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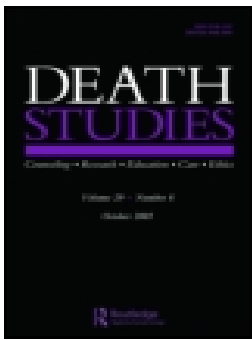
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## Mayan & Swedish attitudes and practices toward death

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores how Mayan people from Guatemala and Swedes view and behave toward death. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis, 10 participants from each culture were interviewed to elucidate the most relevant and important emerging themes. The Mayan approach to death is based on a collective perspective in which consultations with Elders, ancient traditions, and rituals help provide answer to most existential inquiries surrounding death. In contrast, the Swedish approach is based on an individualistic, rational analysis with a focus on life instead of death, but also showing openness to new perspectives on death.

Death, as an event, is highly complex and it can be feared for multiple reasons, such as the uncertainty of what comes after it, the possibility of dying painfully, loss of memory, and others (Rodenbach et al., 2015). The eventuality of dying challenges everyone regardless of culture, faith, social status, or ethnicity. How a person conducts him/herself and thinks about life is related to how that person views death (Wong et al., 1994). To a large extent, death is socioculturally framed, although it is foremost individual in the sense that it is the person who will die and must face his/her own finitude. As a social phenomenon, death is immersed within collective attitudes, thoughts, ideas, and beliefs undergirding the individual's opinion about death (Poulsen et al., 2013). Every society in the world has reacted in its own way to the fact that everyone will die. Research indicates that at least some societies outside the Western industrialized world tend to have a more open and accepting view of death, in which conversations, traditions to allay anxiety, and beliefs surrounding it form a part of the culture (Macleod et al., 2016; Ma-Kellams & Blascovich, 2012; Makgati & Simbayi, 2005; Rodenbach et al., 2015). Similar patterns have been observed in families that live in a Western society but come from non-Western backgrounds (Krause & Bastida, 2012).

In the last century, industrialized Western societies have placed death outside of public life, banishing it

to a more private and hidden sphere (Ariès, 1981; Pajari, 2017). In the case of the Nordic countries, a restrained and rational approach was not seen until the 20th century (Høeg & Pajari, 2013). Swedes in the 19th century commonly held beliefs such as that the dead would come to visit, and lighted a candle for them on their birthday, with no one allowed to touch the candle until it had burned completely (Hagberg, 2016). A traditional funeral in early 1900s rural Sweden involved rites where the dead would be washed, the casket would be placed in a decorated and separate room, and people would follow the deceased toward the cemetery. The usual time for a burial was before Sunday church and the attitude toward death was based on adherence to Lutheran Protestantism. Today Sweden is a secularized society in which a secular worldview has taken the place and diminished the influence of Lutheranism (Åhren, 2009), circumscribing death to a private, bureaucratic level (Jakobsson et al., 2006). Attitudes toward death and the expressions of grief in Sweden have changed, with the use of technology as a means of expression through webpages, email, blogs, and the press becoming more common (Gustavsson, 2015; Hugoson, 2009; the use of technology and media for communicating grief has also been observed in other cultures, Mak, 2011). Nonetheless, little is known about Swedes' attitudes toward death.

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If Sweden is a paradigmatic example of a technological industrial society, Mayan society in Guatemala is considered a collective and traditional society. Present day Mayan society is primarily located in rural Guatemala and is not isolated from Western influence. For instance, some Mayans work in towns or cities, but mostly live in rural villages, where traditional beliefs and practices remain strong. Transmitted knowledge and wisdom is based on family, elders, the community, legal authorities, and spiritual guides (García Ixmata, 2010). The use of oral traditions to preserve and communicate knowledge and traditions is a tool that has commonly been used by indigenous societies (Finn et al., 2017). For Mayan culture this involves consulting elders, who are considered sources of knowledge, leadership, and wisdom (Harman, 2001). In terms of the Mayan world view, much importance is placed on dreams, their content, and interpretation. This is especially true when it comes to the subject of death (Garrard-Burnett, 2015).

Dreams are considered a way in which a person can communicate with those who have already passed away (Suazo, 2010). In dreams, Mayans may receive information or knowledge that may be useful for their lives. The practice of interpreting and communicating with others what they have dreamed is of importance because through this process Mayans can validate their experience and relate to each other by sharing dreams or stories that transmit knowledge (Permanto, 2015). In the authors' observations, contemporary Swedish culture does not have a similar regard for dreams or the importance of the elders. It does seem of importance to systematically compare how different cultures' beliefs toward death affect their attitudes and practices, which may have important implications for clinical, medical, educational, and other contexts. For instance, Sweden has a very advanced medical and welfare system that protects the elderly and dying, yet loneliness and a sense of alienation are growing problems (Mabale, 2017). In contrast, Mayan groups are economically disadvantaged in comparison with the Swedes, but have a strong communal structure that might alleviate the sense of loneliness when someone close dies. A comparative study may point out which cultural beliefs and practices provide greater meaning for those surviving the death of a close one, and for those approaching death.

## Method

### Participants

We recruited a total of 20 participants between the ages of 26–56, matched for age and gender. Ten

participants from each culture were selected to obtain a representative sample of adults using a qualitative research approach. Participants included native Mayan from Guatemala and native Swedes. The Mayan participants were recruited from different parts of Guatemala, had been born and raised in a Mayan village, spoke Spanish fluently, and claimed to practice and believe in Mayan traditions. To recruit participants in Guatemala, the first author, of Guatemalan heritage with experience working with Mayan communities, lived in a Mayan village for 5 weeks and traveled to different Mayan villages, presenting himself to local authorities, and asking for assistance at libraries, schools, markets, parks, and public establishments and events. The ten Mayan participants (5 men and 5 women, mean age = 38.8) were interviewed in Spanish. The 10 native Swedish participants (6 men and 4 women, mean age = 38) were interviewed in English, and were recruited via social media, email, public events, and establishments like coffee houses.

All participants gave their consent to be interviewed in a place of their choosing and for the interview to be recorded. They were given a comprehensive explanation of the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as the opportunity to ask questions regarding the research before and after the interviews took place. No Mayan or Swedish participant expressed discomfort or had a difficult time expressing themselves in a language that was not their mother tongue. The study was reviewed before data collection by Lund's University Department of Psychology to ascertain that it fulfilled the ethical requirements of the Swedish guidelines for research.

### Procedure

The methodological strategy we chose was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), whose goal is to have the researcher interpret or make sense of how the participants make sense of and experience specific phenomena (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2017). IPA's most common method involves in-depth, flexible semi-structured interviews, with each interview transcribed and analyzed qualitatively, probing for the most important experiential themes in a particular interview, and looking later for patterns across cases (Smith, 2017). Our interviews followed accordingly a semi-structured format with an average length of one and a half hour. The interviewer (M. L.) asked participants about their attitudes, opinions, and feelings concerning death; traditions within family and society; how they had experienced the subject of death in their lives, families, and society; if they thought and felt their perspective and experience of death to be

positive or negative; and how they faced their mortality. The interviews ended with participants having the opportunity to add or discuss anything further that felt relevant to their attitude toward and perspective on death. No participant expressed distress or discomfort about their participation.

The transcripts of the interviews were evaluated case by case in a systematic interpretative manner by the first author. Every interview transcript was re-examined several times in order to produce notes and comments on the narrative of each participant, to detect the most relevant themes. Then, those themes were compared across individuals to detect and compare the shared categories or super-ordinate themes along with emergent or subthemes across individuals of each culture. Out of these comparisons, main and secondary themes emerged for each culture to describe attitudes and practices toward death.

Then, these sets of themes were examined in detail to ascertain similarities and differences across the two cultures. The two sets of common themes from both cultures explain in general terms how participants experience death. Later, the results were converted into a narrative in which the interpretation of the researchers is presented and supported with verbatim extracts from the accounts of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). IPA offers open and flexible guidelines that can be modified to the objectives of the research (Pietkiwicz & Smith, 2014), and this was especially useful in studying two cultures that present different worldviews by revealing the important themes for each culture based on the participants themselves, rather than imposing a set of meanings from one culture into another. By allowing modifications on how and where the interviews were performed, the researchers were able to adapt to each participant and obtain a rich account of their perceptions and attitudes.

There are various ways in which trustworthiness for naturalistic research can be obtained (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following seem to us to be pertinent in this study: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checks. The author who conducted the interviews has had years-long engagement with both the Mayan (he was born in Guatemala and periodically returns to Mayan villages) and Swedish (he has been living in Sweden for the last 7 years) cultures. Persistent observation was, to an extent, inbuilt into the method by the use of the thorough, long semi-structured interviews. With respect to peer debriefing, the first author was in contact with the second

throughout the data collection and analysis, receiving questions and feedback about them (the second author's mother tongue is also Spanish and he has lived in Sweden for more than a decade). Negative case analysis or "revising hypotheses with hindsight" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309) is also an aspect of the iterative nature of IPA, going back to previous observations and speculations obtained from previous interviews after obtaining and analyzing newer ones. Member checks were part of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees, as the former mentioned to the latter some of the previous relevant comments he had obtained earlier. Finally, although it would generally be advisable to deposit the transcripts as a form of audit trail, they contain potential identifiable information so we decided not to do it.

## Results

### *Mayan culture*

Four super-ordinate themes arose from themes found throughout the interviews carried out with Mayan participants. They are presented and discussed below (Table 1).

#### *The role of the elders in mourning*

The topic of the Mayan Elder<sup>1</sup> appeared during all the interviews and demonstrates the importance that this culture gives to both elder men and women (often referred to in common parlance as "grandparents"). The theme describes how Elders have several roles within their communities, such as being keepers of knowledge and historical records, and conduits of wisdom and cultural knowledge through oral tradition. They are seen as authority figures, and help organize traditions related to the subject of death.

Here, we have a council (the 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

**Table 1.** Super-ordinate and emergent themes for Mayan participants.

Super-ordinate theme	Emergent themes
The role of the elders in mourning	Wisdom and knowledge holders Authority in the community Oral tradition
Religious syncretism & spiritual life	Connection with the dead and spiritual practices Experience of Mayan life
Death as a community celebration and phenomenon	Celebration of life and death Death as a community tradition
Death, part of the natural process of life	The divine law A part of life, never the end

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 whatever I can do, but that old man, I do need to take him 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, a 33-year-old man)

The existence of a Council of Elders is an example of the level of authority and respect that Elders have in Mayan society. The Elders role is not just one of passing wisdom to other generations, but one of respect that is tied to several aspects of Mayan life including death. The participant alluded to a reciprocity principle according to which how he treats his elders will determine how he will be treated later in life. Elders are given a high status within their society not just on account of their old age but of their life experience and 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 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... 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. (Participant 9, a 33-year-old woman)

The Elders use oral tradition to transmit historical facts, traditions, or advice. The Mayan elder plays an essential part for existential inquiries. The active role of the Mayan Elder appeared as fundamental throughout all the interviews. The participant seems to judge as vital the life experiences of Elders to answer questions related to life and death. The Mayan Elder serves a function that goes from passing and telling stories related to life and culture to one of organizing and being active in the subjects of life and death.

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 they who are 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 they are 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 they the ones who 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 the dead person needs to be dressed and how the vigil will be done, that is one of the functions of the Elders. (Participant #6, a 30-year-old woman)

This narrative demonstrates the active role of the elders within their community. The Elders seem to fulfill several tasks. They actively give support to the grieving family and assist by preparing food and other necessary things that comprise the funerary traditions. They also give guidance with regard to how the deceased will be dressed and how the rites will be performed. The guidance that the Elders provide seems to influence the attitude not only of the individual but of the collective. In order to understand Mayan worldview, culture and traditions, one must consider the role and importance of the Mayan Elders.

### *Religious syncretism and spiritual life*

From the interviews, it is evident that there is no single religion or spiritual perspective that influences current Mayan society, but rather many of its traditions and spiritual beliefs are a product of religious syncretism and connection with a spiritual realm. Spiritual practices such as talking to the dead, asking them for guidance, legends, and tales help explain different cultural phenomena and provide meaning to life. This religious syncretism comes from Catholicism, Evangelicalism, and ancestral spirituality, referred to within the culture as Mayan Cosmovision.

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 them 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, a 30-year-old woman)

This response is a good example of how the beliefs have merged and formed modern customs. The notion, rooted in Mayan Cosmovision, that the dead are able to manifest themselves and form part of the

living, combined with the Catholic tradition of the nine days of prayer, exemplifies how beliefs and religious practices have merged. Living in a Mayan village or community seemed to be a vital factor in terms of the formation of a person's view of death.

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?

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. (Participant 3, a 33-year-old man)

The participant is clear in describing the importance that living in a Mayan community has to his way of thinking about death; he states that the subject is already understood within the culture. The view of death appears to be embedded within life in the community, and extends to dreams.

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. (Participant 1, a 55-year-old man)

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.

It will depend on the dream; this is very complex. The Elders say it isn't that because you dreamt something 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?

It is an important part and I have and will continue to associate them with the connection to the Kemek (death). (Participant 7, a 28-year-old man)

A more complex view of dreams and their connection to the dead is alluded to here. It is a means of communication but dreams are also taken as messages and contact from the afterlife. 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 afterlife and communicate via dreams to the living. Traditions and beliefs have merged in present day Mayan society, Mayans may consider themselves as belonging to a particular religion but practice traditions that are either of Catholic, Evangelical, or Mayan origin.

The 1st of November is celebrated as the day of the dead. This tradition is celebrated every year. All the families that have deceased family members, they go to the cemetery and the belief is that, well they take maize, corn tamales, fiambres (traditional food); they even sometimes take spirit liquor or beer, so they go and leave all of that in the grave. They leave it there or sometimes they also stay and share with the dead there. But most people go and take flowers, they decorate and paint the grave. It is said, well my mother in law is Catholic and she tells me "you cannot walk in midday one week before November 1st, you can't walk at that time, you cannot walk at midnight and you can't walk very late at night because the dead are walking, their soul is there and something might happen" So that is the belief we have here. (Participant # 4, a 33-year-old woman)

The participant describes how the day of the dead is celebrated and in her Catholic mother in law's narrative there is a deeper clarification as to how a person can have a religion mixed with ancient Mayan beliefs. It can be seen through the extracts that Mayan faith, traditions, spiritual practices, and worldview are influenced by the Cosmovision and other religions, and as a result they have merged creating a unique perspective in their culture. Religious Syncretism manifests itself through Mayan traditions, beliefs, and cultural practices.

### *Death as a community celebration*

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.

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, dong, ding, dong and in the last bell if its DOOONG, if it's a very strong sound it means that an adult died. But, if the last bell 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, 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. (Participant 4, a 33-year-old woman)

The participant makes evident that there is a system that the entire community follows and is aware of. 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 are offered to the dead, etc.

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. (Participant 7, a 28-year-old man)

Death in a Mayan village is not only felt on a personal level but on the community level as well. Death is celebrated not because a person's life has ended, on the contrary, the celebration is done in order to celebrate the purpose of that individual's life and to celebrate that life will continue to be lived on the next stage.

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 going 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 9th, those 9 days. The 40 days also, but in Mayan culture we also need to have a ceremony, in Christian-Catholic culture we do also a mass at 9 and 40 days, where the loved one has left. After we have a

9th again after 1 year, and we never can lose the practice and tradition of on the 1st 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 to eat, 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. (Participant # 10, a 52-year-old woman)

As it can be seen the community is always involved in the process of death. The participant demonstrates this by always saying "we." The food, smells, and music are offered to the dead 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 something to the dead is a common tradition described in the interviews.

Mayan culture seems to celebrate death because of the belief 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 that when a person is born it enters the community and when it departs it serves and belongs to the community of both the living and dead. Celebrations are not done privately, but in a very open sphere. This theme seems to indicate 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 a 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*

This theme 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 part of what life is. Death is not only understood to be something normal, but is also seen as a law that needs to be obeyed.

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) ... 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 Nahuales (Spirit or energy) 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, a 37-year-old male.)

The participant makes a reference to the process human beings have to follow in life. Death, for the



participant, is part of the progression of life, a natural law that applies to all. The participant mentions that within the Mayan calendar there is a representation of death, called “Kemek.” In the Mayan calendar each day has an energy which is referred to as Nahual, there are 20 Nahuales in total. The participant refers to the Nahual of Kemek or Kame, which represents death. Death is seen as a part of life, but not an end. Every participant mentioned an afterlife; there was no clear and specific consensus as to what happens after death, but there was an undeniable belief that life continues.

For me personally the Keme’ (death) is not the end. It is not the end, as I told you, the Kamnaq, Kamik (death) 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. (Participant 7, a 28-year-old man)

Death here is explained as a stage in which a person has a purpose and things need to be done, which presents the perspective that within death there is also purpose.

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

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 foundation for them and 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, a 52-year-old woman)

The participant explains that death is not the end of life, and that there is a purpose in death. From a Mayan perspective, a person still serves their culture in death and helps those who ask for it.

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, a 33-year-old man)

Death here is explained as the end of the physical but not of the spiritual, and the spiritual part not only goes on, but it also is able to communicate via dreams, which offer proof for those within the culture that an afterlife exists. Several conclusions can be drawn regarding the theme of death in Mayan society.

Death is a natural law, an obligatory stage of life for all living things; there is purpose in the afterlife, communication can occur with those that are still living, and though ceremonies and spiritual practices, people remember and can invoke those who have passed away in order to ask for protection and guidance.

In sum, in the process of understanding the Mayan perspective of death four superordinate themes were detected: (1) The Mayan Elder, (2) Religious Syncretism and spiritual life, (3) Death as a Community Celebration, and (4) Death as Part of the Natural Process of Life. The importance of the Elder in connection to the subject of death was a theme that appeared very frequently throughout the interviews. The significance of the Elder was further demonstrated by the fact that all participants referred to them as grandparents, regardless of any biological relation. To be a Mayan Elder signifies that a person is seen by society as wise, authoritative, and worthy of respect (Harman, 2001). 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 death.

Mayan knowledge is cultivated and nurtured through discussion and guidance based on the life experience of the Mayan Elder (García Ixmatá, 2010), living in a Mayan community involves taking advice from Elders (Ekern, 2011). The importance of the Elder and oral tradition is also found in other indigenous cultures (Finn et al., 2017; Stiegelbauer, 1992) as a way of preserving knowledge and giving a sense of place to the individual (Huff, 2006). Participants demonstrated that within present day Mayan society beliefs from the traditional Mayan Cosmovision and Christianity have merged, giving way to religious syncretism that has been referred to as “Maya Catholicism” (Maurer, 1993). Within this syncretism the communication with the dead is not only possible, but it is also visible and experienced. This communication can take place at work, home, community life and, above all, dreams (Suazo, 2010). Dreams appear to play an important part in terms of death. Mayans are able to receive knowledge from their ancestors (Permanto, 2015), it corroborates that there is an afterlife and a purpose after death. Both dreaming and dream interpretation are important parts of the Mayan worldview, and this is nowhere made clearer than when dealing with death (Garrard-Burnett, 2015). Many of the beliefs, tradition, and knowledge seem to pass from oral tradition, and the experience of living in a Mayan village (García Ixmatá, 2010),

which entails living in a society that is full of legends, stories, spiritual practices, and mysticism.

The 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. Death is experienced on a collective rather than an individualistic level. It is the community that is in charge of giving support to the family and helping it with their needs (Suazo, 2010). The experience of death in a Mayan village includes the celebration of life and death. The deceased continue being active members of the community (Ekern, 2011; García, 2014).

The fourth theme addresses death as a part of the natural law of life; a law that cannot be avoided, a stage that all living things need to go through; a stage where those that have already passed away are now fulfilling a purpose and taking care of the ones that are living (Garrard-Burnett, 2015). It is safe to conclude that the sense of community and companionship remains after death, and 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 fulfill a different purpose, and to be in a position to assist others.

### Swedish culture

As with the Mayans, we extracted the super-ordinate themes and emergent themes, using examples from the interviews in order to provide better and deeper comprehension of their attitudes, opinions, and feelings toward death (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Super-ordinate and emergent themes for Swedish participants.

Super-ordinate theme	Emergent themes
Death is the end	Rationalized Indifference Darkness/Nothingness
Focus is on life	Afterlife is uncertain Long life
Death, private and uncomfortable	Family and loved ones Intimate subject Uncomfortable Silent matter Individual
Weak traditions but open to change	Weak traditions Open to new ways

### 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. 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.

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, a 45-year-old man)

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, a 37-year-old man)

These are clear examples of death seen from an apparent 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. (Participant 8, a 42-year-old man)

Focus in all these cases is on what is known, what can be considered as a fact and a product of rational thinking. Participants focused on what was known both through science and their personal experience, which in turn made their opinion of death rational, and in some cases related to feelings of indifference or stress and sadness.

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, a 27-year-old woman)

The participant struggles to grasp nonexistence, and rationalizing death leads to the perspective of darkness or the end since it implies that everything known to that person will come to an end. 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.

### Focus is on life

Although the previous theme dealt with Swedish participants' view of death, the theme of the focus on life

reveals that, since there is a lot of uncertainty and confusion regarding what happens after death, participants focused more on what is certain, and showed a greater interest in what life had to offer, in living a long life, and expressed having concerns for their loved ones after their passing away.

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, a 28-year-old woman)

The participant explains 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 her, it is best to invest all efforts on life. Participants made comments regarding social pressure and media advertising about the importance of a long life.

In Sweden we expect that we shall be eighty years old, and a lot of things we do every day 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, a 34-year-old woman)

The participant mentions that in the eyes of society there is a relation 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. Some participants when rationalizing death seemed to care more about the feelings and state of their loved ones.

If you have the approach to death that I have, it's just a switch and 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, a 37-year-old man)

The participant does not show much concern for death since it is considered a switch that just turns everything off, instead the attention is given more to those that have to experience his passing away.

The purpose of this theme was to explain how death caused confusion, stress, indifference, or sadness. Since participants had a difficult time understanding or grasping a concept of afterlife they considered more fruitful to place their energy and focus on living. Life is something that is known and under their control, and as such it should be lived

and enjoyed. Participants shared a common understanding that a long life was something positive and something to be desired. This theme aimed at explaining that death caused uncertainty in many participants, but life was always certain and familiar and, because of that, it was cherished.

### *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.

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. (Participant 7 a 56-year-old man)

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

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 it is 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, a 36-year-old woman)

In both cases participants expressed how difficult and complicated the subject of death is in society. The subject is perceived as a negative and sad subject that should not be spoken about unless it is unavoidable, and even so it is only spoken about perfunctorily.

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. (Participant 4, a 28-year-old woman)

Participants seem to have a common understanding that the subject is very sensitive, and as such one

should be very careful with it. It is a subject that it is not talked upon with ease or comfort. Seeing that it can create a tense atmosphere in general it is best to avoid it unless the circumstance requires it.

Death, according to the statements by the Swedes, 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 experts on 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. Although notices of deaths are typically posted in newspapers and memorial websites on the internet, 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 toward new approaches to death, and in some cases described Sweden as a culture that is constantly changing.

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 it's good. (Participant 7, a 56-year-old man)

Here Sweden is described as a society that is able to adapt new traditions with ease, which is seen as a positive thing. In terms of attitudes toward death it means that the participant realizes that Sweden is a country that has lost many of its tradition, many have been replaced and contemporary Sweden is a country that is able to adopt new traditions and customs, it is described as a fast pace changing society. Other participants spoke about the lack of traditions but that it would be positive to make changes in how funerals are held.

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 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 it's something, it's probably doable but it's more of an effort for the people holding the funeral. (Participant 5, a 34-year-old man)

The participant's narrative tells of how there aren't any traditions that make people talk or focus on death more positively, yet he is not closed to the idea of making or experiencing those changes. This narrative exemplifies how Sweden is, as previously described, a society that can easily implement new traditions without much problem. What can be seen here is that traditions seem to have an individual element, it is the individual or close family that decides how death should be handled rather than society. Other participants gave positive examples on how their family had started a tradition with regard to death.

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?

uhmm 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, a 27-year-old woman)

This illustrates how the participant's family did something spontaneous 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 a religion to be considered good.

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 valued.

In sum, 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. 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 has been reported in previous studies (Høeg & Pajari, 2013; Strang et al., 2014) and it led participants to claim that what is known for them is life and existence, and death seemed to simply be the end of that. For some participants thinking of death evoked feelings of stress and sadness while others showed indifference.

Given that most participants considered death the end of existence, life was a more appealing subject to focus on. Death seemed frightening because it contained too many elements that are unknown (cf. 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 had 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 on this theme were mostly based on how a person’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 is nothing that could be done to change or influence the outcome of death. If there is nothing that can be done, then it is simply best to devote one’s energies to life.

All participants agreed that the subject of death is rarely discussed in Sweden, whether in a public or family setting, and the lack of experience in the subject could be a reason for it to be considered an uncomfortable and taboo subject that should be

avoided (Pajari, 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 causes discomfort to others. People in general wouldn’t know what to do or say about it, perhaps because of the lack of personal experience with a culturally explanatory framework (Jakobsson et al., 2006). Participants reflected that friends could think that the subject is not fun or it is too dark. Death can be associated with religion and some people mentioned social pressure within Swedish society for showing others that things are always fine, which would become a problem if one wanted to discuss death with someone else, since it would mean acting against that social pressure. This indicates that an attitude of silence about death is preferred to being active and open about it (Hagström, 2016).

Respondents observed that traditions that made them think about death do exist but are considered weak and 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 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 mindset 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 shown toward practices such as Mindfulness (Hornborg, 2012) and the use of technology, including online memorials in to express grief (Hugoson, 2009). The benefits of discussing death in Scandinavia has been discussed by other authors (Hall-Lord et al., 2018; Strang et al., 2014).

## Discussion

The interviews and literature review show that the Swedish and Mayan cultures have very different perspectives on life and death. It is not our intention, nor is it the objective of the present study, to favor one perspective over the other. Rather, we sought to evaluate how different cultures can look at the same existential phenomenon from different angles, and to demonstrate how different perspectives produce

different outcomes. What is death? What happens to a person during and after death? How should one respond to 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 with whom anyone could talk to for support or wisdom, a guide that tells and explains traditions, rituals, culture and even existential inquiries including death. For Mayan participants, death was not the end of life or existence, but a stage that people have to go through. Dreams played an important role, since they mean both communication with the dead and confirmation of an afterlife. Death does not end a person's relationship with their loved ones, it just changes the way it is lived and understood. For the Mayans, talking to the dead and preparing food and drinks for them is not only rational, but an obligation they have to honor to show their loved ones that they are remembered. These practices keep 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, reflecting the more homogeneous and traditional nature of Mayan culture.

For the Swedish, 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 Swedes it was more private and intimate. Death was mostly analyzed through secular rationality for Swedish participants, which produced more questions than answers. To be born in Mayan society means that a person is part of a community in life and death, a community that conceives of life beyond current scientific explanations; they appealed to their historical and cultural heritage 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 Swedes, 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 is known than to speculate on what could or could not be the case.

Mayans believe in a spiritual realm where the dead reside, which is seen as rational to them. For Mayan participants, 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. The Swedes seemed to be aware that their current attitude toward death causes indifferent

or negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in them and in their society. This and other elements of their answers also included 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, there is no reason to believe that it will not or cannot change them again.

The contrast between both cultures supports the general historical analysis of Ariès (1981) that Western rationality has made death a non-communal, private and, to a large degree, hidden aspect of existence in industrialized societies. Nonetheless, Swedes' use of social media may be seen as an attempt to make death at least partly a communal event. In the case of the Mayans, one should extend the analysis of communal cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) that presents the self as embedded within a network of relationships in the past, present, and future, which continue after death. For Mayans but not Swedes, communal membership continues for both the living and the dead after someone passes away, because the ancestors are assumed to continue existing and influencing the living from another realm. For many if not most Swedes (as well as for members of other secular societies), in contrast, the presumption is that the deceased will mostly only impact the person through the latter's psychological dynamics, rather than as their continuing to have some type of existence and direct impact on the living.

Because the Mayans' attitudes toward death and communal support seem to decrease the anxiety about personal demise, it is important to evaluate the effect of creating shared and meaningful rituals to mark someone's passing in secular/technological societies, besides those currently in existence. With the recent onslaught of the Covid pandemic and its devastating losses, some Western professionals have provided advice on how to personally deal with the grief, without much discussion of communal support (e.g., Gottlieb, 2020). An analysis of responses to a disaster shows that spontaneously the survivors may enact rituals to seek meaning (Ursano & Fullerton, 1990), so deliberate forms of soothing rituals can be developed to help individuals with their loss even in secular societies. And other studies could evaluate any potential negative effects of more traditional societies attitudes toward death, for instance with respect to potential resistance to needed change.

The greatest strength of the study is the comparison of two very different cultures, using a procedure that allowed for the emergence of themes related to death

attitudes and practices. Furthermore, the number of participants was larger than the usual IPA study because our purpose was not to only see death from the subjective experiences of a few participants, but to identify cultural patterns. The study, nonetheless, has various limitations, including: neither Mayans nor Swedes were interviewed in their mother tongue, which might have influenced how they felt and expressed themselves during the interviews. In the case of the Mayans, they came from different parts of Guatemala which meant that they spoke different Mayan languages. Nonetheless, neither Mayans nor Swedes commented during the interviews that this had limited their ability to express themselves. The use of IPA from a small group of individuals makes it difficult to draw strong generalizations. Many of the conclusions and themes in the interviews were summaries of common themes, which meant having to sacrifice specific elements and themes from the narrative of the participants to obtain a general perspective. Another limitation is that the interviews and coding were conducted only by the first author, although in consultation with the second. And some forms of strengthening trustworthiness such as an independent auditor to thoroughly evaluate the coding of the material were missing in this study (cf. Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Only ethnic Swedes were interviewed, which means that the conclusions drawn do not represent a complete view of other Swedes. Similarly, 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. On the other hand, this study has the advantage of presenting information about death from modern-day Mayans in Guatemala, providing a clear view of how they conceive death, and could serve as a platform for a comparison to the perspectives of their ancestors, as evidenced through archeological artifacts and texts. By comparing two unrelated cultures, this study casts light on the differential effects of mostly secular and individual versus mostly communal and religious attitudes and practices toward death.

### Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

### Note

1. In the interviews Mayan participants used the word “abuelos” to refer to older people of both genders, which translates to “grandparents.” We use the word “Elders” in order for the reader not to be confused.

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