

Ethno-Semiotic of Death:: funerary monuments on venezuelan roads

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Introduction

Anyone who travels on Venezuelan roads will be surprised to see every so often small man made monuments in the form of little chapels. Dimensions average 0,71 meters in width, 0,73 in height and 0,70 in depth. Their colors vary, even though white and gray are predominant, and, generally, they have crosses. These monuments, named *capillitas* (little chapels), constitute funerary monuments constructed in memory of people who have died in road accidents, and they can be found throughout Latin American countries. In this reasearch we analyze this phenomenon as part of Venezuelan funerary culture, to wich, according to the available bibliography, scarce attention has been paid.⁽¹⁾ The purpose of this article is to determine the symbolic meaning of this funerary practice so common in Venezuela in order to build a venezolan funerary system made by comunicational contens which are related to the sacred and the hidden, the social and the individual through messages which are reveald through representative rituals of life and death. For the purpose of our investigation, three principle procedures were implemented. First, a photographic record was made of all the *capillitas* (little chapels)

located on highway Lara-Zulia, starting at the “General Rafael Urdaneta” bridge that crosses over the lake of Maracaibo, up to the western limits of Lara state, comprising a total distance of 71 miles. On that highway, up to the moment of our research, 95 funerary monuments (FM) were located, this made an average of 1.2 monuments per mile. Secondly, as a support for the photographic record, a physical description for each of the capillitas was made (color, size, materials, place, etc) located on the referred highway. Finally, some relatives of the deceased were interviewed. The research was made during 1997-1998.

Hiding Death

Edgar Morin, in his book “El Hombre y la muerte”, writes of an archaic anthropological trilogy that is constant and durable today: the human being’s obsession about the trauma of death, the consciousness of the event itself the rupture, and the belief in immortality (Morin 1994:32). Throughout prehistory and human history, this triple constant has generated an unadaptive and uncomfortable feeling for man before death (Morin 1994:79). At the same time, the consumer society has denied his unequivocal death, claiming for itself the control of death (Ziegler 1976:239). Examples of this tanatocracy are hospitals, funerary services, cementeries, and morgues.

The double construction of monuments -in the cemetery and on the place of death- appears contradictory to the repeated opinions of European and North American scholars, who often agree that “la société actuelle cherche à occulter la mort” (Pittet and Rossel 1992:9). Or also “de nos jours, (la mort) est repoussée, malfaisante, immode. On l’occulte, jusque dans les cimetières » (Labes 1996:259). Pastor Eric Fuchs goes even further: “On tait la mort, on cesse de la célébrer, on l’expulse au marges de la vie sociale vers l’anonymat des hôpitaux ou vers la stérilité fonctionnelle des centres funéraires” (in Pittet and Rossel 1992:47).

Ziegler is one of the leading authors in the study of this affective indifference and isolation regarding death in big cities. He writes, “The society of commodities has made of the thanatical experience something a residue impossible to recognize: death itself has been reduced to a change of forms. Now nothing happens, ...the thing-man

perceives death as the change from one arithmetical position to another in the referential net (Ziegler 1976:63). The author discusses numerous examples regarding the process of “silencing death”, which he represents in fields such as psychoanalysis, medicine, economics, and biology (Ziegler 1976:76).

The traumatic trilogy of death can be observed in the big cities of Venezuela. But in these small off-road communities, who have to deal with a great number of victims of the predator vortex, traffic accidents compounded by speed and alcohol, death is remembered through diverse rituals that maintain permanent communication with their deceased, rituals that nurture the memories that stir and push real death, oblivion, into the depths of time.

The Little Chapels

The *capillitas* stand out due to their abundance along the road and because they represent spot funerary monuments where no one lies dead. It's certainly a fact that the people deceased in road accidents are buried in the closest city or village cemetery. But on that fatal spot, a special mark is made, and a monument is built with the indications and descriptions already mentioned.

The materials used for constructing the *capillitas* and for harbouring are most likely cement or brick, and these in turn harbour candles, flowers and water. In some cases, stones or saint images, of the Virgin Mary or Jesus Christ are placed inside.

According to the informants, the funerary monument must be constructed in the exact place where the person died, and it will be constructed only in cases of tragic, unexpected deaths, such as hit-and-runs involving cars, pedestrians, or cyclists. These same relatives of the victims narrate episodes of other family members who died violently from stabbing or shooting, but for whom *capillitas* were not built. In a way, the monuments in question are closely related to the road, and they are expressions of unexpected deaths caused by road accidents. Accidental deaths have always received a special distinction among funerary cultures of different countries. Venezuelan newspaper obituaries usually differentiate those deceased in a more natural way and those who died in an accidental or tragic manner. For the first type of death, the newspapers obituaries will start by saying “Has died in the Lord's peace (Mr./Mrs.)...” or “Consoled with the holy sacraments has died (Mr./Mrs.)...”. In the second type, the

mortuary story will read “Has died tragically (Mr./Mrs.)...”. In Europe the gravestone often indicate when death has happened in an accidental way, a practice that goes back as far as Ancient times (Labels 1996:124). in this sense, we would say from now on that the *capillitas* respond, at first, to two determining factors: a spatial one (place of the accident), and a factual one (violent death caused by a road accident).

□...So That their Spirits won't Linger□

The *capillitas* suggest a cultural response to a particular type of death. In the economy of the funerary ritual, the construction of this monument tries to avoid “that the soul remain suffering”. The monuments are built so that the deceased “can have eternal rest”. The fundamental belief among these off-road community people is that if the *capillita* is not constructed, “the dead linger eternally”. Many of the interviewed point out that the deceased are said to have been seen, after dying in those places, where they used to live. The same belief states that a soul appears before the living because “it is still suffering”; suffering remains because it is considered to have not been fully admitted into the life beyond. Carmen G., a 38-year-old catholic woman, interviewed just off the road, points out that, “it’s customary (to build the *capillitas*) when they die tragically...when nothing is built, they (the souls) remain in pain”. Something that was commonly said was that the *capillitas* are to be constructed so that the dead’s soul does not “wander around bothering or frightening other folks”. These affirmations respond to the teachings of the catholic church, according to which “death is nothing more than a passing through place, the provisoric limit that reaches to the terrestrial life. Beyond the threshold of death, life eternal begins” (Ziegler 1976: 245).

All previous comments, given by victims’ relatives, always suppose that two spaces exist: one terrestrial or familiar, and another from “beyond”, celestial or just simply extraterrestrial. This also supposes that once the person is dead, he or she no longer belongs to the familiar and terrestrial space. The construction of the *capillitas*, and the rituals associated with them, *search*, among other things, to ease the transit of the deceased soul between the familiar/terrestrial space and the extraterrestrial/non-familiar space. Another of the most frequent comments, not contradicting the previous, is that the construction of the *capillita* will bring peace to the deceased. The sense of “peace” or of “eternal rest”, is also related to the transit from

familiar space to the extraterrestrial space.

Using the concept of spatial isotopy, it is now possible to offer a first semiotic model, which is divided into two semic nets: see Figure.1

“...That I haven’t Forgotten Him”

When talking about this custom, the relatives distinctly and frequently point out that the *capillitas*’ are an expression of the remembrance, and the remembrance is an expression of love. Honoria G., 37-year-old, whose son Johan, only 16, was died run over by a car, affirms that she brings her son flowers so he feels “that I love him, that I haven’t forgotten him. What I was going to buy for him (in life), I give to him in flowers”. Likewise, the ritual strategy before the violent deceased on the road can be accounted as the same phenomenon already described for cemeteries of the city of Maracaibo, according to which memory performs as an instrument to conserve the notion of life as the fundamental, decisive content of culture (Finol and Fernández 1996, 1997). In other terms, the memory and all the rituals, objects, and expressions that maintain it perform as elements of a semiotics of life that intends to deny, in an effort of self-conservation, the definitive character of death.

Semiotic of time: Building a *capilla*(2)

The informants point out that the construction of the *capillita* must be done as soon as possible, to avoid the suffering of the souls or their appearance before the living, and to some, “so that the devil doesn’t come”. Some indicate that they construct the *capillita* the week following the relative’s death, while others begin the process only after nine days have passed. Some even point out that it must be done after a year has gone by. The majority seems to agree on the convenience of making it after the ninth day (novenario), a practice that consists of a series of prayers that takes place during nine consecutive nights. On the last night, the prayers continue the whole night, until dawn, at which the finished altar must be removed, including flowers and a special type of candle for praying. All the interviewed agreed that the *capillitas* are built by the victims’ relatives themselves, and very few are commissioned to non-family members.

Also here, having in mind the collected information, it is possible to offer a model of funerary time, as we think it is perceived by members

of the family group: see Figure 2.

Space and time become now a net where actions and beliefs are semiotically tangled. Death is not only a factual event, but it is also an opportunity to strenght familiar and cultural ties. But foremost, the fact that this little chapel is built in a space directly related to the event of death, makes this specific spot a scred one. People resent the fact that sometimes, during road works, their littel chapels have been moved from their original location. It is important to point out that rituals are performed in a place where there is no support of a buried body; it is only the presence of a soul, frequently seen by people who walk around, wich feeds this funerary subculture.

The monuments and their role in everyday life

The majority of the informants agreed to point out that the *capillitas* have an active presence in family life. To some, the deceased's soul, who's presence materializes into the monuments where he or she is remembered and made the object of various rituals, influences in some way their everyday lives. To others, the *capillitas* help in the family care, providing luck, and petitions are made to the *capillitas* for the family's benefit and wellbeing. Many materialize the presence of the defunct beings in the *capillitas* through wich they are remembered. Even it's good influence over the small family businesses located off-road, is pointed out. These experiences confirm Pollak-Eltz's investigations (1989) which show that some of these "capillas" easily transform into sanctuaries thanks to the development of believes acoording to which the souls have powers to influence on the destiny of the living. On of the *capillitas* examined corresponds to a person who was a lottery sailsman who was run over by a car off-road of the Lara-Zulia highway. It is a costum today in the nearby communities to visit his little chapel to ask the deceased for information about the wining numbers of the lottery.

The funerary Ritual

According to the interviewed, the most common practices, once the "capillita" is built, is the placement of candles, flowers, and water. In some cases we have found that it is customary to exhibit small

stones placed over the *capillitas*. This practice, of Jewish origin⁽³⁾, seems to have been extended in Venezuela from Falcón state, where the first Jewish cemetery was constructed in its capital city of Coro. It is not strange that the numerous *capillitas* observed on Falcón state roads would show the presence of rocks, and that the people of Falcón who emigrated to Zulia state would have brought that custom to the Lara-Zulia highway.

The candles are placed on Mondays, remembered as the “Days of Souls”, according to catholic religious costume. Their purpose is to “shed light on the deceased”. Frequently, such offerings are meant to obtain favors or grant protection to the family members. At a *capillita* made for a truck driver who traveled much between Mérida and Maracaibo, it is typical to see some drivers stop to offer candles and place small images of saints inside the monument. Truck drivers hope to get protection from the deceased friend’s soul. The candles and flowers are also expressions of remembrance of the deceased. In Venezuelan society it is considered improper to allow the memory of the deceased to fall into oblivion. For this particular reason, here and in cemeteries, flowers are used. The best and most clear expression that states the remembrance as alive, either here, in these off-road locations, or in cemeteries, is the presence of flowers. While the use of flowers is more popular than the use of candles in cemeteries, the presence of candles appears to be more common in the *capillitas*. A hypothesis that could explain this difference might be that candles appear related to the type of death, usually tragic in nature, while flowers might be related to deaths caused by natural causes. The lighting of the candles, according to some of the interviewed, clears a path for the deceased; in this way, “he has more light in heaven”. To others, the candles serve a purpose: to give him light “because he was not supposed to die”. The symbolism of the light dates far back in many religions. Here, as in other societies, light plays an opposing role to the forces of darkness, always associated with evil. It is also the power that gives heat and the “guide” that illuminates the way (Vernant 1986: 81).

The placement of water is maybe the most common and amazing characteristic of the family ritual of visiting the *capillitas*. It is believed by the families that the deceased will drink the water that is left for them. All the informants assuredly stated that the volume of water placed disappears until it is all gone, in very short periods of time. The water, according to some, is “for them to drink”, because “they (the deceased) really lack it”, or because the deceased “could have died also feeling thirsty,” or “because the person’s spirit that

arrives there drinks it”.

Water can be interpreted as a symbol of life and their will to keep the memory of their loved ones alive, culture has developed forms of representation of life. “La puissance de l’eau, comme élément de renaissance et de vie, est incomparable dans la magie, les mythes et les religion” (Morin 1970:141). Moreover, water is, in a sense, the fullness of the cosmos and the element that bonds the living and the dead, as Morin affirmatively states: “L’eau est la grande communicatrice magique de l’homme au cosmos” (1970:142).

Even more amazing is the generalized belief among the informants that persons who suffer violent or unexpected deaths, die having “a need to drink”. As some report, “they say they died feeling thirsty and thus their need to drink water”. One of the interviewed affirms: “My brother left with lots of thirst”. In two testimonials, people had placed coffee and beer in the *capillitas*. As to this last statement, the relatives explain that the deceased’s friends bring him beer to the *capillita* not only because while living he used to drink it frequently, but also because on the day of death he had drank a lot.

As it can be seen, water and light form a semiotic mate which articulates the meaning of life before death. Water and light are instruments destined to serve as impediments to definitive and absolute death, and they respond to the human being’s profound need to maintain life over death. Water and light help the path towards the extraterrestrial or heavenly space where light and water will be abundant.

Capillitas or homes?

One of the initial questions we asked ourselves was if the monuments represented homes or *capillitas*. The informants, with the exception of one, always referred to the monuments as *capillitas*. The use of the diminutive form of the word in Spanish in this case, tends to indicate, precisely, the extremely small size when compared to the real-life size of a *capilla* or chapel. Also, the majority of the monuments examined tend to resemble the typical architectural shape of small churches, known in Venezuelan Spanish as *capillas*, which are clearly differentiated from regular churches. That difference between church and *capilla* refers to size and to the use of the *capilla* occupying a particular space for praising a saint or a divine being. Usually, they do not constitute headquarters of permanent parishes or rituals, but they are identified

with dates and particular liturgies. Moreover, frequently inside catholic churches there are special places, usually contiguous to the main building, named *capillas*, where particular divinities, different than the consecrated ones in the actual church, are given praises. *Capillas* are also named private oratories, which have a meaning closely related to *capillitas*.

The concept of *capillita* used on the roads visited, is applied as spatial limiting for deaths caused by road accidents, but also a clear purpose is marked for differentiating the monuments from others located in cemeteries. Then, as it has been pointed out (Finol and Fernández, 1996), cemetery graves are representations of the family houses, they are resting places. Meanwhile, the *capillitas* are built for souls that, due to unexpected and violent death, “because they were not supposed to die”, do not have rest. Being wanderers, “in suffering”, they are often around bothering the living, appearing in places they frequented when still alive.

It can be inferred from the above that it is logical to suppose that *capillitas*, and not homes, are built, at least because of two fundamental reasons. First of all, as a kind of *capilla*, they constitute spaces for a particular and specific cult, typical of a person deceased under specific circumstances, and who is the object of rituals destined to someone (the defunct), and to serve a special purpose: to achieve his or her eternal rest. Second, the *capillitas* differ from cemetery graves in at least two fundamental aspects. First, in the places where the *capillitas* are located, there is no one actually buried, and, second the cemetery graves are resting places, a metaphor of the home⁴, while the *capillitas* meet, in the economy of the funerary system, with a totally different function. It is not a matter of a resting place, but of ritual spaces that seek, as mentioned before, to aid the path towards the celestial or extraterrestrial world, beyond.

In the semiotic articulation of the funerary space, we are looking at a triology with different functions, with different semiotic structures. The naming of the *capillita* in itself is a means of “symbolic efficiency in the construction of reality” (Bourdieu 1991:105). So then, it is a matter of symbolically creating a space, different to the cemetery grave and similar to the *capilla*, in Spanish spoken Venezuela. Finally, it is a place for symbolic practices meant to achieve rest for souls.

As in the traditional meaning of the term *capilla*, in Venezuelan Spanish, the *capillitas* exploit the meaning of “place of particular worship”, in the case of the violently or unexpectedly deceased. Additionally, while the cemetery grave is a resting place for the body,

the *capillita* is something of a ritual spatiality that lets relatives act upon what will be the last destination of the defunct's soul. It allows the development of ritual strategies oriented around helping the defunct's soul to find his or her eternal rest in the extraterrestrial world.

Conclusion

The construction of off-road *capillitas*, and the rituals that relatives offer to them, constitute a fundamental component of the funerary practices in Venezuela and in various countries of Latin America as well. In the state of New Mexico in the U.S., similar monuments are found. In Venezuela the construction of these *capillitas* has three components that constitute this funerary structure. These components are factual, spatial and temporary. The factual component is given by the type of death, dealing with violent and sudden deaths. As we have indicated previously, the majority of the interviewed point out that the *capillitas* are built for people who have died in road accidents. If we deepen the analysis, we will see that the dominant characteristic in this type of death is the violence with which it occurs and not the fact that it would have happened subtly. For others who died subtly, non tragically, a *capillita* will not be constructed or required, neither will it get the customary rituals.

The spatial component is given by the need expressed by the relatives to build the *capillita* in the same place where the family member died. In such a sense, these monuments constitute a spatial delimiter, with which a very particular connotation takes place. It is there, "where (he or she) took the last breath", where the *capillita* will be built. A reason why *capillitas* are not built in the homes of the deceased, is that it must be built off-road "because there (he or she died)". The place of violent death becomes a sacred, symbolic space: a scene of ritual visits. The reserve is true when more natural death takes place such as at home or in a hospital bed, or any other place where death strikes a human being.

The temporal component has to do with the need of constructing the *capillita* as soon as possible. Even though some of the interviewed built them the following year, the majority indicated that they must be constructed in a period of a week or nine days. This temporal urgency would include the realization of dates. The general tendency seems to be to construct the *capillitas* once the ninth day is through.

According to our hypothesis, in the economy of the Venezuelan funerary system, the *capillitas* are symbolic spaces, scenes of rituals destined to achieve the “peaceful rest” of the deceased, to avoid that they live “in suffering” and stop the defunct’s soul from bothering or frightening the living. The relationship with the deceased is completely different from the one established with the deceased who died from natural causes and is buried in a cemetery. The fact that *capillitas* are constructed in places where the death takes place but where no one lies buried reveals that the cult is destined to the soul and that the visit is not made to the place where the body lies as it is in cemeteries. This reinforces and semiotically updates the soul/body duality, of such long tradition in different cultures. While the two principal components of the macro-funerary ritual of Venezuela, specifically the wake and burial, are centered on the body (Finol and Djukich de Nery, 1998), the ritual studied here deals primarily with the soul. Therefore, it is only and exclusively the spirit of the defunct, the one being semiotically updated through the *capillitas* and through the ritual with which they are associated.

Notes

(1) One of the few exceptions to this are the brief notes of Angelina Pollak-Eltz. She points out that “through out the national territory it’s customary to leave a cross at the side of a road, at the place where the fatal accident has occurred” (1989:28). Our experience shows that the presence of “capillitas” (little chapels) built off-road is praised higher than the isolated crosses left on them, even though the “capillitas” include crosses. The presence of isolated crosses is scarce.

(2) The regular comparative term is *capilla*, and its diminutive is *capillita*. We will see to the relevance of this difference later.

(3) According to some members of the Jewish religion, the placement of the stones represents a previous visit of a loved one or friend.

(4) There are numerous references comparing the grave and home. “of course, the burial is an art: to keep the cadaver from the rotting enemy, substitute of immortality, and to keep the place (the grave) so beautiful, or more beautiful than the common house of men in life, their definitive home” (Rodriguez Ortiz 1994:6). i.e. i.e. See also to this respect Finol and Fernández 1997.