

Death rituals in american and egyptian society



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The term burial refers to the practice of disposing of dead bodies or remains of the dead. Though there are other ways of disposing of dead bodies as practiced by people following different religions, the term burial particularly means the act of placing a body into the dug into the ground. Once the digging has been done, the body is placed inside, followed by the replacement grave of the soil to fill the hollow again. Though the term burial may refer to burying of any object or body, it usually refers to the burial of the body of dead person. It is sometimes also used for the placement of a body into a tomb. Burial of dead bodies prevents the release of stink as a result of gases discharged by bacterial putrefaction after a body starts to decompose (Bodiford, 1992). History tells us that burial is an old custom and the first instances in history are found during the Paleolithic period in European caves.

Research method

The approach used for data collection relied on both secondary and primary sources. Data were gathered according to two complementary techniques:

- * Documentary research and

- * Personal interviews

With respect to documentary research, the internet served as the primary tool for research. Relevant journals, articles and books provided the information. For more scholarly sources online libraries and research databases such as Emerald and Ebsco were used.

Personal interviews were conducted from a number of local residents from different areas selected randomly. The majority of these interviews were personally conducted at or outside their residences; a few however were interviewed on the phone. Informal, conversational interviews were taken where Death and Burial Rituals were discussed. In most of the cases no predetermined questions were asked. This strategy kept the discussions open and adaptable. Almost all the interviewees discussed how they have seen changes in these rituals with passage of time. They also shared their personal experiences.

Introduction

Many communities all over the world bury their dead in keeping with their religious beliefs and social customs. Usually the body is carefully handled and buried with respect. In some cultures it is believed that the physical remains continue to be important to the person who has passed into the next world. In other cultures, a ceremonial burning frees the spirit to go up to its new abode in the next world.

Many variations in the burial customs are found especially in early Asian communities. Though, burial usually refers to burying in ground, history tells that amongst the Vikings water burials were common. Later, they started to burn the bodies followed by scattering the ashes in water (Wahl, 1961).

In India, outdoor funeral pyres were common by the side of rivers and the ashes were frequently thrown into the holy Ganges River. Nonetheless, these customs are transitory and have changed to a great extent over time. As societies have evolved, their ways of burying their dead and grave markings

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evolve too only to provide an interesting area to be studied by archeologists of the future generations.

This essay aims at comparing and contrasting the death and burial rituals of the contemporary American society with the ancient Egyptian society and their primitive ways of burial. The essay would talk about how the ancient Egyptians would preserve the dead bodies (mummies). It would also talk about how in modern America and in modern Egypt bodies are buried in the natural form to signify death as a rite of passage.

Egyptian rituals of burial and death:

Ancient Egyptian society believed in rebirth and this is what reflects in the burial rites that they practiced. For them, death was not the end of life but only an interval. They believed that eternal life could be ensured by leading a pious life and by preserving the bodies of those that passed away by mummifying them. For the Egyptians, every human body consisted of the 'ka', the 'ba', and the 'akh' (name, body and shadow) (Spencer, 1988). The name and shadow were also considered to be living things that had to be sustained and shielded from harm along with the body so as to enjoy eternal life.

Bodies that are buried in desert pits are naturally preserved by aridity.

Therefore, the poor Egyptians who could not afford a ceremonial burial were usually buried in deserts. Rich people would bury their dead in stone tombs making use of non-natural mummification methods. This involved doing away with the internal organs, followed by covering the body in linen. The body was finally buried in a stone tomb in a wooden coffin.

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By the New Kingdom, the ancient Egyptians had mastered the art of mummifying dead bodies. The best method took as many as 70 days and involved removal of the internal organs including the brain which was removed through the nose. The body was then dried out after the application of a mixture of salts called natron. The body was then covered in linen with protecting amulets placed in between layers and placed in an ornamented anthropoid sarcophagus.

The original preservation practices declined during the Ptolemaic and Roman eras as greater importance was now given to the outward appearance of the mummy, which was bejeweled. Rich people were buried with a lot of luxury items. Nonetheless, all burials, not considering the social status, included goods for the departed soul. After burial, the family and friends of the dead were expected to occasionally bring foodstuff to the tomb and offer prayers for the departed soul.

Egyptians assumed that preserving the body by mummifying it was the only way to have an eternal life. A special constituent of the death and burial ritual was a carved mask, put on the face of the dead. This mask was thought to make the spirit of the mummy stronger and protect the soul from evil spirits on its way to the next world. Egyptians believed in the flimsy state of transition - thinking that the dead would have to successfully surpass in their physical and spiritual flight from this world to the next.

Burial and Death rituals in American culture:

The United States has a loaded history of burial and death rituals and traditions that have merged with the incursion of Evangelical and Catholic customs to form fascinating and at times strange contemporary practices.

The present century has observed a number of remarkable changes in death customs of the United States. Some of these changes, perhaps, represent improvements in the long established rituals; others do not. Customs of burial were completely different a century ago than they are at present. Mr. Peterson, a local resident, shared his father's early life experiences of death rituals with us. While giving details, he told us that his father grew up in a countryside area of south-central Kentucky. When an old lady in his neighborhood died, female members from his family went to her cottage, bathe the dead woman and made her wear the best dress from her wardrobe. The next day a wooden coffin was brought and was loaded in the rear of a wagon drawn by a mule and towed to a small graveyard a few miles away. The members of her family had a small gathering near her grave and stayed there for a brief service. Routine work was resumed quickly.

Another local interviewee, while talking about his own experiences, told us that his grandfather died when he was only nine year old (five decades ago). They transported the dead body to their old family home for a family gathering. He recalled that there was already a small "funeral parlor" in the close by city by that time. His grandfather's body was placed in one of the bigger rooms. The adult of the family stayed up late talking of the past and about the good deeds of the dead man. The body was buried in the little graveyard the following day.

The death culture of the United States has changed significantly over the last few decades and even at present a variation can be seen in these practices in different localities of the country. In southern America, burials and funerals, predominantly, continue to be extremely “sanctified” events. Residents of southern America still give way to the passing burial procession and pull to the side of the streets.

Things are fundamentally different in the Western part of the country. A funeral, according to an interviewee belonging to the West, takes a completely worldly atmosphere. He, while giving details of his personal experience, recalled that he had attended many funerals where there was no insinuation of the spiritual or religious words, no talking about of God, no interpretation from the Bible, no sacrosanct signs, and no holy hymns. A number of funeral processions even took on an almost celebratory atmosphere.

Another interviewee talked about the playing of popular music in the burial and funeral processions of the Western America. Residents of the West are also seen as too busy to be attending these services. They have a very casual attitude towards these services. A few interviewees also mentioned about attending some funeral services in which even fewer than a dozen people came for the service.

The present Burial and funeral practices of the United States correspond to the emotional, economical and symbolic facets of their lives (Spencer, 1988). A few people, with respect to the economic explanations, affirms that funeral practices of America indicate the nature of materialism and capitalism.

Others, however, believe that these Death customs symbolize the core beliefs of the social system; that “ life is sacred”.

Almost all the funeral services in America are characterized by a relaxed and normal public show of the dead body on his last day before burial. The main rationale behind this is that people want to show an acceptance of the verity that dead bodies will decay with passing time and that no one is making an attempt to spell out that they have been nauseated with this (British Humanist Association website, 2003). Dead bodies On the other hand, are represented as simple as possible so as to display that no manipulation has been done as normally carried out by capitalist systems.

American Fascination of Egyptian Mummies and modern Egyptian burial practices

The culture of ancient Egypt and the mummification of their dead bodies have been a source of great inscrutability and attraction to the people of United States. The Egyptian belief that mummies and their spirits are capable of flying out of the burial place and come back to it is also a bit terrifying to a number of Americans.

Although the burial and funeral practices of the Egyptians and Americans were extremely different in the ancient times, Egyptian culture has drastically changed with passing time. They have given up the mummification of the dead bodies and burial of Gold and other worldly things with the dead.

The most prevailing religion in Modern Egypt is “ Islam” so their current burial and funeral practices are completely in accordance with the teachings of their religion (Andrews, 1994). When a Muslim Egyptian is close to death, the family members are called upon to console, and remind him/her of God’s compassion and amnesty. Verses from the Qur’an may also be recited by some encouraging the dying soul to recite words of commemoration and prayer.

When the person is dead, the family members are encouraged to stay peaceful, pray for the deceased, and start arrangements for funeral. The eyes of the departed should be closed, and the dead body is temporarily covered with a clean sheet. Egyptian Muslims try hard to bury the dead body as early as possible.

The family members, relatives or other members of the society, in preparation for funeral, will bathe and shroud the dead body. The body is then carried to the place of the funeral prayers. These last prayers are usually held in the open air. All the people gather there, and the prayer leader (imam) stands at the front of the dead body.

After the final prayers, the dead body is transported to the graveyard for burial. Although funeral prayers are attended by all members of the community, only the male members go with the dead body to the graveyard (Faure, 1991). The dead body is peacefully laid in the grave facing the holy city of Mecca. Putting flowers or other momentos is strictly discouraged by the Islamic teachings.

Now that we have read about the modern Egyptian burial and funeral practices more closely, we can see that it is very similar to the modern American burial rituals.

Conclusion

Rituals regarding burial and funeral cremation represent the beliefs, holy cosmology and rational growth of people and their customs. Today, the average individual is likely to disregard studying or exploring about traditions of burials and funerals. The reason behind this is that the present world is more about young life and life with an entrenched apprehension of death buried in one side of the mind. Death is an inescapable part of living. Archaeologists search and investigate the history of ancient civilizations by discovering burial and funeral practices that different cultures have left behind. These findings disclose more and more about the way societies have lived and from where our current cosmology around the world has come from.