

3D Sex, Death, and Life Regeneration in the Moche World, 200–900 CE

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Between the third and tenth centuries CE, in one of the driest deserts of the Western Hemisphere, the Moche society thrived. Considered by many as one of the first state-level entities from the pre-Hispanic Andes (cf. Quilter and Koons 2012), the Moche were organized into diverse political confederations governed by elite family clans, who controlled large portions of the valleys of the north coast of Peru (Quilter and Castillo 2010).

The Moche are particularly recognized, among many aspects, by the level of complexity of their elite burials. Discovered within large adobe pyramids or *huacas* (e.g., Sipán, Úcupe, El Brujo, and Huaca de la Luna), the Moche elite burials are composed of underground quadrangular-shaped adobe chambers often decorated with niches, platforms, and mural painting. The chambers contain the remains of high-status Moche lords and ladies accompanied by dozens of luxury items, including silvered and gilded copper crowns, nose ornaments, and headdresses, as well as warfare and ritual paraphernalia of various materials decorated with the most intricate designs and motifs.

Something particularly intriguing about these contexts is the striking similarity between the funerary ornaments that accompany the individuals and those with which mythological beings are depicted in Moche narrative art while performing ceremonial activities. For many, this is an indicator not only of the religious nature of the funerary items, but also their powerful transformative agency (Kaulicke 2000), suggesting that high-status individuals were interred as personifying gods and goddesses from the Moche pantheon. Whereas discussions about whether these divine identities were gained (and performed) in life or ascribed during funerary rituals have remained unresolved, it is undeniable that, in Moche society, immense power, prestige, and wealth was held in the hands of a few families in the region, who were likely related one to each other by kinship and hereditary rights.

But, as many have claimed, the Moche cannot be reduced to the sophistication and material richness of their grave goods, despite their exuberance. Death in the Moche world was particularly conceived in relationship to a specific understanding of environment, landscape, ancestors, and life regeneration. The Moche are considered both a cause and consequence of a long process of adaptation to an unpredictable environment, process that initiated around 14,000 BP with the first human groups arriving and settling down on the north coast of Peru. Impacted by heavy rainfalls and subsequent droughts caused by ENSO (El Niño Southern Oscillation) events, this region has been the backdrop of long-term cultural resilience, where the populations turned the threats imposed by nature

into true opportunities to thrive. But, the unpredictable natural world of the Moche was not only “domesticated” through successful socioecological strategies, but also religion, mythology, and ritual practice. Through religious narratives, the Moche turned the wild landscape of the region into an animated world inhabited by devouring mountain-gods, gigantic killing spiders, dangerous maritime creatures, and even animated objects that could dangerously rise up in rebellion against humans (Quilter 1990). Risk and danger were always present in the Moche world, and Moche groups were constantly confronting the destabilizing forces around them.

But, as suggested by some Moche iconographers (Donnan and McClelland 1999), the chaos produced by natural forces and nonhuman agents was always brought into order by the intervention of the “mythological hero.” The so-called hero (Ai-Apaec or Wrinkle Face) travels to the ends of the known world—from the mountains to the ocean, from the forest to the desert—fighting the monstrous creatures he encounters on his way toward the sun (Rucabado Yong 2021). After defeating these creatures, the hero acquires parts of their physical attributes, enabling him to remain victorious in his feat, which culminates in a copulation act with the moon goddess, from which emerges the so-called “tree of life.” Some iconographers have suggested that the “tree of life” emerged, too, by the intervention of ancestors, who needed to be sexually stimulated for such an endeavor. The ancestors were thus mediators for the reestablishment of the much-desired order.

Although perhaps disturbing for modern eyes, graphic and vivid representations of sexual acts, possibly mimicking the deeds of the Moche mythological hero, are ubiquitous in Moche art. Humans, nonhumans, and hybrid beings are represented as actively engaged in sexual practices that involve masturbation, fellatio, and coitus. But not all entities had the same privilege to be represented, and Moche sex cannot be equated with eroticism or pornography. Elite individuals seem to be preferred in these type of depictions and it is very likely that sexual acts were ritually performed, too, as part of larger performances of death in Moche religious centers (Muro Ynoñán 2019). The prominence of the sex organs (both male and female) in the artistic representations emphasizes the relevance of the *stimulus*, as well as the acceptable limits of the interaction between bodies.

So, it is not the sexual act in itself that is central in these representations. Instead, it is the capacity of given individuals to serve as a receptacle and means for the transmission of the *vital fluids*: those that guarantee the continuity of life and the maintenance of the social and natural order.

Figure 3.12. Moche vessel featuring ancestor-like figures engaged in an activity of sexual stimulation (FM 288074).

The Moche people conceptualized the elements of reality as made of, and linked through, fluids and substances (Weismantel and Meskell 2014). Landscapes, bodies, and things were perceived as containing an animated force (*camaquen*), which could flow from one entity to another, as well as transmute and transfigure. Both human blood and semen were interpreted as tangible expressions of such vital forces and, as such, were highly valued. In the sacrificial performances orchestrated in large-scale Moche temples (Uceda, Morales, and Mujica 2016), human blood and semen were obtained from the defeated warriors in ritual combats, after they had been stripped of their garments, paraded naked through the public plazas, and violently dispatched. In fact, bio-archaeological data suggest that the corpses of the sacrificial victims might have also been involved in *postmortem* rites, where they were manipulated theatrically and sexually (Bourget 2001) (Figure 3.12).

The relationship between sex and death was thus present in the religious narratives, practices, and mythology of the Moche world. It is believed that while victims' bodies were ritually "consumed" under the eyes of spectators at the large temples, in the underworld, or *uku pacha*, the dead and the ancestors celebrated the reestablishment of the social and natural order. They did so dancing along with living women and children around the "tree of life." Only then was the process of life regeneration and reestablishment of order guaranteed.

Moche vital fluids were imbued with deep political symbolism. Their materialization in the form of erotic vessels, or sex-pots (Weismantel 2021), made for easier circulation and distribution, although their archaeological occurrence, mostly in high-rank burials, suggests that this circulation was tightly controlled by elite families. Some have suggested that the possession of these items, along with other ornaments of metal and semi-precious stones, in the hands of given elite families provided the means for them to claim rights of ancestry over lands, water, and resources and, thus, legitimize their political and economic power over local populations. As represented in the art, the multi-generational transmission of the vital fluids, from ancestors to parents and from parents to their descendants (Figure 3.13), seems aimed to guarantee the perpetuation of power of given lineages. In this sense, the reproduction and nourishment of new members of these lineages were also seen as repetitive reproductive cycles

that involved the participation of multiple agents, living and nonliving, in a process where time and space, life and death, power and memory, were perpetually unified.

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Edmond has also created a magnificent collection of ritual flags depicting the spirits valiantly fighting *Kowona* (the coronavirus), the most deadly infectious disease to affect Haiti since the cholera epidemic of the 2010s. In these *drapo*, the spirits of the dead combat larger-than-life representations of the coronavirus, entering a martial dance of epic proportions. The healer-warriors portrayed include both the Gede pantheon as well as their sibling spirits of life and death, the *lwa Bawon*. In Edmond's 2020 *Bawon le Médecin du Covid-19/Bawon the Doctor of Covid-19* (Figure 3.3), *Bawon* appears in a grey fedora, black pants, and a white suit jacket long

enough to recall a doctor's authoritative white coat. In his right hand, he holds a tall baton, which simultaneously symbolizes his status as an elder and also the virility of his phallus. *Bawon's* eyes are concealed behind a pair of sunglasses which allow him to see in both visible and invisible realms, and he judiciously wears a face mask to protect himself (and his loved ones) from the virus. A white candle in his left hand hints that he is saluting the ancestral bones over which he dances. Night appears to have fallen from the chrome-colored beaded background, and the coronaviruses glow blue and red as they illuminate the tombstone behind him,



Figure 3.13. Moche vessel depicting a simultaneous scene of breastfeeding and coitus (FM 100140).

one of so many which has claimed the lives of his mortal children. To be clear, Bawon the COVID-19 Doctor is a new spirit of the Vodou pantheon. In the same way that the Dahomean-Benin spirit Sakpata of disease developed the powers to cure his devotees of smallpox, a contagious virus which devastated global communities between the 1600s and the 1800s, a new Haitian *lwa* was needed in the face of the coronavirus pandemic of the twenty-first century. And who else could battle the virus with as much grace as the great healers and arbiters of life, death, and rebirth—the Gede and Bawon spirits? In these Kowona flags, the spirits of death reveal themselves as healer-warriors, combatting mortal diseases with mystic powers and great aplomb. Haiti's Gede and Bawon spirits thus emerge not as fearsome grim reapers but rather as fearless protectors of their human children.

Vital Force: Livy and Longevity

Across the Black Atlantic world, religious devotees work to restore cosmic harmony through the active maintenance of vital force, especially in the face of death. Vital force refers to the divine source of energy that resides in every single entity—animal, vegetal, and mineral. In Yorùbá traditions of southwestern Nigeria, this principle is called *àse* and in Fon regions

of southern Benin *se* identifies the same concept. Each being possesses *àse* or *se* that is fortified through righteous living and ritual practice. This notion of vital force has persisted in the African Diaspora as well. Haitian Vodouizans use the term *fòs* to discuss physical strength and spiritual power, while *nanm* refers to the soul or cosmic energy of a person or sanctified object. In Jamaican Rastafari, *livity* identifies righteous living and the concept that Jah or God has imbued an energy or life force in all living beings (Edmonds 2003).

Immortality is neither sought nor desired among most African religious communities. Indeed, the life expectancy of Black people in Africa as well as the African Diaspora remains decidedly lower due to heavy histories of colonialism, neocolonialism, and more contemporary ramifications of racial injustice. However, prayers abound for Black Atlantic devotees to live full, purposeful, and intentional lives. A life of longevity, vibrancy, and integrity honors the destiny linked with one's unique soul collective. Righteous living in African-derived traditions includes worship and care for guiding ancestors and spirits, the utmost respect for elders, the maintenance of harmonious relationships and vital force, and leaving a meaningful legacy for the next generations to come. These concepts resonate with the ideologies of life and death still present among many other Indigenous

groups all around the world. When death occurs, a ripple emerges in the cosmic pool of the universe. In addition to the physical acts of care that prepare a deceased person for rest and burial, death must be addressed on a spiritual level to restore harmony to the community and assist newly initiated ancestors in their transition to the ancestral realm. It is through the cultivation of a vibrant life and divine fortification of the soul(s), the creation of mortuary arts and rituals of balance, that death can be recognized not as enemy of humankind but as one of many cosmic energies to be propitiated in the restoration of harmonious communal living.

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Performing Death

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Abstract: Death affects the living in multiple and complex ways. Social groups across time and space have designed diverse coping strategies to deal with the pain, frustration, and anger that the loss of a loved one produces on the living. Mortuary rituals play a critical role in how humans deal with emotions associated to death. Rituals are important in processes of remembering and forgetting. They also offer the possibility to reconfigure and reconstitute the social relationship of the living: forging, challenging, and reinforcing (new) social orders. When we die, we continue influencing the relationships between others long beyond our physical presence. This chapter offers perspectives about the performance of death, the agency of the dead, and how our existence transcends and continuously gives shape to the memories, actions, and hopes of the living. Case studies present examples of non-Western practices orchestrated around the preparation, both physical and symbolical, of the body before its eternal journey to the afterlife.

Resumen: La muerte afecta a los vivos de formas múltiples y complejas. Los grupos sociales a lo largo del tiempo y el espacio han diseñado diversas estrategias para afrontar y lidiar con el dolor, la frustración y la ira que produce en los vivos la pérdida de un ser querido. Los rituales mortuarios juegan un papel fundamental en la forma en que los humanos lidiamos con las emociones asociadas con la muerte. Los rituales son importantes en los procesos de memoria, pero también de olvido. Ellos ofrecen la posibilidad de reconfigurar y restituir las relaciones sociales entre los vivos: forjando, desafiando, y/o reforzando (nuevos) órdenes sociales. Cuando morimos, seguimos influyendo en las relaciones entre otros, aún mucho más allá de nuestra presencia física. Este capítulo ofrece perspectivas sobre la escenificación de la muerte, la agencia de los muertos, y cómo nuestra existencia trasciende y continuamente da forma a los recuerdos, acciones, y esperanzas de los vivos. Los artículos que este ensayo contiene exploran ejemplos no Occidentales de la ritualización y la escenificación alrededor de la muerte.

“Death may be the greatest of all human blessings.”
—Socrates

“Our dead are never dead to us, until we have forgotten them.”
—George Eliot

Epicurus once said that death should not worry us, because as long as we exist, death is not here, and when it comes for us, we no longer exist. Through death, we become aware of our finitude. However, whereas for many of us death might be imperceptible and perhaps sudden, for those that we leave behind, death is a deeply affective experience producing feelings and emotions from which they can hardly escape. Death affects us in multiple and complex ways, and, as Damien Hirst reminds us, it is perhaps the impossibility of comprehending it that causes us the most anxiety, terror, and fear.

Throughout time and space, humans have created diverse ways to cope with the pain, frustration, and anger produced by the loss of a loved one. Rituals have played a critical role in how humans deal socially with the sensations of emptiness, chaos, and crisis that death creates. Rituals are important in the processes of remembering, as well as forgetting. They also offer the possibility to reconfigure or reconstitute the social order of the living: forging, reinforcing, and challenging (new) social relationships and meanings.

But social relationships and meanings are not just cognitively constructed. They are forged through actions and experience. Unlike ritual—often framed within religious structures and liturgies—performances are actions that, because of their aesthetic, theatrical, and dramatic nature, forge meanings through the body, movement, and nonverbal language. Whereas all rituals are performances, not all performances are rituals. Yet, they both constitute means of expressing emotions in moments of crises and disruption: from the large-scale funerary spectacles celebrated by the Inca of Cusco to the small-scale Japanese household commemoration rituals. Social actions orchestrated around death, whether collective or individual, ritual or not ritual, forge potent meanings that enable us to reconfigure our position in the world. We could say, then, that human beings face the tragedy of death through actions, and that the human experience with death is, above all, performative.

Both rituals and performances around death have been critical in the social evolution of human groups, and have contributed to the formation of communities, identities, social hierarchies, and religious beliefs. Such rituals and performances, with a special emphasis on those from the pre-Hispanic Andes, my own area of expertise, occupy a central theme of this chapter (Figures 4.1–4.7). The power of action, perhaps even more than thought, lies in its capacity to activate emotions, memories, and experiences, and thus constitutes a powerful tool to heal