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***Two Worldview Perspectives on Death: Mayan & Swedish Attitudes toward Death***

**Marcos Lopez Macal**

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Supervisor: Etzel Cardeña

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### Abstract

Death is life's companion, it has existed throughout the history of humanity and of all living things. Mayan culture represents one of the oldest civilizations native to the American continent and is renowned for its traditions and spirituality. Sweden is recognized as a modern-day industrialized, technologically advanced, and secular society. How do these two different cultures handle the subject of death? Studying how these two cultures view and confront death provides a unique opportunity to appreciate how worldviews can differ with regard to the same phenomenon. This study aims to find out what opinions and attitudes modern-day Mayans of Guatemala and Swedes have about death and to discover any similarities or differences between them. Ten participants from each culture were interviewed using an interpretative phenomenological approach in order to analyze the most common and important emerging themes. The analysis suggests that the Mayan worldview has incorporated elements of Catholicism and answers many questions regarding death. Swedish participants' approach was more based on rationality with a focus on life instead of death, but it also showed openness to a new perspective toward death. Future research should take into consideration how foreign philosophies and technologies influence Swedes' perspectives on death, while future research on the Maya should consider how modern-day Mayans have combined Catholic religion with their ancestral beliefs to create a new and different perspective about life and death.

*Keywords:* Mysticism, death, Mayan, Swedish, attitudes toward death, phenomenological analysis.

## **Two Worldviews on Death: Mayan & Swedish Attitudes Toward Death**

Death is one of the most complex and mysterious subjects in human life. It is something that all living things will experience directly, and indirectly through the death of those around us. This means that regardless of our culture, faith, social status, or ethnicity death will affect us all. To experience death can be something individual in the sense that it is *I* who will die and *I* who must face my own finitude, but in order to grasp a complete picture of death, it also needs to be seen from a social perspective. As a social phenomenon death carries many collective thoughts, ideas, and beliefs undergirding the individual's opinion about death (Poulsen, Lund, & Hviid, 2013).

Because death is an inevitable occurrence in life, the way we approach it, recognize it, or even think of it when it is near us is something that can vary from one culture to another. Every society in the world has adapted in its own way to the fact that death will occur at one moment or another. It is a part of human existence (Hviid, 2016). If there are many ways we can think, act, or feel about death, then these can be studied in order to appreciate how different perspectives and attitudes toward death affect our lives. Wong, Reker and Gesser (1994) stated that how individuals view life affects their attitude toward death, but the opposite is also true: how one views death will affect how one conducts one's life. These statements present a vital part of my intended research, which is to compare attitudes toward death in two different cultures, Swedish and Mayan. The Mayan worldview involves a complex cosmological perspective in which everything can have a spirit and reason for being, while Swedish culture represents a very technological, Western worldview in which conversations about spirits or death might be seen as taboo or simply unnecessary.

Regardless of beliefs or worldview, humans eventually ponder their own existence: Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? Am I happy with how I have lived my life? Pondering about our existence can make people wonder about their own finitude, which becomes interesting when we observe the consequences of our opinions about life and death. Does thinking about or confronting our death cause fear, anger, joy, or satisfaction? What are the emotions and thoughts that come to mind when we think of our finitude? How do they affect our decisions and daily life? I believe that by looking into Mayan and Swedish attitudes toward death we can learn how opposing cultures handle the concept of death, and can even gain knowledge that might be helpful in creating philosophies or psychological training methods to help alleviate anxiety in people worrying about their existence. My intention in this research is not to see which culture handles death better, but to closely examine the view of each culture, to find out how each society copes with death at individual and social levels, and to investigate some of the consequences of different views on death.

### **Death Anxiety and Attitude Toward Death**

Death, as a phenomenon, is highly complex, and it can be feared for multiple reasons, such as the uncertainty of what comes after death, the possibility of dying painfully, loss of memory, etc. (Rodenbach, Rodenbach, Tejani, & Epstein, 2015). It is important to mention that in the literature the terms “fear of death” and “death anxiety” are commonly found, and at times can be used as synonyms. Nonetheless “fear of death” is defined as something more specific, concrete, and conscious that comes with the belief that death is frightening, while “death anxiety” is a more general term that might be inaccessible to awareness (Lehto & Stein, 2009; Wong, Reker, & Gesser, 1994)

For Yalom (2008), death anxiety can influence the human psyche, and evidence suggests that the matter is of both clinical and theoretical importance. Iverach, Menzies,

and Menzies's (2014) review of death anxiety and psychopathology clearly indicates the relation between death anxiety, mental disorders, and other behaviors. For example, fear of death is related to somatic symptoms. A clear behavioral example would be when a person frequents the doctor's clinic and constantly asks for exams in search of a serious illness.

Deepening the understanding of death anxiety and its impact on people's behavior in the workplace, Sliter, Sinclair, Mohr, and Yuan (2014) explored death anxiety in occupations in which one would be reminded of human mortality more frequently. They investigated death anxiety in nurses and firefighters. They found that in both professions, death anxiety was strongly associated with higher levels of burnout and lower levels of engagement. Being exposed to the loss of life would build up death anxiety, which in time could lead to burnout and, in the case of firefighters' death anxiety, was related to higher levels of absenteeism.

Following the same line of investigation, Rodenbach et al. (2015) studied in a group of oncology clinicians the relation between their personal attitudes toward death and their communication with terminally ill patients. The results showed that the majority of oncology clinicians demonstrated an acceptance of death, and felt there was a reciprocal relation between their own death and the care of their patients. The care of dying patients had affected their outlook on life and death. Interestingly, they observed that among the factors that influenced the acceptance of death were: personal loss, mindfulness, and cultural background. Clinicians not of Western background mentioned that their cultural upbringing had had an influence in their view of disease and death. The small group of clinicians that did not accept their own mortality described having discomfort and avoiding thoughts of death. They also experienced anxiety resulting from their professional and personal lives.

Death is a normal experience that all living things have to go through.

Nonetheless, in many cultures it is not spoken of until a death occurs and a person or group is forced to deal with the situation. Because some cultures do not speak about it or prepare their people for it, speaking about death brings discomfort to both the individual and society since they do not know how to react to and think about death. In the Western world, we see this clearly. Ma- Kellams and Blascovich (2012) studied the differences between Eastern and Western cultures in response to mortality salience by assessing participants' mood, death, and life-thought accessibility via tasks, and by asking them to write their thoughts regarding their own death (experimental) or dental pain (control). Their results revealed that East Asians responded to death in a different manner than European Americans. For East Asians participants, death was a reminder of life and motivated them to participate in and enjoy life more. This was explained, in great part, by the view East Asians have of death. Their view is considered to be holistic, in which opposites such as life and death are connected, and coexist in a balance, as with the principle of Yin and Yang. Their research concluded that striving to enjoy life is a culture-specific answer to mortality that has been adopted by Easterners, but not by Westerners. Westerners did not show the same pattern of thinking about life as Easterners, and they displayed an increased interest in activities aimed at achieving a symbolic or literal immortality.

Other studies have been conducted on more Western societies in which the results were influenced by a non-Western culture. For example, Macleod, Crandall, Wilson, and Austin (2016) investigated death anxiety among New Zealanders, and found that marital status predicted levels of anxiety. Higher levels of anxiety were found in single participants and the lowest levels were found in widowed people. The authors attributed the levels of death anxiety to socio-psychological variables. They stated that New

Zealand's society has developed with the influence of Māori customs and traditions. In this worldview, death is accepted and aligned to other life events.

In a similar manner Krause and Bastida (2012) studied death anxiety and contact with the dead among Mexican Americans living in the United States. Their findings suggested that the participants that believed they had contact with the dead saw that there was a connection among all people, and as a consequence were more grateful to God, which in turn helped reduce feelings of death anxiety. These studies exemplify the varied nature of death anxiety across different cultures and demonstrate how it is possible for cultures to be influenced in a way that impacts their attitudes toward death.

The previous studies show the importance of understanding and expanding the knowledge about attitudes toward death from different cultural perspectives, and how societies that are considered more Western can develop their worldviews with the influence of non-Western cultures. Exploring different perspectives about death is important because it helps understand behaviors and reactions toward death. This can be observed in Firth (2000), when she refers to the approach to death of Hindu and Sikh communities living the UK, and the consequences it has when seeking medical assistance. Firth concludes that in these communities it is important to know about death in advance in order to be prepared and be able to perform all important rituals and traditions. These may include chanting a prayer or being there to hear the last words of a person, since this tells the members of the family about his or her mental state at the moment of death. If these words are positive, they give hope and comfort to the family. The author concludes that, particularly for people from the Indian subcontinent, one is a member of a family first, and only then an individual. These beliefs are important to know when a member of this culture passes away, since there are several rituals and behaviors that can be expected. This type of knowledge can be vital for people working within the health sector

because their actions and decisions can have a profound effect on how the family deals with death and bereavement.

The studies presented so far exemplify how varied perspectives of death can be, and even show how such perspectives can influence how a person copes with their own death or the death of others. Not only does studying death from different worldviews present the opportunity to acquire new knowledge regarding two different cultures, but it offers the chance to compare a society that is usually considered secular with one that is considered spiritual and traditional.

### **Mayan Approach to Death**

Mayan culture has been historically enigmatic because of their engineering, beliefs, and lack of written information that survived the European conquistadors, which made it very difficult to know all aspects of their societies and life before the Europeans arrived to the continent. Nonetheless, it has been well documented that Mayans excelled in several areas, such as architecture, mathematics, and astronomy. The Mayan worldview is renowned for its complexity and philosophy. Sharer (1998) describes how the present-day Maya still maintain a very ancient ideology of life and the universe that is foreign to Western societies. One big difference between these worldviews is that Western culture divides reality into two realms, the natural and supernatural. The former is the one in which all living and observable beings exist, while the latter one is the domain of all non-living objects such as ghosts, luck, faith, etc. In Mayan cosmology both living and non-living things are filled with an invisible power. The natural and supernatural are fused together. The concept of *cuxolalob* exemplifies such a fusion; it refers to knowledge that can be simultaneously rational and supernatural. Mayan beliefs and worldviews present an opportunity to explore a world in which meaning is given to all things and aspects of life, including death.

Steele (1977) underwent the task of studying death among Mayan people, and thought that he would not only learn about how the culture dealt with death, but also evaluate the efficacy of current methods for coping with death. He found that Mayan people showed little struggle against death, and explained it in the following way: “When the time came to die, the Maya did not fight it. Old ones might at any time announce that their time had come and retreat to their mat or hammock, where they would lie quietly, awaiting death” (p.1063).

He stressed the importance that mythological beliefs had in Mayan society. These beliefs were profound and compatible with the environment, and provided spiritual support in the face of death. They also provided a sense of control over death, and told the victims or their relatives how to respond to it. He contrasted these beliefs with those of Western societies, and mentioned that in the West there is a lack of spiritual sustenance. Western societies, in turn, were left with science to accommodate the support and guidance that at one point was provided by belief, myths, and rituals. Nonetheless, science at the time offered little consolation from a spiritual point of view.

Another aspect of the Mayan worldview that has been highlighted in the literature is the importance of dreams and their interpretation, which is to date a common practice within the culture (Tedlock, 1992). The way Mayans generate knowledge is also fundamental for understanding their society. Mayans generate knowledge within groups, beginning with the family, and extending later to the community, legal authorities, elders, spiritual guides, etc. (Garcia Ixmata, 2010).

### **The Swedish Approach to Death**

According to Ariès (1981), Western industrialized societies have banished death, and are living in an era that he referred to as “Invisible Death,” This era is characterized by the removal of death from the public sphere and its transition to a more private one, in which

mourning is not shown in public. Further, codes for revealing feelings that were unexpressed, for giving birth or for consoling the bereaved, have disappeared. This “invisible death” causes people to pretend that death does not exist, which renders the subject taboo and unwanted.

Sweden is a Western industrialized country where the Protestant Lutheran Church used to have influence in society. Less than one hundred years ago, people here would wash and clothe the body of the deceased. It was believed that hair and nail clippings should be eliminated, and that the water used to wash the body should be disposed of in an elaborate way, in order to prevent the dead from haunting the living. These practices demonstrate that people had a close relation with death. The Sweden of today, however is a much different, more secularized society, in which modern life has changed together with science and its institutions. A scientific worldview took its place in society by replacing or greatly diminishing the Lutheran influence, leaving a Christian faith that is considered more modern and open to reform (Åhren, 2009). Many old practices and traditions have disappeared, leading people to have a more distant relation with death. However, regardless of religious belief, death still occurs, and investigating what native Swedes of today believe or think about death gives an opportunity to discover how a highly secularized and technological society perceives death.

Ek et al. (2014) explored the subject of death and caring for dying patients with first-year Swedish nursing students, and found that they felt that the idea of death was much more frightening than the actual experience of seeing a dead person. The students’ narratives showed plenty of concern with their own fears, reactions, and feelings when confronted with death. This was an important finding, since it appeared to show that the students were fearful of not having control over their own reactions to death.

Strang et al. (2014) researched the reasoning of Swedish nursing students in regard to emotionally demanding issues involved in caring for dying patients. One subject of discussion was that when students encountered questions regarding death, their thoughts drifted between their responsibilities and their own insufficiency, lack of experience, and fear of death. Students acknowledged their duty to their job, but the vision and idea of death was something they feared. Interestingly, students who had previous experience caring for dying people reasoned more confidently than those that did not. Such a finding could be explained by Jakobsson, Johnsson, Persson, and Gaston-Johansson (2006) who mentioned that in Sweden death is institutionalized; death will usually take place in hospitals and residential care facilities, and experiencing death outside of these institutions is uncommon. Being a first year student could indicate that the person has little experience with the subject of death, and those students that had been training for more years had developed a relation to the subject through their education and work.

It has been observed that a certain type of stigma exists in Sweden regarding the topic of suicide, and that bereaved youth opt for strategies of “keeping silent” in response to the stigma, which in turn had a counterproductive effect on them since they revealed a desire to seek support (Hagström, 2016).

Hornborg (2010) states that Sweden is considered one of the most secularized societies in the world, and that many traditions related to religion are kept private, while “new age” spirituality that offers to “find your inner self,” “develop your inner potential,” etc., seems to be more accepted in the public sphere. A study by Gustavsson (2015) looked at the symbols on gravestones and messages on memorial websites in Norway and Sweden. He found that the messages showed that many people have some form of belief in an afterlife, since the idea of their loved ones being in heaven was a common expression. However he argued that these references to afterlife or heaven are not necessarily Christian expressions,

but more “New Age” in that people, through the use of technology, could keep the memory of their loved ones. Further, it was also found that Swedes tended to refer to their love ones becoming angels, which would also confirm a belief in an afterlife.

Rituals and beliefs in Sweden are changing at a drastic pace, and expressions of grief through the medium of the Internet are a sign that there is a need for traditions and customs more in tune with modern society. Some of these changes are seen in how graves are being decorated. One explanation for this is that immigrants are choosing to be buried in Sweden rather than in their home countries, which influences how death is seen in the country in general. Regulations are in place to indicate how graves can be decorated, but authorities are also showing leniency and openness to other peoples’ religious or spiritual expressions, allowing such changes to take place regardless of the rules (Hugoson, 2009).

This indicates that, to an extent, Swedish people are showing openness and curiosity toward other peoples’ attitudes regarding death. The studies presented here demonstrate that there is a need for the subject of death to be researched in Sweden. I believe that the studies presented show that attitudes toward death will vary from one culture to the next. By studying the attitude toward death of Swedish and of Mayan people in Guatemala much can be learned that may help advance existing knowledge in the subject of death. My intention is to study different worldviews of an existential problem that all cultures share. Regardless of culture, language or race, all humans ponder, and in some way suffer, death. Mayan and Swedish cultures are not similar in terms of language or beliefs. However, this does not mean that they cannot have the same existential curiosities, or that new knowledge cannot come from studying similarities and differences in their attitudes toward death.

I believe that the study of Mayan and native Swedish culture presents itself as an opportunity to further understand attitudes toward death. Mayan culture has frequently been studied by Western society because of its historical advancements in mathematics, astronomy,

written language and engineering, but the same attention has not been given to its psychology and its potential contribution to technological societies. Swedish society, on the other hand, is known for being a technologically developed society, and how a Western, developed society handles the subject of death is also of great interest. Much can be learned that might be incorporated into clinical settings and educational classes as part of mental hygiene, palliative care or even training for professionals in health care institutions.

This study addresses the following questions:

- What are the attitudes, thoughts, and feelings toward death in Swedish and Mayan cultures?
- How are they similar and different?
- Can either of these cultural worldviews assist the other in handling death?

### **Method**

#### **The Phenomenological Approach**

Understanding the phenomenon of death means comprehending how people perceive it, and making sense of the meaning people ascribe to it. Qualitative research centers on the quality of experience and how individuals make sense of the world rather than causal relations (Pietkiwicz & Smith, 2014). It has the advantage of being able to communicate the logic and meaning making of behavior in cultural inquiries (Hellman, 2017). To research death from a qualitative and phenomenological perspective can give some insight as to how each culture views and defines death. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), phenomenology seeks to understand social phenomena from the individual's perspective, where the important reality is that which people recognize it to be. To study the phenomenon of death requires one to understand how people recognize and perceive death; for this reason, the present study uses a phenomenological approach.

**Participants**

A total of twenty participants between the ages of 26 to 56 were recruited for this study. Ten participants from each culture were selected. Participants included native Mayan from Guatemala and native Swedes.

**Procedure**

The Mayan participants were recruited from different parts of Guatemala. In order to recruit participants in Guatemala, I travelled to different Mayan villages, presenting myself to local authorities, and asking for assistance at libraries, schools, markets, parks, public events, and other public establishments such as art galleries, museums, etc. The ten Mayan participants (5 men and 5 women, mean age 38.8) were interviewed in Spanish. The ten native Swedish participants (6 men and 4 women, mean age 38) were interviewed in English, and were recruited via social media, email, references, public events, and establishments like coffee houses. All participants were interviewed in a place of their choosing and were given the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research before and after the interview. All participants were compensated for their contribution; Mayan participants were paid 40 Quetzales (45 SEK) and Swedish participants received a gift card for the same amount at a local coffee shop. Differences in compensation are for reasons of cultural sensitivity since what is perceived as normal compensation for one culture can be perceived by the other as offensive, undesirable, etc. My own cultural background includes being a Guatemalan and a psychologist with prior experience working with Mayan and native communities in other countries.

**Interview**

Participants took part in a semi-structured interview (appendix A). The interview consisted of 10 base questions related to death. Further questions were asked during the interview in order to obtain deeper insight into to the participants understanding of the

subject. Participants were told in advance that the interview could take up to 60 minutes of their time, and that if they were uncomfortable with any question they had no obligation to answer or continue.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Participants were given a consent form (appendix B), in English for the Swedish population and Spanish for the Mayan population (appendix C). Before starting the interview participants read the consent form, and an oral explanation was given to further explain the research. All prior doubts were solved before beginning the interview, and a second opportunity for questions was given after the interview had finished. In case of any questions or doubts that arose later, participants could also write via email to the researcher or supervisor. All participants were informed of their rights to privacy and anonymity, as well as their right to stop the interview at any time if they felt like it, without the need to give any explanation or justification. No sensitive data were collected, and a number was assigned to each participant in order to protect his or her identity. All participants were informed, both orally and in the consent form, that the interviews would be recorded, and that after the transcription process was completed the audio files would be deleted. All participants received a copy of the consent form.

### **Analysis of the Data**

The interviews were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This approach is concerned with the detailed inspection of human understanding and experience of specific phenomena, which, in this study, is death. The transcripts of the interviews were evaluated case by case in a systematic and qualitative manner. After examining each case and detecting the most relevant themes and patterns for each participant, I examined the shared themes among the individuals of each culture. As a result, a set of themes appeared for each culture and with both sets of shared themes I was able to do a

detailed exploration to examine different relations between themes and observe differences between cases and cultures. The two sets of common themes from both cultures explained in general terms how the participants perceived death. Later, the results were converted into a narrative in which the interpretation of the researcher is presented and supported with verbatim extracts from the accounts of the participants (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA offers open and flexible guidelines that can be adapted to the objectives of the research (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), and this was especially useful in studying two cultures that present different worldviews.

### **Results**

I will start by presenting the Mayan results. The super-ordinate themes and their sub-themes are explored using examples from the interviews, in order to provide deeper understanding. The following four super-ordinate themes arose from emergent themes that were found through out the interviews carried out with Mayan participants:

- **The Mayan Elder**
- **Religious Syncretism and Mysticism**
- **Death as a Community Celebration and Phenomenon**
- **Death, Part of The Natural Process of Life**

**Table 1***Exemplification of super-ordinated themes by emergent themes found in interviews*

| <b>Super-ordinate theme</b>                        | <b>Emergent themes</b>                                      | <b>Percentage of interviews<br/>in which the theme<br/>emerged</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mayan Elder                                        | <i>Wisdom and knowledge<br/>holders</i>                     | 90%                                                                |
|                                                    | <i>Authority in the<br/>community</i>                       | 70%                                                                |
|                                                    | <i>Oral tradition</i>                                       | 100%                                                               |
| Religious Syncretism & Mysticism                   | <i>Connection with the dead<br/>and spiritual practices</i> | 90%                                                                |
|                                                    | <i>Experience of Mayan life</i>                             | 80%                                                                |
| Death as a Community Celebration<br>and Phenomenon | <i>Celebration of life and<br/>death</i>                    | 60%                                                                |
|                                                    | <i>Death, a community<br/>tradition</i>                     | 70%                                                                |
| Death, Part of the Natural Process<br>of Life      | <i>The divine law</i>                                       | 60%                                                                |
|                                                    | <i>A part of life, never the<br/>end</i>                    | 90%                                                                |

**The Mayan Elder**

The Mayan Elder<sup>1</sup>, as a super-ordinate theme appeared in all the interviews. This theme demonstrates the great importance and status that both elder women and men have in their communities and in Mayan culture. The theme shows that the Elders play several roles in society, such as being keepers of knowledge and historical records, and conduits of wisdom

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<sup>1</sup> In the interviews Mayan participants used the word "abuelos" to refer to older people, which translates to "grandparents". I used the word "Elders" in order for the reader not to be confused when the participant is referring to their biological grandparents and when it is referring to older people.

and cultural knowledge through oral tradition. They are seen as authority figures, and help organize traditions that may be related to the subject of death.

Here, we have a council (Mayan Elders' council) that says if you take care of your parents, when you are old they will also take care of you, and people will be with you. But, if you leave them alone to die, if they die alone with nothing, then you will die the same way, and it is like that. So, people are afraid, or no, not afraid of that but it is more like a feeling. My father said to me, "oh, I have pain in my head and I am short on cash" so I do not say "oh, he can fix it by himself." I have to see what I can do, go borrow money or what can I do, but that old man I do need to take to the doctor so he feels he is protected, he is an authority, respect. (Laughs) I am sorry if it is a long answer but it has a lot to do with respect, the elders, and with death. (Participant # 3)

The presence of a Council of Elders is an example of the level of authority and respect that elders have in Mayan society. The participant also alluded to a reciprocity principle according to which his treatment of his elders would determine how he is treated later in life. The "feeling" he has of protecting and taking care of his father indicates that he is living according to the wisdom that is shared by the Elders of his community and showing companionship with his father. Another example of this line of thought is presented by another participant, who explains that elders are not respected because of their education, money or other things, but for their wisdom.

Because the Elders or ancestors maybe they do not have any formal education, or cannot even write or read, but with the years of life that they have, they have obtained a lot of experience with regard to this (death). Here in the community, even if you are a professional with university education, or with any type of education you might have, we always look to our Elders for wisdom because they have so much experience in our life as a culture, they have lived through a lot, they have seen a lot so they will help you with an idea and say "look at this that happened, X day this happened or once upon a time this occurred..." They tell the stories. So it is for that reason, for example when someone has a problem you go to the Elders and they will give the idea "This happened, this occurred, don't worry this has a solution" that is what they do, they help you, they open your mind with their advice. (Participant 9)

Both extracts demonstrate the respect that the Mayan participants have for their Elders and the role they play in their society. For participant 9, it is not the level of education that is important and she makes this clear when she states that in some cases the Elder might not

know how to read and write. Instead, it is the wisdom that has been obtained over the course of life that gives the Elder his or her status in the community. Participant 9 demonstrates the importance of the oral tradition when she mentions that the words of the Elders can open a person's mind. The figure of the Elders is associated with life experience and wisdom, they are able to keep historical accounts of what has happened in society and in the culture and transmit them to younger generations through oral traditions. This makes the Mayan Elder an essential part of any existential question or doubt a person in the society might have. The narratives of both participants capture all the subthemes of this superordinate theme.

The Mayan Elder appears as a very strong and fundamental figure throughout all the interviews and as such it forms a vital part of any discussion of death or any other subjects related to Mayan life. The Elder in Mayan society is anything but a passive figure, serving an active function with regard to traditions within the community.

Researcher: What role do the Elders play in all of this?

Participant: Well, for me the fundamental function that the Elders have is that when someone dies they are the first to arrive to the family that is grieving. It is them the ones that start the fire, prepare the coffee, prepare the food it's basically them the ones in charge that have volunteered without anyone calling or asking them. They just arrive and it's them the ones that help the visitors, because one of the things that is found here in San Juan is that when someone dies most people will go to visit the grieving family and give beans, sugar, or other groceries, but they always have to give something in order to sympathize with the family so it is them the ones that receive all of those things that are for the grieving family. Another thing that they do is that they are the ones that tell what needs to be done, how does the dead person need to be dressed and how the vigil will be done, that is one of the functions of the elders. Basically here in San Juan all Elders are respected and when an Elder arrives they always speak to the eldest son if he is still alive. If it is a grown woman that died or the mother or father, they always speak to the eldest son, so the eldest son is the one with a lot of communication with the Elders in regards to the burial. (Participant #6)

This narrative demonstrates the active role of the Elders in the community; they have the task of supporting the grieving family taking the initiative to prepare food and other necessary things that comprise the funerary traditions. The role is active, and changes from

one of support to one of guidance with regard to how the deceased person should be dressed and how the funerary rites should be held. As is clearly demonstrated by the previous extracts, one must consider the role of the Elders in society if one is to understand Mayan worldview, culture, and traditions.

### **Religious Syncretism and Mysticism**

From the interviews, it is evident that no single religion or spiritual perspective has influenced Mayan society but rather that many of its traditions and spiritual beliefs are a product of religious syncretism and mysticism. Mayan mysticism is complex since it involves the belief that everything has a life force. Spiritual practices such as talking to the dead, asking them for guidance, legends, and tales help explain different cultural phenomena, and give meaning to life. This religious syncretism comes from Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and ancestral spirituality, which is referred to within the culture as the Mayan Cosmovision. Mysticism is incorporated into religious and spiritual beliefs and forms an important part of the Mayan worldview. It not only helps to explain life events, but it forms an important rational perspective and view of the world. It could be said that without taking mysticism into account the Mayan worldview cannot be understood, because it is a pillar of the beliefs and culture that constitute it. All participants described traditions, stories or beliefs that are Catholic, Evangelical, or derived from the Mayan Cosmovision. The participants' accounts showed how these beliefs and traditions practiced today have been combined with each other, and form a worldview that incorporates a spiritual realm full of mysticism, and religious syncretism that includes a connection to the dead via their dreams.

Researcher: When you say invocation, does that mean there is also communication?

Participant: Of course that is why I am telling you that the dead are here. They are alive they haven't left forever because they are here in our Mayan Cosmovision and they always join us when we invoke and they basically are our protectors in this sense. When we invoke them they are with us in order to achieve things. It is something very

deep but when we really are thinking about them they manifest in different ways and that is how we see they are with us. Because here in the population when there is a dead person everything becomes holy, everything is holy and nobody goes around doing weird things because the soul might be there, we have to say goodbye and let him pass to the next life. So everything is a ceremony from the vigil to the burial everything is respect. After the 9 days all the family gets together during those days. (Participant # 6)

This response provides a good example of how beliefs from different traditions have come together to form modern customs. The belief, rooted in Mayan Cosmovision, that the dead are able to manifest themselves and form a part of the living, combined with the Catholic tradition of nine days of prayer, is a clear example of how the two traditions have been combined. As can be seen, mysticism is incorporated into the participant's tale in such a way that it explains both behavior and beliefs present in the community. The following excerpt explains how the experience of living in a Mayan village or community is a main factor in the formation of a person's view of death.

Researcher: Is there a person that has had any influence on your view of death?

Participant: No, not when it comes to a person. It is really what I told you about the experience and that it is understood within the culture. That part is really a key part because it is the road to speaking about death.

Researcher: Can you please explain more about that?

Participant: Yeah, I live here and starting from that, it has to do with what I live, what I see and what I feel from here. I am not talking anything strange or making stuff up. So it is like that, I guess other cultures have their own way of looking at it. I am talking about looking at it from our culture, maybe if we compare to other cultures it is a different version but there is always something in common in what we speak of or maybe sometimes there is nothing in common because it does happen. (Participant # 3)

The participant is very clear in describing the importance that living in a Mayan community has to his way of thinking about death. It is interesting that the participant states that the subject is understood within the culture. The view of death appears to be embedded

within life in the community. Life in a Mayan community involves being surrounded by spiritual and mystical beliefs and phenomena that are full of life.

My parents when something sounds in the house, they start to speak. Thank you for being here, we are here, this is your house and come whenever you want. It's not that the house is possessed, no, no, it is really another way of looking and understanding life, that is how manifestations occur in our culture. (Participant # 8)

This extract deals with both the spiritual realm and how life in a Mayan village can have an influence on a person's perception of the subject of death. The participant describes how a sound is interpreted as a manifestation of a loved one who has passed away and is visiting them. This interpretation is something that is embedded within the participant's cultural worldview. Manifestations such as this can also occur in dreams.

So it is all how I am living in this moment that I am earning my next life and many people say and comment when someone has died, that there is a contact with the person that died but not all people have that contact. You can even dream of that person and they are ok and telling you not to worry because they are in that place and doing their work. There has been plenty of dreams about that, generally people dream that the person is well dressed and that it is in charge of other people in another life. That is why I am telling you that they keep working but in another way.

Researcher: So to dream about them is to see them in another dimension?

Participant: Of course, yes. (Participant # 1)

The important thing in this narrative is the meaning that is given to the experience of dreaming about the dead; it is important not only because it reveals a connection to those that have passed away, but also because it confirms the existence of an afterlife. Dreaming holds an important position in the Mayan worldview and in Mayan society.

Researcher: How does that have an influence in your life?

Participant: It will depend on the dream; this is very complex. The Elders say it isn't because you dreamt something that that will occur. There are negative dreams and positive ones. When the Elders dream something usually they ask which day of the calendar it is. So they know the energy of that day is important and they think oh, ok,

this might happen. So the influences come from what the dream was. You have to give it an interpretation and take the right calculations according to the Mayan calendar and with that result you get the experience of that day. So here we speak of negative, positive, whatever. So the experience with the calendar, Kemek (death), requires calculation and the result is the calculation of all those things. Because many times what we dream does happen in life.

Researcher: So dreams are an important part within the culture and Mayan vision?

Participant: It is an important part and I have and will continue to associate it with the connection to the Kemek (death).

Researcher: So what I understand is that through dreams a person is able to have communication with those who have died, is that correct?

Participant: communication... mmm yeah we could say communication, we could call it like that, but it is more like a message you receive. So it depends on what and how they say things, they might say how you are living or how your experience in life will be tomorrow or another day. That is the detail. (Participant # 7)

A more complex view on dreams and their connection to the dead is alluded to here. It is a means of communication but dreams also are taken as messages and contact from the after life. The participant also adds the element of interpreting the dream and explains that for such an interpretation to occur the Mayan calendar needs to be used and an elder needs to be consulted. Dreams hold meaning for Mayan culture, in them there is a connection with the people who have died, those who have passed away also appear to carry a purpose in the after life and communicate via dreams to the living.

It can be seen through the extracts that Mayan faith, traditions, spiritual practices and worldview have the influence of the Cosmovision together with other religions, and as a result they have merged creating a unique perspective of their culture. Religious Syncretism manifests itself through the Mayan traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices. As it can be observed throughout the participants' narratives, their beliefs and experiences are filled with a mysticism that gives them a clear explanation of life events and it even tells them what to do and how to behave when death makes itself present. Life in a Mayan community is full of

mysticism and religious syncretism, and the participants explain that this is a huge influence on their view of life and death.

### **Death as a Community Celebration and Phenomena**

Several participants described how death elicits a celebration within the community.

Death from a Mayan perspective, is something that needs to be celebrated; it is a phenomenon that involves plenty of people, food and music. It is also treated with respect and includes a system that alerts the community that someone has passed away.

A bell started to sound in the background to which the participant reacted and heard it very carefully).

Participant: Oh. wait; there is also another tradition I just remembered because of the bell. When someone dies here they ring the bell, so people know that someone has died. There are 2 types of bell sounds; 1) it sounds ding, dang, ding, dang and in the last bell if its DOOONG if it's a very strong sound it means that an adult died. But, if in the last bell it is a softer sound like DIIING that means a child died. So everyone comes to the Catholic Church and asks who died and then the ones in charge of ringing the bell, well they know who died and to which family the person belonged. So the entire population goes to that house and they take maize, eggs, sugar, they take whatever they want but they need to take it to the house of the person that just died. Why do they take these things? Everything that is gathered is used to feed the same people that will go visit the family. Coffee is given to the people; they give breakfast, lunch, and even dinner to the people that go there. Those that go to keep vigil, it is kind like you eat the same things you went to leave. So the bell rings if someone has died but also at 12 middays the bell also rings, that needs to happen eeeeeveryday the entire year, that is so people know that its midday. This is at 12 middays, you will hear it again at 5pm, and this is to call the faithful to come to mass.

Researcher: What happens if a person that is not Catholic dies?

Participant: They can also ring the bell, if the family or someone comes to give news here at the Catholic Church then if they want they of course will ring the bells.

Researcher: So then it doesn't matter which religion you are; the bells can ring for anyone?

Participant: Yes, it does not matter which religion they are. That's a different tradition, each person has their own ways and traditions. Each religion has its own traditions, but this is a tradition of the entire village (Participant 4)

Here it is evident that Mayan communities have established a system to alert the population that a death has occurred. It is noteworthy that regardless a person's religion this is

always done by the Catholic Church. In this excerpt, it can again be perceived how different religious beliefs and traditions can be found to coexist in Mayan society. The alert system is intriguing because it sets in motion a series of traditions surrounding death; for example, the community accompanies the family during the funerary rites, food and music is offered to the dead, etc.

Participant: Death is happiness; why do I tell you happiness? Because here the Elders when you die, they always say goodbye in a sort of party. Here the Elders when someone dies they say goodbye and they let you enter the next stage through music, through fireworks, people ask sometimes why do you do all those things? And it's because they understand that you have fulfilled your time in earth in a dignified way and now they are saying farewell and the party is that they are letting you enter the next stage of life, which is death. So it has to be happiness, just like you were received when you came so should it be when you leave, that is what my grandfather says. When a child is born, boom there is a party. We need to go buy clothes, cakes, stews need to be cooked, and there are so many things. Party equals happiness so must it be when you die, it must be happiness because you fulfilled your mission, so you need to be given your farewell through that happiness. It is not only when you come that there is happiness and the goodbye, sadness, no it needs to be the same my grandfather used to say. That tells us that if I think about my death, I have told in my home that when I die I want a party at the house, a ceremony, marimba (traditional music instrument). (Participant # 7)

The above explanation reveals that death is perceived in terms of the community and celebration. If a person is celebrated at birth, why would he or she not be celebrated at death? What is celebrated is the life and purpose of the individual; not that life has ended, but on the contrary, that life will continue to be lived on another stage. To enter to death is to enter the following stage of existence, and the celebration is both a farewell and a recognition that a person has fulfilled the purpose of his or her life. Further explanations elaborate on these ideas, mentioning beliefs surrounding specific dates.

Researcher: How about regarding traditions?

Participant: Oh traditions, well we know, well let's say that a family member died then we know that, that day we need to go into our community. We cook, we cook with wood, we need to do those tasks, we need to have food when the wake of our loved one is taking place. We need to take something, it is not just as they say about go to see people's faces and giving our condolences, no, we need to give our feelings,

candles, coffee, so that we can all share and also do the correct prayers, the ones regarding the 9<sup>th</sup>, those 9 days. The 40 days also, but in Maya culture we also need to have a ceremony, in Christian-Catholic culture we do also a mass at 9 and 40 days, were the loved one has left. After we have a 9<sup>th</sup> again after 1 year and we never can lose the practice and tradition of on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November we will wait for our loved ones in their home. How will I wait for them? Well, at midday I will already have a sacred shrine with the food they liked eating, my loved ones. I have their food ready, I also put some incense for them at midday that is the time our ancestors told us they would arrive. So we receive them with prayers, we cleanse the house, we also put marimba because it is ours, so we receive them with marimba and at 6pm we again do a prayer. The next day we give them our farewell and then we can go and visit them at their grave. Why? Because that is where their remains are, because spiritually they came to our home.” (Participant # 10)

This excerpt combines a series of elements that are worthy of examination. First, the community is always considered and involved in the process of death. This is demonstrated by the fact that the participant always speaks in terms of “we.” The act of giving food and different items for the celebration is an act of sharing within the community. It is done to get together and bid farewell not only to the family member but to a member of the community. This indicates that loss is not only felt on a family level, but on a community level as well. The participant also describes how food, music, and incense are offered to the dead in order to welcome them into what was once their home. The sense of community is frequently alluded to in the participants’ narratives, and is an important part of death within the culture. The act of offering to the dead is a common tradition described in the interviews.

We can give them flowers, something that has an aroma. Also on the day of the dead, you go to the cemetery and to the tomb people take a corn or a güisquil (vegetable) it is what they ate when they were alive. People might ask, why do you take that? Its not like they will eat it, and of course not, they won't eat it. But they will sense the aroma. You always have to take a corn; you have to take a corn because you can take it from the land. They wont eat it, but they will feel the smell. So in the dreams they come back, so if you get them accustomed to that and suddenly you forget, they come back in the dreams to complain, they say “hey what’s up? Why have you forgotten us so quickly?” or if you have been good, they come back to thank you and say “thank you, today I ate good, I was hungry but with what you brought I was full” so it is an abstract part but for us those things exist, exists, that we always need to take incense, flowers, or candles. (Participant #3)

This participant not only explains some of the reasoning behind the offerings, but also clarifies that they are made with regard to one's connection to the dead via dreams. The offerings are made in part to please the dead, but also to make them feel remembered and honored. It is clear that the food itself will not be consumed, but that the aroma is used to establish a connection with the deceased. To serve what they used to eat in life, the aromas of their traditional foods, music and incense demonstrates that there is always a sense of belonging and community that is celebrated in life and with regard to death. The offerings show one's respect for the memory of one's loved one and appreciation for the connection that he or she continues to have with the dead.

To summarize, Mayan people celebrate death because they feel that the life of a person needs to be celebrated. They believe that both the start of life and the parting from it are similar in the way that when a person is born it enters the community and when it parts it still serves and belongs to the community of both the living and dead, and as such they both need their proper celebration. This celebration is not done privately, but in a very open sphere in which the community is involved. The dead are offered the unique aspects of their culture (food, music, aromas, etc.), in order for them to know they are remembered. This theme indicates that when a person is born in a Mayan community he or she is born with a sense of belonging to that community. When he or she passes away, it is the community that bids that person farewell, acknowledging his or her exit from the realm of life, but not from the community.

### **Death, Part of The Natural Process of Life**

The theme of death as a part of life and as a natural law emerged on several occasions throughout the interview process. Death, in this context, is seen as something that is not separate from life, but is a part of what life is. Death is not only understood to be something normal, but is also seen as a law that all humans must obey.

There is a divine law that says that the moment has come and that is it. Of course we would like to decide that moment when we want to leave, for example if we reproduce, we fall in love, we meet the girlfriend, we get married and we would like that our children grow up, we buy them their cars and we leave them with their homes but we can never avoid it. It is the way it has been and will always be. (Participant # 2)

The participant describes how death is a mandatory experience in life, something that has always been and will continue to be. In the narrative, the participant tells of a process of growth in human life, from meeting a person, to having children and taking care of them, but that process also means that death comes to all. Death can also be seen to appear in the Mayan calendar.

Death for us is, all human beings are born, grow, reproduce, and die. For me death in our culture that our grandparents taught us, death is something that everyone... that is why in the Cholq'ij (Mayan calendar) it appears the Mayan numbers tell us that from 1 to 13 that all people come with their own number so one person that wants to go far away but in the Mayan calendar there are 20 Nawales and one of them is Keme'. Keme' is the one that represents death; death comes to all human beings that is the law. (Participant # 5)

Here again there is a reference to the process humans have to follow in life. Death, for the participant, is part of the progression of life, something that human beings need to go through, a natural law that applies to all people. The participant also says that within the Mayan Calendar there is a representation of death, called "Kemek".

Death is seen by the Mayan participants as a part of life, but not the end. Every participant mentioned an afterlife; there was no clear consensus as to what happens after death, but there was an undeniable belief that life continues.

Researcher: Is death or Keme' the end?

Participant: For me personally the Keme' is not the end. It is not the end, as I told you, the Kamnaq, Kamik is a stage where a person has another life in terms of Keme', here we are talking energy, spirituality but it is another stage where we need to do other things. But for me Kamnaq, Kamik is not the final stage.

Researcher: Could I say that death is a form of transition for you?

Participant: mmmm (short pause) We could say it but I am not sure if that is the correct term, if its a transition or not but I don't know, if we can call it that because we need to remember that human beings and I don't know if I am explaining this right but our life is in stages. So Kame' is a part of our stages, it is part of our lives, we all have to go through it, so we do need to go to that dimension so it is more a stage of life. It is not the end, it is another stage where we have to go work and to do things, it is a place where we have another mission, and have another work or concept when you are there. (Participant # 7)

The participant explains the continuity of the spiritual part of a person after death.

What is interesting about this statement is that death is seen not as a transition from life to the afterlife but as a stage of life. Death, in this view, is far from representing the end of life.

Instead it is considered a stage of what the whole of life is. This presents an interesting perspective, that within death there is also purpose.

Researcher: What do you think will happen to you after you die?

Participant: I think that people that are guides (spiritual guides), I think that in their ceremonies they will ask so that I can help them clean their path. Why? Because I as a Q'eqchi' Mayan woman, every town has its history, for example we in Coban before the Spanish people invaded we had our king so to say. He ruled at that time, he was Aj pop Matalbatz, when we do a ceremony we ask Aj pop for help and strength because as a culture, we the Q'eqchi' have been strong. So that manifests itself as us asking the leaders that are not here for strength, we do that on the day we do our ceremony. So we say that physically we are not here, but spiritually we are always, so there is no forgetting.

Researcher: So after your passing, your death, you will continue with your labor?

Participant: Yes, I will continue with my labor. If we speak also about the Christian-Catholic culture, in its history they speak about their saints. Those saints that gave their lives so that Christianity would not die, that is a fundamental base for them and also it's the same for us in Mayan culture. It is not fanaticism but it is to believe that if in Western culture it is said from a Catholic perspective that there will be a resurrection then we as Mayan culture we say that we don't die, but that we are there. (Participant # 10)

Here, what is of interest to observe is the purpose that will be followed in death and the desire to serve those that ask for her help. She states clearly that, within their traditions, Mayan people ask for strength from those who have already gone, and that when her time

comes, she will contribute by helping her people in the same way. In both of the previous cases, participants explained that death is not the end of life, and that there is a purpose in death. From the Mayan perspective, a person still serves their culture in death and helps those who ask for it. This is similar to the act of praying in the Catholic tradition.

Researcher: What do you think will happen to you after you die?

Participant: I can only say probably because no one has come back from death I guess that I will form part of the ones that have left us and when people do an invocation from our elders I will continue the path, it does not matter if it is long or short but I will be there.

Researcher: What do you mean by invocation?

Participant: Well in our Mayan Cosmvision we don't call it a prayer but we call it invocation, so the Ajau or the all mighty God or the creator, so we invoke the name of him. It is like saying that you are praying for a person or praying because you have started a work. (Participant # 6)

This shows both the continuity of existence and purpose of death. There is a sense of belonging to and of serving the community, which continues after death. This participant shows uncertainty as to what occurs after death, but believes that she will rejoin those that have gone before her. It is clear, therefore, that life continues after death according to a Mayan perspective presented here. Also, having communication with those that have departed is something that is culturally acceptable.

Researcher: So death is not the end?

Participant: IT IS NOT THE END! Maybe death is the end in a physical way because the person is no longer here physically, but spiritually YES. In soul and spirit yes, they listen to us. It's just that we cannot see them and they cannot speak to us. That disappears, but through a ceremony we speak and they communicate, they come back and speak to us through a dream and that is clear, that exists. (Participant # 3)

Here, the participant explains that death puts an end to the biological part of our existence, but that the spiritual part carries on and is able to communicate with those still living. This communication can take place via dreams, offering a proof for those within the culture that an afterlife exists.

In summary, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the theme of death in Mayan society. From a Mayan perspective, death is a natural law, a stage of life that is obligatory for all living things; there is purpose in the afterlife, communication can occur with those that are still living, and through ceremonies and spiritual practices, people remember and can invoke those that have passed away in order to ask for protection and guidance.

## **Discussion**

### **The Mayan Elder**

The purpose of interviewing Mayan people was to understand what some of their attitudes and opinions are toward death. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the Mayan Elder plays an essential role in society. The importance of the elder in connection to the subject of death was a theme that appeared with pronounced frequency throughout the interviews. The significance of the elder was further demonstrated by the fact that all participants referred to them as grandparents, regardless of biological relation. To be a Mayan Elder signifies that a person is seen by society as wise, authoritative and worthy of respect. He or she is also a holder of knowledge about life, culture and history. With these characteristics attributed to the Mayan Elder, it is no surprise that a person would seek their counsel regarding the subject of death. This existential matter falls under their domain, and culturally they are involved in several aspects surrounding death, including the preparation for traditions concerning the funeral rites and celebrations. Knowledge and wisdom are passed down via oral traditions, which play a significant role in Mayan society.

Mayan knowledge is cultivated and nurtured through, discussion and guidance based on the life experience of the Mayan Elder (Garcia Ixmata, 2010), and living in a Mayan community involves taking advice from elders (Ekern, 2011). The importance of the Elder and oral tradition is also seen in other indigenous cultures. Finn, Herne, and Castille (2016) commented that traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is preserved in indigenous communities via their oral traditions, arts, storytelling, ceremonies, etc. These are some ways in which these communities codify and preserve knowledge. Stiegelbauer (1992) referred to Native American Elders as teachers that advise their fellow native people by assisting them in understanding their own heritage. Furthermore, their role draws on their life experience, which is put into their stories and teachings about the relationship of the individual to society and how these two support and reinforce each other.

Such findings help to demonstrate the importance of the theme of the Mayan Elder. Harman (2001) suggested that Mayan people strive for stability both in their community and family, and that elders in this sense are sources of leadership, respect, and wisdom. The figure of the Mayan Elder is very well founded with regard to its position in society and relation to the subject of death. According to the Mayan worldview, elders are cultural archives who maintain, preserve and nurture their traditions and ways of life, including those dealing with life and death. In order to comprehend the Mayan worldview, it is necessary to start by understanding that the elder is a fundamental piece of that worldview and that cultural knowledge and wisdom pass through their role in society and in many ways the elder can be considered the guardian that holds the key to the Mayan worldview.

### **Religious Syncretism and Mysticism**

Participants demonstrated that within present-day Mayan society, beliefs from traditional Mayan Cosmvision and Christianity can be found to, in many cases, have merged through a religious syncretism. Maurer (1993) called the product of this religious syncretism

“Maya Catholicism” when he presented his analysis of the beliefs of Tzeltal Mayans of Mexico, arguing that these two religions had synthesised to form something new. According to Scotchmer (1993), Mayan people in Guatemala have several influences or spiritual options, including traditional Mayan religion, Christianity, and Protestantism.

This second theme demonstrates that many of the beliefs and traditions from Christianity and Mayan Cosmvision are found in present-day Mayan society. Participants spoke about several customs, traditions, and beliefs that they had or that could be found in their communities. One of the most important beliefs mentioned was that of the connection and communication with the dead or ancestors. Culturally, the connection with the dead is expressed in several ways. One may talk to them, make offerings to them such as water, food or incense, and invoke them in ceremonies and in dreams. For Suazo (2010), the most direct communication with the dead takes place through signs that occur at work or home, in community life, and above all through dreams.

In dreams, the Maya receive knowledge and information from their ancestors, usually interpreted by an elder or an expert on the subject. It is also a common practice among Mayan people to share their dreams. This is done so that people can transmit knowledge to each other, and if another person is able to relate to the dream or has heard a similar tale, this also validates the experience and belief (Permanto, 2015; Tedlock, 1992).

Several participants commented that in dreams their elders and ancestors could either thank them for offering them food, visiting their graves, etc., or reprimand them for forgetting about them. They could also transmit other types of valuable information, warning them about something or advising them on a decision that needs to be made. It can be deduced that dreams are an essential part of the connection with the dead. Both dreaming and dream interpretation are important parts of the Mayan worldview, and this is nowhere made clearer than when dealing with the subject of death (Garrard-Burnett, 2015).

The merger of religions and beliefs can be seen in funerary rites, starting with the fact that it is the Catholic Church that announces the death of a person, regardless of that person's religion. The traditions that follow, such as the prayers after nine and forty days also belong to Catholic tradition and are followed by many of the participants. After the forty day celebrations, the spirit of the dead person is considered an ancestor, and if everything was done under normal conditions, the communication with that ancestor is consolidated. Another example of the merging of religion can be seen in the celebration of All Saint's day. According to several participants, this is a day in which people go to the cemetery and decorate the tomb of their ancestor, take food, alcohol, music, and celebrate. This demonstrates that Mayan culture has given its own interpretation to the Catholic tradition (Suazo, 2010).

Permanto (2015) gives another example of this merger with Mayan Q'eqchi' people from Chisec in Guatemala. He observed that Mayans believed in a being called "Tzuultaq'a," which Catholics, instead of not believing in it, had incorporated into their religion through the belief that God created everything and thus, also created the Tzuultaq'a. Interestingly enough, those who claimed to be Evangelical either rejected the belief because it was not permitted or believed in it but did not pray to it.

With regard to this theme, participants also remarked on the importance of living in a Mayan village, this by itself being an important factor for their view on death. Living in a Mayan village means that participants are surrounded by these beliefs and cultural practices. Many of these traditions and practices take place in public and require the participation of the community. Permanto (2015) mentioned that the elders with whom he worked in Chisec are part of a world that shares with a vast number of non-human beings, referring to the Tzuultaq'a and other beliefs. Garcia Ixmata (2010) states that traditional concepts in Mayan culture are spread during mealtime, at work or in ceremonies, as well as in the course of daily

life, within the family and the community. This exemplifies how living in a Mayan village means that a person lives in a place that is full of myths, legends, stories, mysticism, and many spiritual practices that will have an impact on its inhabitants because these characteristics of a Mayan village are put in practice both privately and publicly.

### **Death as Community Celebration and Phenomenon**

This third theme describes how death in a Mayan context is not a phenomenon that only affects or involves the individual and his or her close relatives, but the community as a whole. The experience of death in a Mayan village carries the celebration of life and death. Participants explained how the Catholic Church rings a bell in order to inform the community that a death has occurred. When the bell is rung everyone gives contributions and donations to the family, later the people from the community that gave a contribution will attend and pay respect to both the family and the deceased. Participants made it very clear that within a Mayan context people simply don't die alone and above all, death is and needs to be celebrated, big preparations are made when a death occurs, certain music is played, traditional foods are prepared, candles are lit, the house is decorated, a glass of water is put in the room of the deceased person in case the spirit is thirsty, etc. Afterwards, when the traditions and prayers have finished, the dead person is carried in the casket from its house to the cemetery where all the guests follow in a procession that can be seen publicly in the community.

The death of a person is felt by the community and it is the community that accompanies the family during the process of death and grief. From all the traditions and celebrations involved in the process, death can be considered an active phenomenon within a Mayan context. The participants explained that if something is missing, such as money to buy a casket, a place to bury the person, food, etc., then the community will act and help obtain these things. Participants even mentioned that in Mayan villages there is usually no funeral home or company that provides these services. Instead it is the community that takes care of

everything, and the idea of having a funeral home in the community is something that is not contemplated or desired.

Suazo (2010) explains that the role of the community in the grieving process is to support the family by helping with expenses and providing things they might need. This way of acting and thinking is explained by a fundamental concept found in Mayan culture, reciprocity. This concept demonstrates that for Mayans, there is no such thing as a fully self-sufficient being. It is simply not possible to say that a person does not need another person. This concept of reciprocity, which can be found in the accounts of the participants when describing the involvement of the community when a death occurs, seems to be an essential part of their worldview and community life.

Garcia's (2014) work on the ceremonial language used for the reburial of exhumed Mayan war victims mentions the importance of the dead from a community perspective, stating that the deceased are active members of the community, and that the acts performed in the ceremony of exhumation are intended to reintegrate the deceased into the community. It is also mentioned that the dead are part of the ongoing history of the Maya, and that it is the relationship that the Maya have with death that motivates the displays of public memory in Mayan communities. On this last point, Suazo (2010) mentions that during ceremonies the dead ancestors are mentioned and called upon so that they can act as witnesses, bless things, and share the offerings with which they are presented. This example explains how the concept of reciprocity works in a Mayan community, and it also describes how the dead and the living need each other. Stiegelbauer (1992) shows that the reciprocity principle can also be found in Native American societies. It is described as a tie between the community and the individual; the community will support the individual, making him or her stronger, and as a result, the community will also become stronger.

This theme explores how the community takes care of its own people both in life and death. Ekern (2011) affirmed that living as a Mayan requires living a communal life. This means that a person that belongs to the community, belongs to it in life and in death. Life and death are both celebrated because a person doesn't cease to be part of the community just because they died, they pass to another dimension, stage or form of living in which they are remembered, invoked and in which they can also help their loved ones and the community even after death. As a participant mentioned, when a person comes to life there is a celebration, so there must also be a celebration when it goes to the next life.

### **Death, Part of The Natural Process of Life**

The fourth and final theme deals with death as a part of life that must be experienced, one that cannot be avoided or denied. Death is seen as a stage of what human existence is, a law of life to which all humans are subject. Several participants told of the stages of life: birth, growth, procreation, and death. Death is seen as one of the stages of our existence that needs to be experienced in order to complete the natural cycle of life. If life exists, so must death, duality is present in this theme. The duality principle was also observed by Renault (1992), when she stated that the Mayan worldview placed death within the life-death duality, seeing it as something more palliative in the sense that it is a part of natural life. She described Mayan attitudes toward life as more natural in the sense that the need of feeling control was less intense if compared to Western culture and that life itself took a more holistic perspective.

Death is not perceived as an end, death is seen as a stage when there are things that needs to be done, a purpose that needs to be fulfilled, and in death one can help others. Death does not end the connection to their loved ones or community, life continues in death. This was also observed by Garrard-Burnett (2015), who mentioned that for Mayan people, the dead do not cease to exist, but live in a realm in which they are able to maintain interest in

their loved ones. It is safe to conclude that the sense of community, and companionship remains after death and, as stated previously, to dream about those who have passed away is seen as a confirmation of the existence of life after death.

The Mayan afterlife is a dimension that is alive and full of human presence. Death opens this next dimension, which is a place that has certain characteristics of life. The essence of the individual is not lost in death, because in death a person continues his or her road (Suazo, 2010). In conclusion, death is not an aggressive or abrupt end to existence; rather, to die is to go beyond, to experience different things and fulfil a different purpose, and to be in a position to assist others. Death is not wholly separate from life, but comes together with it to form a duality. This duality is expressed in the traditions and beliefs that Mayan people have with regard to death and the afterlife.

### **Conclusion**

To explore worldviews is not a task to be taken lightly. An attempt to understand the Mayan perspective of death makes that clear. To comprehend this perspective is to enter a world where one can be certain of an afterlife, and where talking and communicating with the dead is not only a possibility but an experienced reality. Dreams, myths, legends, and stories told by the community and its elders attest to that fact. Elders play an essential and vital social role because of their life experience, and seeking their advice is to seek wisdom and knowledge about the culture and its history. To live in a community also means to die within it. To be born is to be celebrated because a new person has joined the community and to pass away is to be celebrated because one was once here and is now there, with the ones who have gone before.

Myths, legends, and stories play an important part in Mayan life. These oral traditions pass down wisdom and knowledge within the culture. Death in a Mayan community is handled in a very complex way, in both the private and the public sphere. To see a casket

being carried to the cemetery by the community is a normal aspect of Mayan life. They do not consider death private, but honor it publicly. Religious practices and beliefs have merged to form a unique and lively conception of spirituality, life, and death.

### **Swedish Culture**

The following results were obtained through interviews with the Swedish population. As with the Mayan participants, I explored the super-ordinate themes and their subthemes using examples from the interviews in order to provide better and deeper comprehension of their attitudes, opinions and feelings toward death.

These 4 super-ordinate themes were developed from emergent themes found throughout the interviews:

- **Death is The End**
- **Focus is on Life**
- **Death, Private and Uncomfortable**
- **Weak Traditions but Open to Change**

**Table 2**

*Exemplification of how the super-ordinated themes came to be through the series of emergent themes that were found in the interviews.*

| Super ordinate theme                  | Emergent themes               | Percentage of interviews<br>in which the theme<br>emerged |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Death is The End                      | <i>Rationalized</i>           | 80%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Indifference</i>           | 30%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Darkness/Nothingness</i>   | 50%                                                       |
| Focus is On Life                      | <i>Afterlife is uncertain</i> | 70%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Long life</i>              | 80%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Family and loved ones</i>  | 40%                                                       |
| Death, Private and Uncomfortable      | <i>Intimate subject</i>       | 30%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Uncomfortable</i>          | 30%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Silent matter</i>          | 60%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Individual</i>             | 40%                                                       |
| Weak Traditions but Open to<br>Change | <i>Weak traditions</i>        | 70%                                                       |
|                                       | <i>Open to new ways</i>       | 80%                                                       |

### **Death is The End**

In all the interviews, Swedish participants stated in one way or another that death is seen as the end of existence. In many cases, it was explained as “darkness,” “nothing else,” “turning the television off,” etc.

It’s just darkness, (laughs) because I don’t believe in any religion, I don’t believe that I am going to transform into something else, I don’t believe that. I just think it’s going to be dark, darkness. (Participant # 3)

It is evident that death is seen to bring an end to things. The participant explains that he has no religious belief, and so finds it more likely that after death there will be darkness.

The concept of darkness or nothingness was expressed in several cases, and on many

occasions seemed to be a product of participants' understanding of death. Death is seen in terms of "science" or "logic," and what is known to science or logic is what will happen to the physical body after death.

Yeah, for me at least, I mean it's death of the organic person and the decay of the body, and the energy that is the mind is dissipated, distributed to other places. Energy cannot be destroyed, it cannot be transformed, and the electricity in the brain of course it will continue as something else, but not as a reminiscence of myself. (Participant # 6)

This is the clearest example of death seen from a scientific and logical perspective.

Nonetheless, participants often showed subtler ways of seeing death.

Because to be honest I don't know, I have never felt that something else exists, but I can't say the opposite either, so by logic the most normal thing would be that the television is turned off. I hope that there is something else, but I don't put too much faith on it. (Participant # 8)

The participant's focus is on what he knows, on the facts of his life. He has never had an experience or knowledge of something that would make him think or believe otherwise, so he concludes that the most logical answer is that nothing will exist after death. Such a perspective seemed to create indifference in some participants, while other participants expressed sadness and stress.

I mean, if it is just that you stop existing, I can't comprehend the feeling or the concept of not existing. I only know existing, so that makes me freak out a little bit, and since I am not sure what happens, I feel very confused and sad. (Participant #1)

This extract shows how the participant struggles to grasp non-existence, and the problem that can occur when one rationalizes death to the point of seeing it as darkness or the end, since it implies that everything known to that person will come to an end.

In summary, the theme of death as an end to all existence seemed to have two consequences: in some participants, there was apparent discomfort, fear and stress, while others demonstrated a more indifferent attitude. The theme showed that death is in many cases rationalized and thought of in terms of what seemed logical to the participant.

**Focus is on Life**

While the previous theme dealt with Swedish participants' view of death, the theme of the focus on life demonstrates that, since there is a lot of uncertainty and confusion regarding what happens after death, participants seemed to focus more on what was certain, and to show a greater interest in what life had to offer, in living a long life. Participants also expressed having concerns for their loved ones after their passing.

It makes me very scared because I have the view that it is the absolute end and there is nothing after it; then you have to make sure that life is as much as it can be.

(Participant # 4)

The participant explains that how her perspective of death and the afterlife causes fear, but also that it makes her focus more on making the best out of life. If death means that all things come to an end, then according to the participant, it is best to invest all efforts to on life.

I believe that we have just one life; I have to do my very best in every situation towards myself and other people. Because I know there is an end that means that you don't get a second chance, and that means that I have to do the very best in my life.

(Participant # 3)

Similarly, this participant explains how his perspective causes him to focus his efforts and attention on living the life he has. There are no more opportunities than the one he has been given, so living becomes something important and precious. An element of pressure also exists in having to do the best to make things right during life. Participants made comments regarding social pressure and media advertising about the importance of a long life.

In Sweden we expect that we should be eighty years old, and a lot of things we do everyday like we plan for the future, and a lot of commercials tell you do like this and you will have a long life. It is like if long life is the meaning of life, and sometimes I feel like that in society, but long life doesn't mean that you are happy; but here in this

society it seems that it is the same, if you live a long life you will be happy and it is not the same. (Participant # 2)

The participant brings up an interesting point, that in the eyes of society there is a correlation between a long life and happiness. The participant thinks that giving focus to life and planning for the future is something that is taught and reinforced by society, something that she does not agree with. As mentioned before, participants also expressed that a lot of their concerns regarding death were focused on the ones they would leave behind.

For me, dying, it doesn't happen to me that much. I mean it's just a switch, it happens to everyone else. They have to live on with the fact that I am not there anymore, but that is an aspect I think is also important, because if you are feeling sad, and if you are feeling down and everything like that, if you have the approach to death that I have, it's just a switch you go away, if you don't have the aspect of affecting others then why wouldn't I just jump before a train when I am feeling sad, really sad? Well it's because it affects other people as well, I think that is an important part of dying. (Participant # 6)

This excerpt shows that death is not necessarily something that causes the participant to worry, since there is simply nothing after. There is however, a concern that is more related to the ones that will be dealing with his death. He explains that death not only affects the individual, but also has an influence on other people. That, for the participant, is a big part of death, how it affects those who grieve.

The purpose of this theme was to explain how there is plenty of uncertainty in regards to what will occur after death, how it can cause emotions of sadness or attitudes of indifference. What seemed to get the attention of people was not death, but to put focus on their lives. It seemed to be a common understanding among participants that life should be lived and if a person has a long life, then it is a well-lived life. People were either not

concerned about an afterlife, or were concerned but the idea caused them stress, and it made them conclude that it was more fruitful to think about fulfilling their objectives in life, since the present and life did demonstrate certainty.

### **Death, Private and Uncomfortable**

This third theme deals with death as a taboo subject in Sweden. All participants mentioned that the subject is generally not discussed. To speak about death appeared unwanted and unwelcome, and in cases where death could or must be talked about, it would only be in the most private and intimate of circumstances.

Participant: My perception is that you don't talk that much of death in Sweden, you don't do it. It's a thing that is there; you don't talk about it that much. Even if you will show up in funerals, that you do but you don't talk about it prior to it. It's no, that is my feeling that you don't talk about it much.

Researcher: Why do you think Swedish society doesn't talk about it much?

Participant: mmmhh what could it be? I think that there you have a little bit of this, that you are afraid of death because it's a... if you had a more Lutheran upbringing your deeds will show in death sort of, so if you don't behave like this, you will sort of... be sure if you don't behave you will end up wrong in the aftermath. It is that kind of thinking people are quite afraid of traditionally it has been afraid of what will happen. So that I think is one of the reasons of being afraid of what will happen. They will not talk about it, because to not talk about it is to not to worry about it somehow.

Researcher: So by not talking about it, do you think people can pretend it doesn't exist?

Participant: Maybe, at least they show other people that they don't worry about it (laughs). The self-suffering, maybe I worry about it but I will not show that I worry about it. (Participant # 7)

This extract contains several elements that are of interest. According to the participant, there is a form of "collective agreement" that no one should speak about death, or even show that it is a concern. One of the reasons the participant gives that the subject is not spoken of is the fear that there might be an afterlife. This idea was seen in several interviews. People understand that death happens and that it is unavoidable, which seems to cause a feeling of rejection towards it. Since death is private and hidden, there is social pressure to keep it that way.

Participant: As I said to you before my grandma is sick and we have been home, me and my sister we have been home a few times because she is in the hospital now and we were just home this weekend and my daughter was with me and my boyfriend, my sister and her family too. She is still alive by the way, so she is fine but we wanted to go there but then my mom and my sister said we should not bring our kids to see my grandma and first I was thinking but why shouldn't I? She is almost 7, so I'm sure she wants to say goodbye or she doesn't know she is saying goodbye but I'm sure she wants to see her again, it was very long since she saw her last. I didn't feel why she should not be able to come to the hospital even if she is laying down in a bed looking really sick, but she could still talk and she was singing and being funny as she has always been. But my mom and sister said "No, you shouldn't because they think too much about it and they start to realize its close to them and that people around them can die" and I was just thinking she is 7 and she understands that people around her can pass away and it's a part of life, but I was convinced to not bring her so I didn't, but for me it felt I would have been able to talk to her about how life is and how people die, its not always sad as I said in the beginning, for me it was sad.

I think you can talk in society about death and that it's ok to talk about being sad and missing someone and having discussions about what do you think its going to happen after and even hear kids about it is fine. But I don't know, it seems a lot of people don't want to talk about it and its something you don't discuss that much.

Researcher: Do you think it's easy to talk about it in Swedish society?

Participant: mmmhhh no, it's hard even when people have someone close to them that has passed away, you hardly even ask about it, you ask how they are and if they start crying you stop asking because you feel its almost as if you are not allowed to be sad together. You should make sure to have it happy all the time and everything is fine, everything is fine. So it is hard to talk about it, even for me even talking to someone who is sick and you know they are on their way to pass away it's hard to talk to them about feelings. (Participant # 9)

The story told by the participant is very descriptive, and demonstrates how the subject of death can be very uncomfortable in Swedish society. The narrative shows the conflict the participant had between what she considered a good opportunity to teach her child about life and death and the social pressure exerted by the family to prevent her from doing that. The participant's experience exemplifies how difficult the subject of death can be, even in a family setting.

Her explanation delves further into social pressure by describing how uncomfortable death can be even when a person has passed away, because in society, things should be, as she expressed, "fine". To show sadness about death goes against this idea, so she refers to being

sad as something that is almost forbidden. In some cases, the subject of death was not only seen as a discomfort, but as something that was boring.

I think that, that is something that in general you avoid to talk too much about because it's a little scary and it's a sad thing and that is something you don't want to happen to anyone around you or yourself. So therefore you prefer not to discuss or talk about and I am pretty sure that if I had a friend that was talking a lot about that I would not hang out with him because I would find that to be very tragic and boring. I would certainly not invite him to my gatherings or anything. You don't want anybody to lecture people about death, so for that reason I think the normal thing is to not really discuss it, except for maybe with a priest or when it happens to someone close to you.” (Participant # 10)

The participant's opinion about death is that it is a subject that, to a large extent, should be avoided. It causes negative feelings and discomfort in others, and for a person to bring up the subject at a social event would be awkward and would cause the participant to consider not inviting that person. This last statement exemplifies not only social pressure, but also social expectations about the subject. Namely, there is an expectation that it simply should not be addressed. Remarks on the discomfort caused by the subject and the difficulty of finding someone to talk to about death were not uncommon in the interviews.

Participant: “I'm thinking about speaking about death with friends and I don't think anyone would... I don't think anyone would think it would be fun, I think it would be strange. So I don't know who I would talk to.

Researcher: Why would it be strange to talk about death with friends?

Participant: Because I don't think they want to speak about death that much. I don't think they like speaking about death.

Researcher: Do you think that is a common feeling among Swedish people?

Participant: yeah, I think so.

Researcher: Is it because it makes them uncomfortable, they fear it or any other reason?

Participant: I think the reasons that you said, that they are uncomfortable they have maybe never spoken about it themselves, so they don't know what to think or say, I believe. It's based on my own experience, I actually have never spoken to anyone about death. (Laughs) And because no one ever spoke to me about death I am thinking

that Swedish people in common don't speak about death that is my experience.  
(Participant # 3)

This excerpt brings to mind many of the elements described previously. Once more, it is apparent that the subject is not only rarely spoken of but, in a way, also forbidden. This is seen when the participant adds that he himself has had no real experience of talking about death with friends or other people, which leads him to believe that the subject is not spoken of in general. In cases where Swedish participants mentioned that death could be spoken of, there was an evident emphasis on doing so with care and privacy.

Participant: I'm not afraid to talk about it but it feels like in the society in Sweden we just don't do it and I think it's also maybe a bit more shocking when someone dies because we don't talk about it. I have some relatives and, close relatives to my boyfriend who are getting weaker because of age and they will pass away in the near future but we don't talk about it. It's just like we talk about them getting weaker and how we think that's sad but we don't talk about when they are going to die.

Researcher: Why is that? Why don't you or other people talk about it?

Participant: I think it's that we don't want to, how would you say this, you have like a personal space, you have a personal space for your emotions and we don't want to go into that too much. I think that is because Swedes are very cold and very like... so I think it has to do with that.

Researcher: Could I say that the subject of death is a sensitive subject among Swedes?

Participant: Yes, yeah very sensitive and it feels like it's something we only talk about with the absolute closest people. If I had any thoughts I could talk to my sisters, one of our grandmothers she has been very sick for a while now and it is something we have talked about but at the same time we don't want to say she is going to die. We have another relative that is not going to live for a long time now, she is going to die soon and I get very offended when she says that because we want to think about the time she still has and she is not dead yet, she is still alive. I think it is a very sensitive subject and I don't want to talk to my father about his mother who is going to pass away unless he talks about it first, then we could discuss it. (Participant # 4)

In this extract, the participant gives further validation to the idea of death as something intimate, private, and sensitive, but she also adds that since the subject is not spoken of, it creates a bigger shock when it occurs. What stands out from her narrative is that death is not spoken of even when it is evident to her family members that it is close. There can be

conversations regarding a person being sick or weak, or about the disease, but not about the actual passing of that person. This would corroborate what a previous participant mentioned, that if no one speaks about it, then there is no need to worry about it, and to talk about it would create worry not only for oneself, but for others as well.

Death, according to the narratives presented, in the Swedish context is a very private and uncomfortable matter. It presents many questions to which the answers are not easily found, and creates an atmosphere of distress when the subject is mentioned. There was no evidence to support the notion that the subject is spoken of openly, or that there are people that handle this type of existential matter to which a person could go and seek advice or counsel. To seek advice or bring the subject up for discussion appeared to be like walking on thin ice, not something done with great ease.

### **Weak Traditions but Open to Change.**

This final theme handles the subject of death from the perspective of existing social or personal traditions that make people ponder about death. Throughout the interviews, people did not mention any tradition that could be considered strong and commonly practiced, despite the fact that almost all participants showed a positive attitude towards new approaches to death, and in some cases described Sweden as a culture that is constantly changing.

Participant: I think its good to have traditions because then this kind of quite natural things are coming in more natural to your life and then you can sort of talk about it more open because its tradition, you don't have to.... It will be sort of part of the day to day, well not the day to day but at least the annual routine that will come, so I think it's good to have this kind of traditions because it's more natural, it's easy to talk to and have a tradition and be reminded of it than having to bring it up because something happens.

Researcher: So you think it's good because as you said natural things like death, do you think traditions explain to the person or makes them understand... (Interrupted by participant)

Participant: it could help them to do it I think, but that depends on the cultural tradition and how the tradition is used in the family. The culture tradition could be misused or used in a good manner sort of, but it could be used in a good manner.

Researcher: You mentioned that Sweden doesn't have that many traditions, do you believe that is good or bad?

Participant: mmmhh it's both, because they are not that strong makes it an easy changing culture I think, it adapts some traditions quite loosely quite quick and there is few traditions that are strong, to have a party in midsummer is quite strong even if the forms are not strong and so on. It's good in the sense that it's a society that changes quite quickly compared to others which is the good and the bad, it has those components it's good and bad because there are some good traditions that are brushed away and so on and there are other ones that are for commercial reasons or whatever are adopted quite quickly and they don't have much of a purpose anyway, it's part of that changing society that is changing quite rapid. I think Sweden has in 100 years changed a lot and it's changing quite quickly still and I generally think its good. (Participant # 7)

The participant makes very interesting comments regarding traditions and the Swedish mentality. The traditions that explain death as something "natural" seem to be of a religious nature, and are at present not commonly practiced in society. To have traditions, for the participant, means to have a space that is designated for talking about death, and this space seems to be missing in Sweden. For the participant nonetheless, there is a willingness to adapt and incorporate new practices into Swedish society, and this was evident in the interviews when people recognized the lack of traditions or the problem of not speaking about death, but were immediately open to new suggestions or alternatives.

Researcher: Do you think it would benefit you or Swedish society to have more activities around the subject?

Participant: yeah I mean it's up to the person holding the funeral of course but I think it would be good for them to make it more a joyous occasion, to have people gathering, to have music, to talk about memories that they had with the person that died and to see it as something nice, to think about the good things and of course it's ok to be sad and to cry but it would be nice to have that as a more of a focus and I think it's something you need to make happen I don't think... at least here because we don't have those traditions, so I think its something, its probably doable but it's more of an effort from the people holding the funeral. (Participant # 5)

This extract supports the claim that Swedish people are not closed to the idea of making changes in how they view death and how they bury and celebrate the ones that have

passed away. What is seen is that traditions have an individual element; it is not that society follows them in a specific way, but that the individual gives them their meaning and interpretation. Participants mentioned on some occasions that to celebrate death was not something that seemed impossible to do in Sweden.

Researcher: you said a little before about honoring the dead, how do you honor those that have passed away?

Participant: by talking about them, how they were when they were alive and how much you loved them and what they used to do, and maybe my grandmother loved champagne (laughs) so she died two days before Christmas eve so this Christmas was 1 year after she passed so we bought champagne and we took her photo and we talked about her and we... yeah things like that.

Researcher: The champagne event was it something spontaneous or a form of tradition?

Participant: umm it was something spontaneous but since it has only been a little more than 1 year since she passed, I'm thinking it could be a tradition.  
(Participant # 1)

This illustrates how the participant's family did something spontaneous in order to remember their loved one. This experience seemed to be pleasing for her, and she showed openness to reliving it and making it a tradition that could honor the memory of her grandmother. This demonstrates that traditions can be formed on a personal and private level and do not necessarily need to be associated with religion to be considered good.

Participant: maybe just talking a little bit more about it, being a little more open about it and actually not being so afraid of death and being afraid of sick people and being afraid as I said before, that my daughter and her cousin couldn't go and visit my grandma, they could if I had said yes, but now I listened to my mom and sister and of course they were thinking how they would feel. But maybe we shouldn't be so afraid of talking about it and that could be a celebration in itself. It celebrates the life that they had instead. (Participant # 9)

In this excerpt, the participant concludes that to talk about death and sickness in a more open way could itself be a tradition. The participant acknowledges that to open up to the subject and approach it in a manner in which people celebrate the life that the dead had would be something positive.

In summary, this theme showed that even though traditions surrounding death are not strong, many Swedes are open to new ones that celebrate and remember the dead. It demonstrated that not only were Swedish participants open to new ways of dealing with death, but that in some cases participants had already experimented successfully by celebrating their loved ones in ways their family saw fit. These traditions or celebrations do not require a religious association to be fruitful with the Swedish population.

## **Discussion**

### **Death is The End**

The interviews emphasized that for native Swedish participants, death was the end of existence. On more than one occasion, it was described as something “dark,” meaning that there was no afterlife, rebirth, or anything that would occur after death. This is an opposite finding to Gustavsson’s (2015) analysis of symbols and gravestones in Sweden. His data showed that the idea of the dead being in heaven, as well as communication with the dead through messages on the computer, was common. Several participants described dying and what was likely to occur after death from a rational perspective claiming that there was no evidence for any other type of explanation, or there was no personal experience that would make them think otherwise. To think about death from a rational or logical perspective led participants to claim that what is known for them is life and existence, and death seemed to simply be the end of that. In some participants thinking of death evoked feelings of stress and sadness, while others showed indifference. Høeg and Pajari (2013) claimed that looking at death from a rational perspective is something that is a recent phenomenon in Nordic history.

### **Focus is on Life**

Given that most participants considered death the end of existence, life was a more appealing subject on which to focus. Death seemed frightening because it contained too many elements that were unknown (Ek et al. 2014), and created uncertainty that caused distress. It

was difficult for some to conceive of “non-existence,” since existence was all that could really be known for them. Some participants said that death was also confusing, since there are so many religions or ways to look at it, and nothing seemed to appeal to them. To focus on their lives and hope for longevity was therefore more fulfilling and meaningful. Longevity was shown to have importance and priority in participants’ lives, which could explain why people had difficulties being at peace with the notion of death, and therefore living a long life becomes desirable (Rodenbach et al., 2015).

Concerns appeared within this theme but were mostly based on how one’s death would affect their loved ones, since it was they who would be left to live and deal with that person’s passing. The individuals who showed more indifference to death reasoned that one should focus on life because there was nothing that could be done to change or influence the outcome of death. If there was nothing that could be done, then it was simply best to devote one’s energies to life.

### **Death, Private and Uncomfortable**

All participants agreed that the subject of death is rarely discussed in Sweden, whether in a public or family setting, and this could be one reason it was considered an uncomfortable and taboo subject that should be avoided (Panjari, 2017). Participants placed death on a private and very intimate level (Ariès, 1981), and discussing it on a public setting could be considered as something that caused discomfort to others. People in general wouldn’t know what to do or say about it, which could be because of the lack of personal experience with death and with it being institutionalized (Jakobsson, Johnsson , Persson, & Gaston-Johansson 2006). Participants reflected that friends could think that the subject is not fun or it is too dark. Death can be associated to religion and some people mentioned a social pressure within Swedish society for showing others that things are always fine, which would come as a problem if a person wanted to discuss death with someone else, since it would mean acting

against that social pressure. This indicates that an attitude of silence (Hagström, 2016) about death is preferred to being active and open about it.

### **Weak Traditions but Open to Change**

Respondents observed that traditions that made them think about death do exist but are considered weak and are not followed by society in general. Some traditions such as All Saints Day, are associated with Christianity. However, even though participants did recognize the lack of traditions regarding death, they generally showed an open attitude to exploring new ways of talking about or celebrating it. Several participants were aware that other cultures in the world have different perspectives on death, and in some cases those perspectives appealed to them as something they would consider trying. This attitude was interesting because it demonstrated that participants found the present perspective of death as lacking and not satisfactory. This shows an open mentality that might change how death is viewed by native swedes. This open attitude to foreign concepts and behaviors is not new to Swedish culture and can be observed in the increased interest being shown towards practices such as Mindfulness (Hornborg, 2010) and the use of technology in order to express grief (Hugoson, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

The opinions and perspectives given by the participants show that Sweden has indeed changed drastically in the last one hundred years as stated in the beginning of this investigation. Swedish people demonstrated a secular and institutionalized approach to death, but appeared to be very open to trying new perspectives. This could indicate that certain aspects of death are open to change and debate. Whether a change will occur because of the influence of foreign cultures establishing themselves in the country or because Swedes themselves have imported foreign philosophies to fulfill their own needs is beyond the scope of this research. However, it was clear that for native Swedish participants death presented

several issues. For example, death is a subject that is not spoken of or celebrated publicly, and there is no figure or institution that is able to explain the subject in an open way. Also, traditions that clarify or familiarize a person with death are lacking. Nonetheless, the will to try new approaches was also present.

Swedish participants showed fear and indifference to death, which is caused by approaching the subject from a rationalized and scientific perspective. Science has not been able to answer many questions regarding death and the afterlife, and is not concerned with providing consolation or comfort, which evidently caused confusion and uncertainty in several participants. Death is an interesting subject in Swedish culture because it presents a challenge to the individual and society, and as the research shows it also presents an opportunity to invite death to the table and discuss it in an open way. Most, if not all, participants saw death as something private and intimate, and even though common social traditions were weak, it was evident that participants thought their society considered death to be something negative to be avoided. There was also a positive attitude towards space and freedom to create traditions that could be celebrated in the privacy of family or close circles. To observe attitudes toward death is not an easy task, and changes in attitudes do not tend to happen overnight. Nonetheless, the evidence presented by this and other studies shows that Swedish is a culture may be opening itself to change with regard to the subject of death.

### **Comparing Mayan and Swedish Worldviews on Death**

Throughout the interviews and literature it was evident that both cultures had different perspectives on life and death. It is not my intention, nor is it the objective of the present study, to categorize one perspective above the other. Rather, it is to show how different cultures can look at the same existential problem from different angles and to demonstrate how different perspectives can produce different outcomes.

**Table 3***Mayan and Swedish super-ordinate themes*

| <b>Mayan</b>                                   | <b>Swedish</b>                     |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| The Mayan Elder                                | Death is the End                   |
| Religious Syncretism and Mysticism             | Focus is on Life                   |
| Death as a Community Celebration and Phenomena | Death, Private and Uncomfortable   |
| Death, Part of The Natural Process of Life.    | Weak Traditions but Open to Change |

What is death? What happens to a person during and after death? How should one respond to death? Who can provide support to one dealing with death? For all these questions, Mayan participants seemed to have a clear answer. The guidance of the community and their Elders was a key component of their worldview, the Elder not only being considered a book or a historian, but someone that anyone could talk to for support or wisdom. For Mayan participants, death was not the end of life or existence, but a stage that people had to go through. Dreams played an important role, since they meant both communication with the dead and confirmation of an afterlife. Death did not end a person's relationship with their loved ones, it just changed the way the relationship was lived and understood. For Mayan participants, talking to the dead and preparing food and aromas for them was not only rational, but an obligation they had to honor and show their loved ones that they were remembered. These practices meant keeping the communication alive. When taking into account the percentages of appearances of themes across Mayan participants, their answers appeared more homogeneous than those of the Swedish respondents.

For the Swedish participants, the aforementioned questions were more difficult to answer because of how death was understood. For Mayans, death had both a private and public component, whereas for the Swedish participants it was more private and intimate.

Death was mostly analyzed through secular logic for Swedish participants, which produced more questions than answers. To be born in Mayan society meant that a person is part of a community in life and death, a community that conceives of life beyond the rationality of science and appealed to their historical and cultural heritage in order to explain events and phenomena. Their religious syncretism is not only believed in but actively lived in the communities through legends, myths, and spiritual practices. For the Swedish participants, it seemed that a person should focus his or her efforts on life instead of thinking or talking about death. It was more important to focus on what was known than to speculate on what could or could not be true.

Mayan participants believed in a spiritual realm where the dead are, and this proved to be logical and rational. However, Mayan participants demonstrated that for them the subject was understood from their cultural worldview, and therefore they did not look to other perspectives to answer any questions that death might bring up. Swedish participants seemed to be aware that their current attitude towards death causes plenty of indifferent or negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in them and in their society. This and other elements of their answers demonstrated an attitude of openness that might indicate a willingness to change their perspective and way of celebrating death. How rapidly and in which direction it may change is beyond the scope and intention of this study, but if Sweden has changed several of its beliefs, attitudes, and approaches to death in the last one hundred years, then there is no reason to believe it will not or cannot change them again.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study has various limitations, among them: neither Mayans nor Swedes were interviewed in their mother tongue, which could probably have influenced how they felt and expressed themselves during the interviews. IPA studies seek to understand subjective experiences of a phenomenon from a small group of individuals, which makes it difficult to

draw general conclusions that apply to both populations. IPA studies usually work with fewer participants in order to focus on specific and subjective elements of the phenomenon being studied. The number of participants used in this study was larger than the usual IPA study because my purpose was not to only see death from the subjective experiences of the participants, but to be able to identify and see a more generalized perspective of both cultures. Therefore, many of the conclusions and themes that appeared in the interviews were generalized, which meant having to sacrifice specific elements and themes from the narrative of the participants in order to obtain a general perspective. The relatively large number of participants presents itself as a strength since it allows future researchers to focus on the themes presented in this study to gain a deeper understanding of the subject of death as it relates to these themes.

Only native Swedish participants were interviewed in this study, which means that the conclusions drawn do not represent a complete view of Sweden's perspective toward death. Even though members of several Mayan ethnic populations were interviewed, the results cannot be generalized to all Mayan groups, given that there are many more Mayan ethnic groups in the region. Much of what is known about death and the classic Mayans comes from archeology and deducing the nature of that. This study has the advantage of presenting information about death from the modern-day Maya in Guatemala, which gives a clear view of how they conceive death, and could serve as a platform for a comparison to the perspectives of their ancestors.

This study invites the reader to ponder how, on a technological dependent world, science and technology have yet to answer the existential questions that humans may have about their existence and finitude. By presenting two unrelated cultures it is possible to observe some of the consequences that may arise when a culture looks to science for existential answers while another looks to its history and into a spiritual realm.

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## Appendix A

### INTERVIEW

- 1) What does death mean to you? How do you define it?
- 2) What thoughts and feelings come when you think about your death?
- 3) What do you think will happen to you after you die?
- 4) Do you think that your attitude, thoughts, and feelings towards death have any influence in how you live your life?
- 5) Do you think that it is important and necessary to talk and think about death in an open way?
- 6) Does something like “a good time to die” exist?
- 7) Is there any tradition, ritual in your society/family that makes you reflect about death? Is it good or bad? Why?
- 8) If you would like to talk about death with someone in your society/family with whom would you talk or seek advice? Why?
- 9) You have given me your opinions, feelings and attitudes toward death, but has there been anyone or anything that has happened in your life that has had an influence on your present opinion about death?
- 10) Is there any subject regarding your vision about death that I did not cover with my questions? If so, which?

## Appendix B

**Voluntary consent form for:** \_\_\_\_\_

This is a consent form for Swedish people that wish to participate in the research titled “Death attitudes, a comparison between Mayan and Swedish people”. This research is being carried out by the student and psychologist Marcos Lopez as part of his thesis in his studies in the Masters program in psychology at Lund University.



This consent form consists of two parts:

- 1) The information part where the objective of the research is explained.
- 2) The consent form where if you as a participant agree to be part of the research you will be asked to sign and confirm your willingness to participate.

**Note: You will be provided with a copy of this consent form if you wish.**

### **First part: Information regarding the research**

#### *Introduction*

The research is being developed by Marcos López, this research has as a purpose to investigate the attitudes of Swedish people towards death and compare these attitudes with those of Mayan people in Guatemala. It is of great interest to investigate the attitudes toward death of Swedish people from a psychological perspective. You by no means are obligated to participate and may take as much time as you desire in order to consider if you wish to take part in the research or not.

#### *Purpose of the investigation*

Every person regardless of their culture, religion or country of origin will have to face their own death. The purpose of this research is to find some of the attitudes toward death of Swedish people and compare them to those of Mayan people in Guatemala. To study the attitudes toward death of this two cultures is an opportunity to contribute with knowledge that can later be used in order to educate and treat people that are afraid or curious about the subject of death.

#### *Type of participation and procedure:*

An interview will be performed in which you will have the opportunity to give your opinion and feelings toward the questions that the researcher does. It is estimated that the interview can take anywhere around 45 minutes to 1 hour of your time. All the information that you provide will be 100% confidential, which means that no one but the research team will know of your participation or answers.

It is very important you realize that at the moment when the interview is taking place that there are no wrong answers, what is expected of you is that you provide your opinions, feelings and thoughts. An example of a question might be; What do you think about death? The interview will be recorded but your name will not be recorded in order to protect your privacy. After having the interview written, the recording will be eliminated and in the written

transcription of the interview your name and personal information will not appear.

### Voluntary participation

This participation in this research is 100% voluntary and by no means are you obligated to participate. If at any time in the research you wish to stop and not continue you may do so without any problem. You are not obligated to give your reasons for not participating.

### Risks

The research has an objective to get to know the thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward death of Swedish people. There is a possibility that by answering the questions you will provide information that is personal or that you will speak about the beliefs of your family or culture. If this occurs and it makes you feel uncomfortable, it is important for you to know that you are not obligated to answer the question. You may take all the time you consider necessary in order to answer any question, or if you feel uncomfortable, you can ask the researcher to stop the interview. After, if you desire not to continue with the interview you will be in all your right to do so.

### Benefits of the investigation

The knowledge obtained from this research can contribute by helping people understand how different cultures manage the subject of death, and which actions, traditions or thoughts they have in order to handle the subject and experience. This is a very important contribution in the literature about death and can help develop philosophies and educational courses that can help train professionals and people that work with the subject of death. Your participation is invaluable and as a token of appreciation for your participation you will receive a gift certificate from a local coffee house worth 50kr.

### Confidentiality

All the information that you provide will be confidential. The materials that are recorded will be later eliminated once the information has been transcribed to a document. The results and analysis will not involve any information regarding your name or any other information that might identify you. The information will have a number or a code so that no personal information is used in order to identify it.

You have the right to ask that the results of the investigation be sent to you via email. You can provide the researcher with your email and he will be sending the research once it is concluded, you need to take into account that the research will be done entirely in English.

This research is being conducted respecting Swedish laws.

### Contact

If you have any question or doubts after your participation or wish to get in contact with the researcher you may do so at the following email: [sam15mlo@student.lu.se](mailto:sam15mlo@student.lu.se) Of you wish to get in touch with the researchers supervisor, professor Etzel Cardeña, you may do so at the following email: [etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se](mailto:etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se)

**Second Part:** *Consent form*

I have been invited to take part in the research of attitudes toward death, a comparison between Mayan and Swedish people. I have been given all the information regarding the research, I have read all the information and I have also had the opportunity to ask any question regarding the research, my participation and rights. I am participating out of my own will and consent.

**Name of the participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of the participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Statement by the investigator:**

I Marcos López declare that I have given the participant all the information regarding the research of “attitudes toward death, a comparison between Mayan and Swedish people”. I have given the participant the opportunity to ask any questions regarding the research, I have also mentioned that all of his or her rights will be respected and that by no means are they obligated to participate and that if at any point during the research they want to abandon their participation they may do so. I have also declared that I have taken the necessary time in order to answer the participant’s questions and have insured that his or her privacy will be respected and that he or she is participating out of their own free will.

---

**Marcos López**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

**Formulario de participacion voluntaria para:** \_\_\_\_\_



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

Este es un formulario de consentimiento para las personas Mayas de Guatemala que acepten formar parte de la investigación llamada “Actitudes ante la muerte, una comparación entre Mayas y Suecos”. La investigación es elaborada por el estudiante y psicólogo clínico Lic. Marcos López como parte de su tesis en los estudios de Maestría en Psicología de la Universidad de Lund en Suecia.

Este formulario tiene dos partes:

- 3) Hoja de información en donde se explica el objetivo de la investigación.
- 4) Formulario de consentimiento en donde si usted acepta ser parte de la investigación se le pedirá su firma o huella para confirmar su participación voluntaria.

**Nota: Se le proporcionará una copia del formulario en caso que usted lo desee.**

**Primera parte:** Hoja de información sobre la investigación.

### Introducción

La investigación, llevada a cabo por el Lic. Marcos López, tiene como propósito investigar las actitudes que tienen las personas Mayas ante la muerte y comparar esas actitudes con las actitudes de las personas Suecas. Es de interés en el área de psicología investigar las actitudes ante la muerte de personas Mayas debido a su historia, cultura y visión. Usted no tiene que participar si no lo desea y puede tomarse el tiempo que considere necesario para decidir si participa o no. Si tiene alguna duda u pregunta ahora o en cualquier otro momento con respecto a la investigación, entrevista, el investigador, o cualquier otro tópico, con gusto contestaré sus dudas y preguntas.

### Propósito de la investigación

Toda persona sin importar su cultura, religión o país de origen tiene que afrontar su propia muerte. El propósito de esta investigación es evaluar las actitudes ante la muerte de los Mayas y compararlas con las de las personas de Suecia, lo que puede contribuir con conocimientos que pueden ser utilizados para educar y tratar a las personas que sientan temor o curiosidad con respecto al tema de la muerte.

### Tipo de participación y procedimiento:

Se hará una entrevista en la cual usted podrá dar su opinión y sentir ante las preguntas que le haga el investigador. Se calcula que la entrevista tomará alrededor de 1 hora de su tiempo. Toda la información que usted dé será 100% confidencial, lo que significa que nadie salvo el equipo de investigación sabrá que participó o qué contestó.

En el momento de realizar la entrevista es importante que sepa que no hay respuestas equivocadas ya que lo que se espera es que proporcione su opinión, pensar y sentir. Un ejemplo de una pregunta es: ¿Qué piensa acerca de la muerte? La entrevista será grabada pero no se grabará su nombre para respetar su privacidad. Luego de tener escrita la entrevista, esta será eliminada y en la escritura de la entrevista no aparecerá información que lo/la pueda identificar.

### Participación voluntaria

Esta investigación es 100% voluntaria y por ningún motivo está usted obligado(a) a participar. Si en cualquier momento de la investigación desea no continuar y retirarse lo podrá hacer sin ningún problema o consecuencia, y no necesitará dar ninguna razón o justificación de porque lo hace.

### Riesgos

La investigación busca conocer pensamientos, sentimientos y actitudes ante la muerte del pueblo Maya. Existe la posibilidad que en alguna pregunta pueda dar información personal o hable sobre las creencias de su familia o pueblo. Si esto sucede y se siente incómodo/a, es importante que sepa que no está obligado(a) a contestar la pregunta si así lo desea. Puede tomar todo el tiempo que considere necesario para contestar, y si se siente mal puede interrumpir la entrevista y el investigador, que es psicólogo clínico, podrá ofrecerle su ayuda en caso que lo desee. Si luego desea no continuar con la entrevista está en todo su derecho de pararla.

### Beneficios de la investigación

El conocimiento obtenido de la investigación puede contribuir a conocer cómo distintas culturas manejan el tema de la muerte, y qué acciones, tradiciones o pensamientos tienen para manejar el tema. Esto es una contribución importante a la literatura sobre la muerte y puede ayudar a desarrollar filosofías y cursos de educación que puedan ayudar a entrenar a profesionales o personas que trabajen con el tema de la muerte. Su participación es invaluable y como muestra de agradecimiento por participar se le dará una pequeña contribución económica de 40 quetzales.

### Confidencialidad

Toda la información que proporcione será totalmente confidencial. Los materiales que sean grabados serán eliminados al momento de tener toda la información transcrita a papel. Los resultados y análisis no involucran ninguna información con respecto a su nombre u otra información que lo(a) pueda identificar. La información tendrá un número o código para no tener que usar e identificar dicha información con el nombre de la persona.

Tiene el derecho de pedir que los resultados de la investigación le sean enviados. Le puede proporcionar al investigador una dirección convencional o de correo electrónico y éste le enviará la investigación al estar concluida, pero algo que debe tomar en cuenta es que el informe se hará en inglés.

### Contacto

Si le surgen preguntas o dudas después de participar y desea ponerse en contacto con el investigador, lo puede hacer al correo electrónico : sam15mlo@student.lu.se

Si desea comunicarse con el supervisor del investigador, el Profesor Etzel Cardeña, puede hacerlo a etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se

**Segunda parte:** Certificado de consentimiento

He sido invitado(a) a participar en la investigación de actitudes ante la muerte, una comparación entre Mayas y Suecos. Se me ha brindado toda la información con respecto a la investigación, también he leído o se me ha leído la información sobre la investigación y he tenido la oportunidad de manifestar mis dudas o preguntas con respecto a mi participación y mis derechos. Participo por mi propia voluntad y doy mi consentimiento.

**Nombre del participante:** \_\_\_\_\_

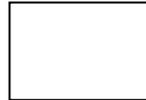
**Firma del participante:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Fecha:** \_\_\_\_\_

**En caso de no saber leer o escribir:**

Se me ha leído toda la información con respecto a la investigación, también he tenido la oportunidad para realizar preguntas y acepto participar en la investigación por mi propia voluntad y doy mi consentimiento.

*Huella del participante*

**Declaración por parte del investigador:**

Yo, Marcos López, declaro haber leído o haber dado toda la información por escrito al participante con respecto a la investigación; “Actitudes ante la muerte, una comparación entre Mayas y Suecos”. Le he otorgado al participante la oportunidad de hacerme preguntas respecto a la investigación, al igual que he mencionado que sus derechos serán respetados y que bajo ningún motivo está obligado a participar y que puede abandonar la investigación en cualquier momento. Aseguro haberme tomado el tiempo necesario para contestar las preguntas del participante así como asegurar que su privacidad será respetada y que participa de forma voluntaria.

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**Lic. Marcos López**

**Fecha:** \_\_\_\_\_