

The Roman Games and Consumption Rituals

Yuko Minowa, Long Island University – Brooklyn Campus, USA

The vast sea of the consumer's psyche is darkly mysterious. In examining the history of funeral rites across cultures, we find that binary qualities of opposite and startlingly contradictory forces coexist in socially cultivated consumers' emotions and behavior. In facing death, either grief and joy or despondence and elation seem to exist on opposite sides of the same coin. While there is universal commonality in phases of personal bereavement at the moment of loss, crescive norms in expressing grief, and even jubilee, in public during and after the period of mourning seem to vary across cultures. Not only do such customs involve experiential consumption of the ritual, but artifacts to perform the ritual are often sumptuous.

The purpose of this paper is to explore intersections of consumer rituals and the Roman games, gladiator games in particular, which originated as funeral rites in Etruria and developed into the brutal and gruesome but popular public entertainment. While the gladiator combats in ancient Rome started in the middle of the Republic, the focus is given to their function and structure as a ritual for consumers in the Roman Empire when the emperors used the Roman games as propaganda. We discuss the significance of the Roman game as experiential consumption. This study is conducted by examining classic and contemporary literature and interpreting the images and inscriptions delineated on archeological artifacts such as vase paintings, relief sculptures on sarcophagi, floor mosaics, and panel paintings.

Prior to Etruscans and Romans, commemorating the death by hosting funeral games after the mourning had been popular among Greeks, conjectured through the Homeric epic The Iliad in which the joyful and festive funeral games, such as chariot racing, sword fighting, and wrestling, take place following "the rites of burning" and burial of Patroclus, the dearest friend of mythical hero Achilles. Roman funeral games, on the contrary, involved human sacrifice and bloody death since, as the Christian critic Tertullian wrote, "[Romans] believed that the souls of the dead were propitiated by human blood, and so at funerals they sacrificed prisoners of war or slaves of poor quality bought for the purpose." Gladiatorial presentations, or munera gladiatorial, meant gifts of the gladiator to the dead. Even after they became entertainment, the concept of gifts from the emperor and

magistrates to public spectators rather than to the dead soul remained during the period of Roman Empire.

There was a long history in the development of gladiator combats from the funeral rite to the spectacular public entertainment. The first recorded gladiator fights in Rome were dated from 264 BC, and involved only three pairs of gladiators to honor a former consul; the rites were conducted by his sons. The number of gladiators involved increased exponentially to 44 in 216 BC, then to 120 in 174 BC. In 65 BC, when Julius Caesar held gladiator fights for his deceased father, 320 pairs of slaves were to be brought in before the extravagant plans were revised. In AD 82, the 50,000-seat Colosseum was built by the emperors Vespasian and Titus, using mostly Jewish slave labor. The most spectacular event was held by Trajan as a jubilant four-month victory celebration against Dacia in AD 107, and it included 5,000 pairs of gladiators.

During the Imperial Period, Augustus and his successors used gladiator games as propaganda for the assurance of their power, authority, and unity of the empire. The shows were free to the public. The extravaganzas staged by the emperors were a form of conspicuous consumption by the elites of the society of the time. Wild and ferocious animals brought from continents of Africa and Asia, such as elephants, bulls, bears, crocodiles, lions, and tigers were brought in the arena for lethal fights with unarmed humans. In addition to the excessiveness, the quality of the extravaganza was demonstrated through the rarity and anomaly of the objects available for public viewing. Deformed humans and dwarfs were other objects of spectacle. Mass crucifixions of Christians and executions of prisoners also took place in the arena for public consumption.

The entire process involving gladiator games can be compared with what anthropologist Victor Turner termed liminoid ritual, a three-stage process of separation, liminality, and reintegration, through which individual consumers or society at large recognize, deal with, and dispose of threats. For example, one important ritualistic aspect of the gladiator game is cena libera, an elegant banquet given to prisoners, gladiators, and bestiarii, the men who fought against wild beasts, the night before the show. Dinners were made into spectacles where the public, out of apparent voyeurism, came to observe how the condemned would indulge vulgarly and voraciously in food and drink the night before the macabre entertainment. The

dinner was not a symbolic compensation but a ritual to cleanse the vile blood of the gladiators and turn them into noble victims. While the voyeurs and the condemned shared time, they did not share food and drink. Commensality, the action of eating and drinking together, is one of the most powerful operators of the social process. At holidays, it serves as a sacred event to reify and strengthen human bonds. Its process contributes to negotiating and renewing the consumer ideology and praxis of the ritual. Since the symbolic consumption in participatory ritual is used to build and rebuild the self to oneself and others, and to rebuild the relationship among participants, not to share the *cena libera* was clearly a means to reinforce one's self identity and distinguish the self from the other group.

We discuss the experiential consumption aspect of the Roman game, by framing it in terms of the purpose and the structure of game spectating. We compare it with how today's sports spectators use the game events for the sake of the experience, for integrating themselves into their community, for classifying themselves in a certain group category, and for interacting with other consumers. For example, Saint Augustine's description of his pupil Alypius reveals that the consumer who was originally resistant to the entire idea of the gladiatorial game would be ignited and become ablaze with mad enthusiasm, exulting in the wild frenzy and bloody sensuality of watching the game, once they actually experienced it in the amphitheater. Dio Chrysostom's description of Alexandrians in the stadium further supports the collectively frantic, trance-inducing aspects of the experiential consumption of game spectating. On the other hand, Ovid's recommendation that young males use such events as chariot races and gladiatorial performances as an opportunity to hunt and openly flirt with women suggests that the game spectating functioned for consumers as a means of interacting and socializing with each other. The study shows that the consuming of Roman games served both instrumental and autotelic purposes, while the game spectating was directly the object of consumption as well as the focal resource of interpersonal communications.

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