatious displays of success are important in these communities, even those that normally “mask” inequalities behind an egalitarian facade of respectability (Trinkaus 1995:57).

But why are funeral feasts the focus of these displays? We first must recognize that there must be some generally acknowledged venue in these societies for the ostentatious display of success. Second, we must understand the basic logic behind the hosting of feasts. If the goal of feasts is to alter others’ attitudes and relationship toward oneself, then one must appeal to the emotions and attempt to influence them. This is the ultimate meaning of the sharing of food.

Sharing of food generates, or at least is indexical of, feelings of social closeness and intimacy. The roots of these feelings undoubtedly run deep, for we find the giving or sharing of food being used in many primate societies in order to solicit favors or show alliance (refs.). As Michael Dietler (in press) and Polly Wiessner (in press) have emphasized, the feasting context is an ideal one to introduce new concepts, new values, and to manipulate people's emotions in ways that favor hosts' political and economic interests. Toward those ends, many other elements are added to feasting which are calculated to produce favorable emotional states and sway the feelings of guests and supporters. Thus, dramatic rituals often take place ranging from graceful and colorful blessings to human sacrifices [slide]. Thus, intoxicating substances are preferred and consumed while drunkenness and chaos are purposefully promoted (Huntington and Metcalf :114) [slide]. Thus, elaborately costumed dancers, singers, and drummers can be part of feasts [slide]. Thus, valuable prestige goods are given away [slide]. Thus, dramas are acted out [slide]. These kinds of auxiliary elements of feasts may be found wherever the goal is to change attitudes or create alliances.

So why are funerals especially good stages for the playing out of these sociopolitical relationships and dramas? Theoretically, any event might suffice as a pretext for holding such feasts for attracting allies: the phase of the moon, the appearance of certain stars, weddings, births, auspicious omens, harvests, sicknesses, and so on. There is no limit to the kinds of pretexts that can be used, and new ones are constantly being explored (Yan). Realistically, however, it must be recognized that some pretexts are relatively transparent and unimportant (e.g., personally interpreted omens), whereas other events seem to lend themselves particularly well to the manipulation of emotions due to their very nature. Thus, people's emotions are generally stirred up and interactive at such events as weddings, at completions of large scale projects involving many people such as house constructions, and of course, at funerals.

In essence, what I would like to argue is that of ALL the pretexts that might be good for holding alliance or promotional feasts, funerals are probably THE most ideally suited. At no other type of event are people's emotions as likely to be as stirred up or interactive (Huntington and Metcalf :18,23ff). The intentional use of drunkenness and chaos is probably meant to enhance these emotional qualities. Funerals are typically events where individuals display support, gratitude, and warm feelings toward each other. These feelings can be more easily created or enhanced in funeral contexts probably more easily than in any other context. Moreover, because of their emotional nature, and perhaps for self-interested genetic reasons, funerals are also events that can draw more people from more widely dispersed social groups than probably any other type of event at the family or clan level. Only marriages might rival funerals in this respect. Since those that typically come to funerals are kin, affines, allies, or potential allies/affines, funerals constitute an ideal context to reaffirm relationships of alliance and support, and to try to cultivate even more advantageous relationships. Moreover, deaths in various families within these support or alliance groups happen frequently enough so that these relationships can be affirmed on a fairly regular basis with each family taking their turn several times per generation.

It is in this kind of context that it is most advantageous to display, advertise, and promote one's success: to as large a number of people as possible from as wide an array of actual or potential allies as possible.

Finally, because so many people can be drawn to funerals, these are also ideal events for support groups to demonstrate their size and importance. Thus, funerals become not only affairs of individual families, but to some extent, they reflect on the power and importance of the support or political group (s) to which they belong. For the most important families, funerals

provide the best possible contexts to display success in order to enhance their own advantages for: marriage, defense, political support, wealth exchanges, and other types of desirable alliances. They are the transegalitarian equivalent of television commercials during the Olympics or presidential candidate debates. This is why no expense is spared and families often go into debt. It is an opportunity to show off to large numbers of important people--an opportunity which does not occur for a family under ordinary circumstances. The same logic probably also accounts for the lavish use of grave goods and the building of lavish funeral monuments [ slides].

So, there are really two aspects to funerals. They are arenas for creating socioeconomic and political alliances via implicit gifts, favors, services, or support and their consequent debts. They are also extensively used for information display promoting the past success, as well as the present state of health and vitality of specific families and their support groups. Because family fortunes can rise and fall precipitously in transegalitarian societies, it is essential to revalidate one's political and economic status at fairly regular intervals and at a range of different levels. Funerals are the most inclusive of large numbers of people that families want to impress. Due to the enormous costs and preparations involved, they therefore are the least frequently hosted types of feasts.

Given these considerations, and understanding the power relationships with their attendant risks in transegalitarian societies, it should come as no surprise that funerals are used so widely for ostentatious displays. Of course, with the emergence of stratified chiefdoms and state societies, the importance of political alliances and funeral feasts among the elites rises to new heights due to the greater wealth and power involved creating greater intrigues, infighting, and aggression. In Industrial societies, the major socioeconomic units of production and competition have taken new corporate forms, but they still use many of the old principles of creating advantageous relationships of varying durations. While it may not be feasible to invite every possible customer to a feast, there is no scarcity of corporate dinners and parties, even today.

#### References