

FUNERAL LAMENTS AND FEMALE POWER IN SARDINIAN PEASANT SOCIETY¹

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INTRODUCTION

The members of all societies, maintain a shared pattern of behaviour for dealing with death. Patterns for regulating this ultimate rite of passage are culturally prescribed on the basis of a particular culture's values, norms, and conception of the nature of life after death. Furthermore, in every society, behavioral roles in rituals surrounding death are assigned to males and females according to the societies' view of what is considered to be appropriate behavior for each sex. In most studies of funeral behavior the emphasis has been on the activities that follow the event of death, commenting on their function as a socially sanctioned expressive outlet for feelings of loss and grief. When funeral laments have been analyzed, the goal has been primarily to determine the structural properties or singing style of the form.² Surprisingly, the actual words of funeral laments have received little attention, and, in particular, there is little information about the funeral laments of women as they reveal the woman's view of life and death and her attitudes about her condition in her society.³ Above all, funeral laments have not been studied from the point of view of the woman's role in the basic subsistence activities of her society as this role relates to her institutionalized position in ritual activities. The ideas that peasant women communicate in their laments and the specialized audiences to whom they relay this information have not been the subject of systematic analysis, and there has been no significant theorizing as to the degree of social control which peasant women may actually exert through the public drama of the wake and funeral in societies where women, not men, have control over the dissemination of information about past and present events in their communities.

It has been exhaustively documented that social control in many primitive and peasant societies, where status is achieved and lost primarily through personal comportment and adherence to established norms and not mainly through acquisition of goods, is maintained largely through verbal behavior, such as shaming and joking. Also, the nature of funeral ceremony as standardized action which exerts control in society by reaffirming the status quo has also been discussed.⁴ In Goody's view for example, as he speaks of the funeral behavior of the LoDagaa, 'Ceremonies of the cosmic style ... are usually simply affirmatory in that they restate established positions and relationships, often in the highly charged manner that led Chapple and Coon to speak of them as 'rites of intensification.'⁵ Goody has concerned himself with the interdependency of mortuary beliefs and practices with the other aspects of society, and has noted the important function of the funeral as social control. In Goody's words:

Funerals are inevitably occasions for summing up an individual's social personality, by a restatement not only of the roles he has filled but also of the general way in which he has conducted himself during his lifetime. The composition of the obituary ... involves directly or indirectly *a public reformulation of social norms that itself serves as a sanction for behavior* [my emphasis].⁶

When, as in Sardinian peasant culture, the ritual activities of the funeral, and especially of the wake with its funeral lamenting, are controlled exclusively by women, and when the society is sexually segregated, as is that of the Sardinian peasant, with only women furnishing the audience for the lament, we observe that there is an important area of social control that resides mainly in the hands of women. The traditional view of peasant women as male-dominated, passive, abused and helpless creatures appears to require careful re-examination. Clearly, the overt control of resources in Sardinian peasant society as in other peasant cultures appears to be in the hands of the males and outwardly all power seems to be vested in males; women never appear to control the official public machinery of peasant cultures. However, women do control many decisions made in private sectors and there is often a distinct distribution of power between males and females, a mute agreement as to formal/informal controls within the society. When we examine the separate community of women in the Sardinian peasant culture of the *Barbagia* (Central-eastern Sardinia) and note how the flow of information is largely regulated by women, a new dimension of control,

latent, but no less powerful, appears.⁷

This paper aims at an analysis of the content and performance of the Sardinian funeral lament in cultural context in order to demonstrate the manner in which women control the flow of information in Sardinian peasant society. We view the wake and its dominant verbal expressive form, the *attitu* (funeral lament), as a public drama with an all female cast which reveals the major concerns of the female population and, at the same time, exerts a measure of social control within the village in which it is performed.⁸ In Sardinia the *attitu* is exclusively a female art, and as we shall see, the drama of the wake is particularly significant in this culture where women have no other public, verbal expressive outlet. The role of the wake and of the *attitu* in the lives of the women of a mountain village of 2,800 inhabitants will be discussed and the social ramifications of the control of the flow of information by women, through the medium of the *attitu*, will be examined. A particular event, the wake of a forty-eight year old woman who had committed suicide by hanging, will be used as our major illustration of the role of the *attitu* in village life.

THE SETTING AND THE COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

Within those villages of the *Barbagia* where sheep and goat herding is the main subsistence activity, males and females are separated along lines of both work and leisure activities. Because of ecological necessity and cultural dictates, men engage full time in herding activities while women work at hoe gardening, food processing and preservation, child care, and maintenance of the homes in the villages.⁹ This division of labor between pastoral and agricultural activities has produced a mutual dependency system in which males and females rely on each other for survival but are rigidly segregated. Accordingly to the ideology of both males and females herding is strictly male work and gardening is exclusively the work of women. Though males may do some of the initial heavy ground breaking, men do not tend the gardens; similarly, women do not engage in herding activities. Additionally, culturally prescribed expectations of behavior for males and females limit contact between the sexes during leisure activities, with men grouping together with other men in after work hours, and women spending their brief moments of leisure time in or near their homes predominantly with other women. The sexes are similarly separated in ritual activities, especially those surrounding death.

Thus, we see that the combination of intensive pastoralism and equally intensive hoe agriculture, plus the concept that males and

females should not mingle in leisure time activities, produces a stringent segregation of the sexes. It is clear that the separation of males and females in Sardinian peasant society extends into all areas of life, and that this sexual polarity is dictated both by ecological factors and by cultural regulations. For both sexes there are traditionally prescribed patterns of behavior from which neither sex may depart without strong social disapproval. It is central to our thesis that these male and female roles are enforced by both sexes. In Sardinian peasant society no man or woman may deviate from the norm without risking criticism or ridicule from both males and females and, within this culturally patterned standard of expectations, males are required to leave the ritual activities surrounding death to females. Women handle all of the ceremonies of the wake and only females are involved in the communal ritual of the wake and especially of the *attitu*. This socially patterned sexual division of the sexes in the ceremonies relating to death further reinforces the male-female separation required by the other institutionalized behavior complexes of the community.

Thus, the women of Sardinian peasant society are united in their separate community of females within the context of the wake and of the funeral.¹⁰ One must consider the fact that what unifies also separates. The unification of females teamed with the exclusion of males in the critical rituals surrounding death further reinforces the separation of the sexes within the culture. Men are involved incidentally in the wake. While the women gather around the only incidentally in the wake. While the women gather around females, by the mandates of tradition, are allowed to sing the *attitu*.¹¹ Since death occurs frequently in the villages, about every two weeks, women participate in funeral ceremonies at least ten to fifteen times each year and the female community is repeatedly brought together in the highly charged emotional atmosphere of the wake. At this time, a woman expresses her deepest feelings about past and present events, either as a major singer of the *attitu* if the wake is for a member of her family, or as a member of the supporting chorus, if the wake is for a member of another family. To discuss the wake as a disseminator of information in the community, several questions must be raised: What is the performance setting of the wake? What sort of information is conveyed in the *attitu*? Who communicates what information to whom? And do men have any opportunity to learn about what has been said?

We have pointed out that the wake is sexually segregated and that only females perform the *attitu*, and have noted that the wake is a collective representation of female unity, where comments are

made about events and matters of interest to the community as a whole. Although men do not participate in the wake, in the hours and days after the funeral they hear the female members of their families discussing the content of the *attitu* and the ideas contained in the supporting comments of the women in attendance. In this way the information conveyed in the closed system of the wake reaches the men and is spread throughout the community.

THE WAKE

When a death occurs in the village the close female friends of the family gather to prepare the body for the wake. It is washed and clothed and laid out on a bed in the home. News of death travels rapidly, and soon many women of the community gather around the bier, as the *attitu* begins. The wake is a social drama with the principle mourners, or main actors, and the secondary mourners, or chorus participating. The following is an account of the wake of the suicide victim as we observed it on June 15, 1975:

We had heard about the woman's suicide the day before and had learned that she had been found hanging in the *cantina*, the first floor storage room of the house, by her youngest daughter, Anna. We also knew that the woman had been known to be *esaurito* (severely neurotic) and, as a result, would not be denied a Roman Catholic burial. Today, the day after the death, at 3.45p.m., we took the mountain path down to the home of the deceased to attend the wake and to pay our respects to the family. As we approached the house we heard the *attitu*. We arrived in the small courtyard which was filled with men who were sitting around in small groups, quietly talking. It was obvious that the men could hear some of the words of the *attitu* issuing from the partially open windows of the house, but none appeared to be listening. We entered the house and climbed the steep wooden stairway leading directly into the room where the body lay. The room was about fifteen by fifteen feet and there were about forty women clustered around the body on the bed. Seated at either side of the head of the body were the two daughters of the deceased, Anna (age twenty years) and Laurina (age twenty-four years). They were singing the *attitu*, and, at the time we arrived, had already been singing for about twenty hours.

The *attitu* consists of improvised rhymed verses of irregular length, about eight to ten stresses; the length is determined by the amount of breath which the singer can expend before having to inhale again. The singing is polyphonic. On this occasion one of the daughters sang the major verses while the other formed a background of stylized comments; then the lead position was reversed,

with the other daughter taking the lead. The secondary mourners, the women clustered around the body, furnished an additional choral background of words, sometimes referring to the deceased or to the daughters singing the *attitu*, or to their own personal sorrows of past events. The effect was one of a casually coordinated group performance, with the two lead singers setting the pace. It was obvious that the women were all singing as individuals yet they were still aware that they were members of a group. It would be impossible in this brief paper to repeat in detail exactly what the singers conveyed in the forty minutes that we were present. However, since we are contending that the *attitu* furnishes the main communication device about past and present events in the community, we will list the main ideas that we heard expressed by both the major singers of the *attitu*, and by the secondary singers, the chorus of women gathered around the body.

In this culture the dead are thought to be able to hear the words of the living, and are especially able to listen in the hours following death and before the burial. The daughters, thus, spoke directly to their dead Mother, asking her questions and complaining to her for deserting them. It is central to our thesis that the questions addressed to the dead are equally designed to convey information to the other women present about the circumstances of the life of the deceased and about the event of her death. This is true of all *attitu* in Sardinian peasant society, not just of one sung in the event of death by suicide. However, in this case, the element of public apology was obviously stronger. The daughters sang on the following points: about the good qualities of the deceased, and about the circumstances of her death, asking her why she had tricked them by committing suicide despite their almost continuous surveillance of her in the weeks before her act. They sang about their loving relationship with the deceased, about their deep feelings of loss, and about their fears for the future without her support. They also sang about how the women of the community had been so kind as to gather to be with them at this tragic time, and expressed their hope that the women would understand the circumstances of their Mother's death and have compassion for their family in its suffering. The ideas that were presented were scarcely repeated in the time that we listened, and we heard later from other women about the many other facts of the family's past troubles which the daughters had conveyed in the *attitu*.

During the daughters' performance the secondary mourners, the chorus of women, expressed their own feelings. One must remember that the major singing takes place in the immediate area surround-

ing the body. The other women, standing further from the body, are stimulated by the *attitu*, a form which they all know well, to comment upon their own misfortunes of the near or distant past. During the wake we heard patterned phrases from the other women referring to the following subjects: There were comments directed to the deceased members of other families and explanations of their deaths, and there were requests, directed to the body (or soul) of the dead woman of this wake, to convey greetings and requests for assistance to these deceased members of other families. It was obvious that the women believed that the dead woman would be able to carry the messages to other departed souls and that they believed in a community of the dead that all join soon after death. The miseries of each woman's present condition were also expressed, and, again, the information seemed to be directed not so much to the body of the deceased as toward the gathering of women. One woman sang briefly about her son who had been accidentally killed several years before by an electrical current in the village bakery, while another lamented about her present miserable condition; she had been abandoned by her husband who had emigrated to Germany for work and had chosen to remain there to live with another woman, leaving her alone with three children to care for. Still another woman drew parallels between the unexpected nature of the present death and that of one of the members of her family which had occurred many years before. Another spoke repeatedly to her husband who had died thirty years past. All of the women participated in the wake in some way, and each seemed to interpret this event as an occasion to vent her feelings anew and to remind others about the sad circumstances of her own past.

CONCLUSION

The wake in Sardinia is a public event, conducted by and attended by females only. It is an event that brings the women into the forefront, gives them their major chance for action, and furnishes them with a socially sanctioned occasion through which they may express their feelings and gain support from females, and from males as well, through the dissemination of this information throughout the community. The wake and the *attitu* gives a woman the chance to be heard publically and to be taken seriously. It furnishes her with a channel through which she may circulate information about herself that she wishes to make public and presents her with an official and legitimized event for social display. This occasion gives her the opportunity to praise or to put down others and, at times of stress, to rally the community to her support. In

fact, the *attitu* has at times, such as when a shepherd has been killed by other shepherds, or a bandit from the village has been killed by the police, had such an inflammatory effect on the village as a whole that the church has attempted to prohibit the holding of wakes.

In Sardinian peasant culture the wake presents the main channel through which news about the past and present condition of individual families may be spread. As such it is the only large scale public medium through which past and present events may be linked and presented. And the women control the system. In this society, as in most peasant societies, the status of the family is the focal point of honor and of status, and it is the woman who controls a major part of the information that may maintain or diminish this status. Matters of family and personal honor, esteem, dignity, respect, pride and prestige are largely manipulated by the female community. Within this separate community women dominate the public flow of information and the related sector of attitude maintenance. Additionally, since women have exclusive rights to the principal channel of communication with deceased members of the community, they also control interaction with the world of the dead. (The village priests also communicate with the dead, of course and the men of the village are aware of the collusion of the priests and the women in this matter. Several male informants confided to us that, 'I preti pascolano le donne', The priests herd the women). Sardinian peasant males are restrained by custom from complaining about their personal problems except perhaps to a very few very close male friends, usually members of their families. They have no comparable public mechanism through which to ventilate their feelings.¹² If a wife dies the husband, however grief stricken he may be, is expected to remain in the background, leaving the expression of emotion to the surviving female members of the family.

It is clear that the cleavage between the male and female worlds in this culture is socially standardized and culturally prescribed. The separate expressive behavior forms and performance settings of the two sexes restate established positions and relationships and thus reinforce the polarity that characterizes the relationship between males and females. The overt expressive behavior of both sexes then, may be viewed as 'rites of intensification' relating to the separation of the sexes and contributing to the maintenance of traditional roles. In Sardinian peasant culture, as in most peasant cultures, males and females alike are captives of traditionally prescribed role models, internalized at an early age and followed with

little questioning as to possible alternatives. Because these norms are enforced directly from within the peer group, deviation from expected behavior patterns is extremely difficult if not impossible. Since the channels of communication with both the worlds of the living and the dead and the flow of information concerning past and present events in Sardinian society are controlled by women, one must conclude that to a significant degree the social norms and behavior of this culture are controlled by the female subgroup. In the Sardinian Barbagia women, through their expressive verbal behavior, serve as mediums through which much private information flows into the community as a whole. Although outwardly social power is vested in the males, the culturally institutionalized event of the wake and the *attitu* confers upon women a significant sector of influence beyond the reach of males in the society. Sardinian males are aware of this network of female control and customarily relinquish this sector of power to women.

Additional studies of the not so obvious but essential mechanisms and dynamics of social control within peasant societies are needed, and a new perspective is required. We must move from the oversimplified traditional view of the dominance of males over females in peasant culture to an approach that will emphasize the complexities and varieties of dominance-submission patterns in specific peasant cultural settings. The Sardinian case of female social control as exerted through the *attitu* suggests that analyses of performance settings and forms of expressive behavior as they relate to environment and subsistence patterns, to sexual separation, and to male-female roles in a variety of peasant cultures may yield new insights into structures of power in traditional societies.

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NOTES:

¹The research upon which this study is based was carried out between May 1975, and September 1975, in Central-Eastern Sardinia. I want to thank Professor Paolo Pillonca for his assistance during the field study and M. Estalie Smith for her valuable comments during the revision of the paper.

²See Wolfgang Laade, *Die Struktur Der Korsischen Lamento-Melodik*, Baden-Baden, Editions P.H., Heitz/Verlag Heitz GMBH 1962; Alan Lomax, *Folksong Style and Culture*, Washington, D.C., 1968; David Sapid, 'Diola-Fogny Funeral Songs and the Native Critic', *African Language Review*, 1969, pp. 176-191.

³One notable exception is Catherine H. Berndt's interesting paper, 'Expression of Grief among Aboriginal Women', *Oceania*: 20:286-332, 1949-50.

⁴For a discussion of current ideas on joking behavior see, Richard W. Howell, 'Teasing Relationships', Addison-Wesley Module 46, 1973. See also, Robert B. Edgerton and Francis P. Conant, 'Kilapat: The "Shaming Party" among the Pokot of East Africa', *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology (Journal of Anthropological Research)*, 20: 404-418, 1964.

⁵Goody, Jack *Death, Prosperity and the Ancestors: A Study of the Mortuary Customs of the LoDagaa*, Stanford University Press, 1962.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

⁷For a recent challenge to the concept of females in peasant society as playing a subordinate role to males see Susan Carol Rogers, 'Female Forms of Power and the Myth of Male Dominance: A Model of Female/Male Interaction in Peasant Society', *American Ethnologist*, 2:4: 727-756.

Clifford Geertz has considered the quality of drama in collective expressive behavior in his analysis of the Balinese cockfight, noting that, 'The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong'. (Geertz: 1972:29). See also Alan Lomax's discussion of folk song as presenting, '... an immediate image of a cultural pattern'. Lomax has suggested that, 'The performing arts acquire their quiet and unobtrusive authority in the lives of men precisely because they carry their message about social structure beneath the surface'. (Lomax: 1968:6).

⁸For a discussion of subsistence patterns, economics and social structure in Sardinia, see Alex Weingrod and Emma Morin, 'Post Peasants: The Character of Contemporary Sardinian Society', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13:301, 324:1971.

⁹Comments on the male-female separation in the Sardinian wake and funeral may be found in sections written by Enrica Delitala and Raffaello Marchi in, *Sante, Streghe e Diavoli: Il Patrimonio delle Tradizione Popolare nella Societa Meridionale e in Sardegna*, a cura di Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, Firenze, Sansoni, pp. 444-448 and pp. 455-456. Marchi mentions the interesting fact that, in the past, there was often a *contro-attitu* along with the *attitu* in which the *faults* of the deceased were sung.

For other discussions of funeral lamenting in Italy see, Alberto Maria Cirese, 'Nenie e Prefiche nel Mondo Antico', *Lares*, 17:22-24:1951, and Ernesto de Martino, *Morte e Pianto Rituale: dal Lamento Funebre Antico al Pianto di Maria*, Torino, Boringhieri, 1975 (first published in 1958).

¹⁰Lomax has noted that the singing style of southern Italy is characterized by factors including a high degree of nasality and glottal constriction. We noted the nasal quality in the singing of the *attitu* but felt that the glottal constriction was minimal. It is difficult to apply Lomax's criteria to the *attitu* since continuous weeping will naturally constrict the nasal passages.

¹¹Sardinian men do sing improvised poetry in public in their verbal dueling sessions, *La Gara Poetica*. However, they do not sing of personal distresses. For descriptions of this all male poetry see, Elizabeth Mathias, 'Sardinian Shepherd's Poetry as Verbal Art: An Examination of Verbal Dueling in Two Interlinked Performance Communities' paper presented at The National Conference of the American Fdlore Society, New Orleans, October 23, 1975, and Elizabeth Mathias, '*La Gara Poetica*: Sardinian Shepherds' Verbal Dueling and the Expression of Male Values in an Agro-Pastoral Society', paper presented at the meetings of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, December 6, 1975.

¹²An interesting event which illustrates the female exclusion of males from participating in the *attitu* occurred at another wake in the same village where the data for this paper was collected. On this occasion a transvestite in the village, who was known for his skill at singing women's songs, entered the room where the body of an old woman was laid out and attempted to begin to sing the *attitu*. The women, kindly but firmly, interrupted his song and directed him out of the room.