

Comparing death and bereavement in Europe and Asia

Adrian de León

Merel Wallis de Vries

Noëmie Sor

Introduction:

- Arnold Van Gennep: details may differ around the world, the general behaviour around the time of someone's death remains the same.
- Bronislaw Malinowski: funeral customs are a social mechanism allowing emotional relief, a simple readjustment of normal conditions.
- Funeral rites are designed to speed the deceased on their way and prevent any possibility of an unwelcome return.
- Funeral customs expose an instinctive horror of death and even the dead; on the other, they reveal a desire to maintain some kind of bond with the departed.

Funeral Ceremonies

- **Similarities**

- Christianity, Buddhism and Islam share similarities in the days preceding death and in their funeral rites: all three share the ritual of reciting prayers to the deceased.
- - Islam: salat aljinaza
- Buddhism: Bardo Thodal
- Christianity: Bible

Funeral Ceremonies

- Similarities II

Islam and Christianity both share the belief in declaring their faith before passing away.

Islam: 'There is no God but Allah, and Mahomed is his true prophet' and sura 36 of the Koran – which deals with the last judgment- is recited over the dead body.

Christianity: a priest is summoned to hear confession and absolve the dying person.

Funeral ceremonies

- Similarities III
- Islam and Christianity share similarities in regards of its treatment of the body:
- Islam: The corpse is sprinkled with rose water and camphor, while its orifices are stuffed with cotton.
- Christianity: coffin blessed with incense and sprinkled with holy water

Fear of the afterlife and its devils

- Buddhism: popular superstition concerned with a fear of hell and demons; meritorious acts are performed and mantras recited.
- Islam: Grave is deep enough so it can stand upright because it will be examined for orthodoxy by the angels Munkar and Nakir.
- Christianity: until 8th century wore white as rejoice until fear of death entered Christian belief and prayers were sung for soul deliverance.

Differences following the funeral

- Europe: Following the funeral, there is no great tradition in dealing with the aftermath or ceremony.
- Islam: the women wail every Thursday for three weeks while on Fridays they go to the grave.
- Buddhism: a wooden effigy of the deceased is dressed in his or her clothes, lamas chant liturgies for 49 days, effigy then decorated is dismembered.

Comparing a Chinese and European burial

- Chinese folk religion

Based on Confucian values:
family, loyalty, filial piety, natural hierarchy
Worship of gods, ghosts and ancestors

Pay their respect

China

Family members come to say their goodbyes wrapping white thread and hemp twine around the neck of the deceased.

Condolence gifts such as incense, paper to burn
Mourning hall, soul tablet

Europe

Family and friends

Wearing predominantly black clothes

Open coffin

Condolences



China

Coffin of wood coated with black lacquer

Burial date decided by feng shui master

The procession : firecrackers, white turbans and incense

Person in front carries a fragrant basket in which are loose red threads, person behind beats a gong, followed by the rest.

Europe

Coffin of wood

Burial date decided by family

Open ceremony in church or hall with speeches by family members and friends (and if in a church : by a priest)

The procession : walking in silence, closest relatives in front, followed by the rest.

The burial

China

Gongs and fireworks

Standing around the grave, holding hands

Burning incense and taking mourning turbans off

Sometimes wailing

Europe

In silence throwing flowers or soil on the coffin

Sometimes last words or final prayers from relatives or priest

Wailing

Mourning

China

Sons and daughters must still wear mourning clothes and white turbans

Closer relationship, longer mourning period

Visit the grave once a year, offering

Ancestral hall, tablet on altar

Europe

No rules, but usually close family members mourn for a longer period in which they restrain from any festivities

Visit the grave whenever and definitely on the anniversary



Reminders and commemorations

- *Cultural changes in attitudes towards death, dying and bereavement*, Hayslip and Peveto
- Mourning is a universal ritual ; only the cultural practices differ.
- Repeating scheme of grief and mourning across cultures



Reminders and commemorations

- **USA** : Memorial Day, Day of the Dead, Good Friday
 - « Toussaint » in **France** (All Saints Day)
 - Halloween (now adopted around the world)
 - « Todos los Santos » in the Philippines
- => Influence of colonization or occupation on people's cultures and approaches towards death

Reminders and commemorations

- Whether in Asia or Europe, commemorations are also celebrated in smaller circles : family gathering
- Christians go to the church or mourn over tombs to communicate with the deceased, whereas Buddhists go to temples and burn incense as a symbol of communication between this life and afterlife.



Reminders and commemorations

- Typical gathering one year after somebody dies in buddhist families



Reminders and commemorations

- Burning incense, ceremony, food, burning paper money and paper gold
- Offerings : whiskey, cigarettes, fruits, jewelry, sweets...





THE END