

Death and burial customs: a cultural comparison essay



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Cultures throughout the world bury their dead in accordance with their religious beliefs and social traditions. However, these traditions are transient and have changed greatly over the past centuries. The essay seeks to establish an understanding of the customs and death ceremonies in ancient traditions, the Japanese, Native Americans and modern American cultures. (British Humanist Association website, 2003) Origin of death ceremonies/ funeral Practices in ancient cultures Death ceremonies today mirror ancient practices. One of the most civilized societies in history was the Egyptian community.

Their death ceremonies reflected their social, economic and religious backgrounds. Ancient Egypt was largely dependant on the River Nile. It would flood annually between the months of July and October. During other times of the year, most subjects would be busy planting or performing other agricultural activities. Nevertheless, during the flood, most natives would be busy building canals or other establishments in the Kingdom. Against this background, most ancient Egyptian funerary customs reflected these economic activities.

They believed in continuity of life and hence preserved bodies to facilitate this transition. An Egyptian would be expected to carry all his possessions in order to prepare for his life in the Next world. This was the reason why most of their tombs had pictures of the architecture, crafts, agricultural activities and dresses symbolizing prosperity in life after death. Egyptians believed that everything envisaged in present life would be necessary in the afterlife. Consequently, most of their dead would be buried along with their tools.

It was common to find things like wigs, clothing, hairdressing supplies and other assortments along bodies. They believed that some of the items needed in the after life would transformed magically into items they required. This was the reason why many tombs had food paintings on the wall. In the event that the food was in scarce supply, then there would be a need to make it available. (Spencer, 1988) Ancient Egyptians also believed that the body kept the soul intact and this would facilitate a transition into the next life. Consequently, the body had to be preserved by mummification.

They also asserted that one's personality would remain in the burial site (tomb). Therefore, it was necessary to make burial ceremonies quite elaborate. Mummification was done by removing a dead person's internal organs (however, they threw away the brain because they thought that it was not important enough). The living would place these organs in closed jars made of stone or clay. The jars resembled different animals that represented protective spirits in the afterlife. They then wrapped these bodies with special pieces of clothing leaving no part exposed.

Additionally, ancient Egyptians buried their dead with a piece of writing known as the book of the dead. The writing was a collection of spells, passwords and magical formulas thought to be essential in the afterlife. They believed that the dead would undergo a lot of trials and it was therefore necessary to equip them with such a tool. (Andrews, 1994) Ancient civilizations such as the latter mentioned Kingdom largely believed in the idea of a rebirth. To them, death was mere interruption of one life but it facilitated another life.

Customs and practices at that time revolved around this concept. (Spencer, 1988) Native American customs and Death Ceremonies Native Americans had embraced the fact that death could occur at any time. However, this did not undermine the sanctity of the dead. Although there are a number of tribes that make up the Native American group, all of them believed in the concept of two souls. One soul would die concurrently with the body while another would enter into the spiritual world and guide the lives of the living. Despite this similarity, most native tribes have their own distinct death customs.

Some of these customs may be shared with other tribes through intermarriages or through trade while others may remain exclusive to that particular individual. (Wahl, 1969) Hopewell societies in the Midwestern region used to furnish their tombs because they believed that the dead ought to be given an exclusive send off. In sharp contrast, the Native Americans found in the Arctic region did not pay attention to their dead as they left them outside to be decomposed by the elements or eaten by wild animals. Tribes in the South eastern region practiced secondary burying.

Here, bodies were exhumed, cleansed and the bones reburied. Tribes in the North eastern region were fond of keeping skeletons of the dead until a time when all members of the community would engage in mass burials. The skeletons would be buried together with feathers and fur to protect them in the afterlife. (Wahl, 1969) Native American tribes found in the Northwestern coastal regions would place their dead in canoes tied to poles and would let the canoes wonder off. Conversely, tribes located in California would cremate their bodies.

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Those found in the western part of the country would place their dead in caves. Those tribes located in the plains would bury their dead. However, in cases where the ground was not soft enough, they would place their dead on top of tree platforms. Mummification was also done among tribes in the South Atlantic and Central tribes. However, when a large number of people in the tribe died concurrently due to a disease outbreak, the bodies of the dead would be cast away in a river or would bury the masses in a mass grave. Funeral rites symbolized a continuity into the afterlife.

Some tribes would mourn for the dead dramatically. For instance, others would blacken their faces, cut off their hair or even cut off a part of their body such as their arm to express their grief. Most tribes would bury their dead with their material possessions. Others even sacrificed slaves, horses and wives of the dead in order to assist the dead in the afterlife. Other communities would wail for long periods of time and eventually hold a death anniversary. (Wahl, 1969) The time spent in burial practices depended on the nature of the tribe.

Some tribes believed that bodies were to be disposed off as soon as possible. For instance, the Apache Indians burnt all the material possessions of the dead and they moved away from any place that the dead had lived. This was done in response to the fear of ghosts which they believed would haunt them. Similarly, the Navajo tribes cleansed all funeral attendants in a purification ceremony. (Wahl, 1969) Japanese customs and death ceremonies Japan has a rich and diverse cultural heritage. Consequently, burial rites may not necessarily coincide in all parts of the country.

Religion, economic status and social status largely determine the nature of the funeral rites. However, the predominant practices revolve around Buddhist customs. (Bodiford, 1992) After an individual passes away, their bodies are washed and all openings covered with cotton wool. The family used to perform this task in the past, however, these days, hospitals do it. Women are covered in a kimono while men wear suits and cosmetics added appropriately. Mortuary representatives usually collaborate with one member of the family and expect them to make decisions about the funeral. Most families give their eldest son this responsibility. This individual will then decide on the food people will eat, nature of the altar to be used, type of casket among other things. The altars to be used in the funeral may be decorated depending on the deceased family's preferences. The altars may be decorated with fruits or flowers or may be carved depending on their preferences. (Bodiford, 1992) From the mortuary, the body is placed into a casket. The corpse is usually accompanied by some flammable possessions that they used in their lives. For instance, candy, cigarettes among others. Thereafter, the body is covered in dry ice and then transferred to the later which may be available at the deceased home or in the mortuary. It is particularly interesting that the Japanese strictly observe condolence procedures. Normally, a well laid out envelope is placed near the body of the dead and individuals are supposed to contribute money depending on their relationship with the deceased. The contributors usually write their names alongside the amounts contributed. This is then handed to the respective family after completing the ceremony. (Faure, 1991)

Relatives of the deceased and other funeral attendants burn incense just beside the altar. They also offer their prayers while performing the latter task. The latter are followed by the arrival of the Buddhist priest who is first given some tea, speaks to relatives and then proceeds to a funeral room. Thereafter, the Priest reads from the sutra, burns incense and then invites family members to the altar, they offer incense and bow to the altar. All other attendants repeat this procedure and this is what is called the wake service. Afterwards, the family gives visitors some money to thank them for attending.

A family member is expected to sleep in the same room as the body of the deceased and may take turns with others. (Bodiford, 1992) The funeral occurs just one day after the wake service. All these services are conducted at the temple and a wooden tablet that has a posthumous name allocated by the priest. Most of the individuals attending the funeral will be required to offer incense at the altar. The priest will read from the sutra and people view the body. (Faure, 1991) The final ceremony is cremation. After the funeral, the body is transported to a crematorium through a car that may also be carrying some family members.

The body is transferred from the casket to the crematorium and placed in an oven. The attendant tells family members the duration of the cremation so that family members can come back for the remains. Bones are taken and placed into urns where they are to be transported to the family's grave or a temple depending on family arrangements. In rural areas, members may walk to the cemetery where the bones of the deceased are buried. The last

issue among Buddhists is conduction of a forty-ninth day service know as the Festival of the dead. (Bodiford, 1992)

Modern American customs and death ceremonies American practices in the present day represent the economical, psychological symbolic aspects of their lives. In terms of economic explanations, some people assert that American funeral practices denote the nature of capitalism and materialism. (British Humanist Association website, 2003) Death customs in the US represent the core beliefs of society; that life is sacred. Most American funerals are characterized by a comfortable and natural public display of the corpse on his last day of viewing.

The reason for this is that society wants to portray an acceptance of the fact that bodies will decompose with time and that no one is trying to indicate that they have been repulsed with this. On the other hand, bodies are made simple enough in order to display the fact that they have not been manipulated as capitalist systems normally do. (British Humanist Association website, 2003) Conclusion All the latter systems have a wide range of differences between each other. However, there are some similarities that cannot be ignored. For instance, most societies use color symbolically to represent their grief.

It is common among Buddhists in Japan, Americans, Europeans and many other cultural groups wearing black dresses or suits. Most of the communities assessed above also depict their grief through their hair. Most of them normally cut off their hair in order to their dishevelment. Many cultures adopt noisy cultures in funerals as some of them drum and wail

loudly. Lastly, most cultures engage in elaborate treatment of the deceased bodies. This symbolizes the fact that death is a rite of passage like birth or marriage. (British Humanist Association website, 2003)