

# Death and Culture

(Cultural Aspects Of Death)



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## Chapter- 1

# Introduction to Death and Culture



"All Is Vanity" by C. Allan Gilbert, suggesting an intertwining between life and death.

## Settlement of dead bodies



A horse-drawn hearse with driver, circa 1900, Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA.

In most cultures, after the last offices have been performed and before the onset of significant decay, relations or friends arrange ritual disposal of the body, usually either cremation or interment in a tomb. Cremation is a very old and quite common custom. For some people, the act of cremation exemplifies the belief of the Christian concept of "ashes to ashes". Other modes of disposal include interment in a grave, or interment of the body in a sarcophagus, crypt, sepulchre, or ossuary, a mound or barrow, or a monumental surface structure such as a mausoleum (exemplified by the Taj Mahal) or a pyramid (as exemplified by the Great Pyramid of Giza).

One method of corpse disposal is sky burial, which involves placing the body of the deceased on high ground (a mountain) and leaving it for birds of prey to dispose of, as in Tibet. In some religious views, birds of prey are carriers of the soul to the heavens. Such practice may also have originated from pragmatic environmental issues, such as conditions in which the terrain (as in Tibet) is too stony or hard to dig, there are few trees around to burn. As the local religion of Buddhism, in the case of Tibet, believes that the body after death is only an empty shell, there are more practical ways than burial of disposing of a body, such as leaving it for animals to consume.

Since ancient times in some cultures, efforts have been made to retard the body's decay processes before burial (resulting sometimes in the retardation of decay processes after the burial), as in mummification or embalming. This process may be done before, during or after a funeral ceremony.

Many funeral customs exist in different cultures. In some fishing or marine communities, mourners may put the body into the water, in what is known as burial at sea. Several mountain villages have a tradition of hanging the coffin in woods.

Many cultures have locations in which graves are usually grouped together in a plot of land, called a *cemetery* or *graveyard*. Burials can be arranged by a funeral home, mortuary, undertaker or by a religious body such as a church or the community's burial society, a charitable or voluntary body charged with these duties.

A late 20th century alternative is ecological burial. This is a sequence of deep-freezing, pulverisation by vibration, freeze-drying, removing metals, and burying the resulting powder, which has 30% of the body mass.

Cryonics is the process of cryopreserving of a body to liquid nitrogen temperature to stop the natural decay processes that occur after death. Those practicing cryonics hope that future technology will allow the legally dead person to be restored to life when and if science is able to cure all disease, rejuvenate people to a youthful condition and repair damage from the cryopreservation process itself. As of 2007, there were over 150 people in some form of cryopreservation at one of the two largest cryonics organizations, Alcor Life Extension Foundation and the Cryonics Institute.

Space burial uses a rocket to launch the cremated remains of a body into orbit. This has been done at least 150 times.

In some nations whole body donations have been encouraged by medical schools to be used in medical education and similar training, and in research. In the United States, these gifts, along with organ donations, are governed by the Uniform Anatomical Gift Act. In addition to wishing to benefit others, individuals might choose to donate their bodies to avoid the cost of funeral arrangements; however, willed body programs often encourage families to make alternative arrangements for burial if the body is not accepted.

## **Grief and mourning**



A funeral during the Siege of Sarajevo in 1992

Grief is a multi-faceted response to loss. Although conventionally focused on the emotional response to loss, it also has physical, cognitive, behavioural, social and philosophical dimensions. Common to human experience is the death of a loved one, be they friend, family, or other. While the terms are often used interchangeably, bereavement often refers to the state of loss, and grief to the reaction to loss. Response to loss is varied and researchers have moved away from conventional views of grief (that is, that people move through an orderly and predictable series of responses to loss) to one that considers the wide variety of responses that are influenced by personality, family, culture, and spiritual and religious beliefs and practices.

Bereavement, while a normal part of life for most people, carries a degree of risk when limited support is available. Severe reactions to loss may carry over into familial relations and cause trauma for children, spouses and any other family members. Many forms of what are termed 'mental illness' have loss as their root, but covered by many years and circumstances this often goes unnoticed. Issues of personal faith and beliefs may also face challenge, as bereaved persons reassess personal definitions in the face of great pain. While many who grieve are able to work through their loss independently, accessing additional support from bereavement professionals may promote the process of healing. Individual counseling, professional support groups or educational classes, and peer-lead support groups are primary resources available to the bereaved. In some regions local hospice agencies may be an important first contact for those seeking bereavement support.

Mourning is the process of and practices surrounding death related grief. The word is also used to describe a cultural complex of behaviours in which the bereaved participate or are expected to participate. Customs vary between different cultures and evolve over time, though many core behaviors remain constant. Wearing dark, sombre clothes is one practice followed in many countries, though other forms of dress are also seen. Those most affected by the loss of a loved one often observe a period of grieving, marked by withdrawal from social events and quiet, respectful behavior. People may also follow certain religious traditions for such occasions.

Mourning may also apply to the death of, or anniversary of the passing of, an important individual like a local leader, monarch, religious figure etc. State mourning may occur on such an occasion. In recent years some traditions have given way to less strict practices, though many customs and traditions continue to be followed.

### **Animal loss**

Animal loss is the loss of a pet or a non-human animal to which one has become emotionally bonded. Though sometimes trivialized by those who have not experienced it themselves, it can be an intense loss, comparable with the death of a loved one, depending on how close one was to the animal.

## **Legal aspects**

### **Settlement of legal entity**

Aside from the physical disposition of the corpse, the estate of a person must be settled. This includes all of the person's legal rights and obligations, such as assets and debts. Depending on the jurisdiction, intestacy laws or a will may determine the final disposition of the estate. A legal process, such as probate, will guide these proceedings.

In English law, administration of an estate on death arises if the deceased is legally intestate. In United States law, the term **Estate Administration** is used. When a person dies leaving a will appointing an executor, and that executor validly disposes of the property of the deceased, then the estate will go to probate. However, if no will is left, or the will is invalid or incomplete in some way, then administrators must be appointed. They perform a similar role to the executor of a will but, where there are no instructions in a will, the administrators must distribute the estate of the deceased according to the rules laid down by statute and the common law.

### **Capital punishment**



Etching of a hanging by Francisco Goya.

Capital punishment, also known as the death penalty, is the execution of a convicted criminal by the state as punishment for crimes known as *capital crimes* or *capital offences*. Historically, the execution of criminals and political opponents was used by nearly all societies—both to punish crime and to suppress political dissent. Among democratic countries around the world, all European (except Belarus) and Latin American states, many Pacific Area states (including Australia, New Zealand and Timor Leste), and Canada have abolished capital punishment, while the majority of the United States, Guatemala, and most of the Caribbean as well as some democracies in Asia (*e.g.*, Japan and India) and Africa (*e.g.*, Botswana and Zambia) retain it. Among nondemocratic countries, the use of the death penalty is common but not universal.

In most places that practice capital punishment today, the death penalty is reserved as punishment for premeditated murder, espionage, treason, or as part of military justice. In some countries, sexual crimes, such as adultery and sodomy, carry the death penalty, as do religious crimes such as apostasy, the formal renunciation of one's religion. In many retentionist countries, drug trafficking is also a capital offense. In China human trafficking and serious cases of corruption are also punished by the death penalty. In militaries around the world courts-martial have imposed death sentences for offenses such as cowardice, desertion, insubordination, and mutiny.

There are five countries that still execute child offenders. Iran accounts for two-thirds of the global total of such executions, and currently has roughly 120 people on death row for crimes committed as juveniles (up from 71 in 2007).

Capital punishment is a very contentious issue. Supporters of capital punishment argue that it deters crime, prevents recidivism, and is an appropriate form of punishment for the crime of murder. Opponents of capital punishment argue that it does not deter criminals more than life imprisonment, violates human rights, leads to executions of some who are wrongfully convicted, and discriminates against minorities and the poor. It seems that both sides make their proper points in supporting one of those decisions, but a compromise can not be reached.

## Warfare



Dead Japanese soldiers on Guam July 1944.

War is a prolonged state of violent, large scale conflict involving two or more groups of people. When and how war originated is a highly controversial topic. Some think war has existed as long as humans, while others believe it began only about 5000 years ago with the rise of the first states; afterward war "spread to peaceful hunter-gatherers and agriculturalists."

Often opposing leaders or governing bodies get other people to fight for them, even if those fighting have no vested interest in the issues fought over. In time it became practical for some people to have warfare as their sole occupation, either as a member of a military force or mercenary. The original cause of war is not always known. Wars may be prosecuted simultaneously in one or more different theatres. Within each theatre, there may be one or more consecutive military campaigns. Individual actions of war within a specific campaign are traditionally called battles, although this terminology is not always applied to contentions in modernity involving aircraft, missiles or bombs alone in the absence of ground troops or naval forces.

The factors leading to war are often complicated and due to a range of issues. Where disputes arise over issues such as sovereignty, territory, resources, ideology and a peaceable resolution is not sought, fails, or is thwarted, war often results.

A war may begin following an official declaration of war in the case of international war, although this has not always been observed either historically or currently. Civil wars and revolutions are not usually initiated by a formal declaration of war, but sometimes a statement about the purposes of the fighting is made. Such statements may be interpreted to be declarations of war, or at least a willingness to fight for a cause.

When members of public services die, especially soldiers, their next of kin are usually given a death notification.

### **Military suicide and suicide attacks**



Two Japanese Imperial Marines who committed suicide rather than surrender, Tarawa, Gilbert Islands in the Pacific, 1943.

A suicide attack occurs when an individual or group violently sacrifice their own lives for the benefit of their side, their beliefs or out of fear of being captured . In the desperate final days of World War II, many Japanese pilots volunteered for kamikaze missions in an attempt to forestall defeat for the Empire. In Nazi Germany, Luftwaffe squadrons were formed to smash into American B-17s during daylight bombing missions, in order to delay the highly-probable Allied victory, although in this case, inspiration was primarily the Soviet and Polish *taran* ramming attacks, and death of the pilot was not a desired outcome. The degree to which such a pilot was engaging in a heroic, selfless action or whether they faced immense social pressure is a matter of historical debate. The Japanese also built one-man "human torpedo" suicide submarines.

However, suicide has been fairly common in warfare throughout history. Soldiers and civilians committed suicide to avoid capture and slavery (including the wave of German and Japanese suicides in the last days of World War II). Commanders committed suicide rather than accept defeat. Spies and officers have committed suicide to avoid revealing secrets under interrogation and/or torture. Behaviour that could be seen as suicidal occurred often in battle. Japanese infantrymen usually fought to the last man, launched "banzai" suicide charges, and committed suicide during the Pacific island battles in World War II. In Saipan and Okinawa, civilians joined in the suicides. Suicidal attacks by pilots were common in the 20th century: the attack by U.S. torpedo planes at the Battle of Midway was very similar to a kamikaze attack.

## **Martyrdom**



Jan Hus being burned at the stake

A martyr is a person who is put to death or endures suffering for their beliefs, principles or ideology. The death of a martyr or the value attributed to it is called martyrdom. In different belief systems, the criteria for being considered a martyr are different. In the Christian context, a martyr is an innocent person who, without seeking death, is murdered or put to death for his or her religious faith or convictions. An example is the persecution of early Christians in the Roman Empire. Christian martyrs sometimes decline to defend themselves at all, in what they see as an imitation of Jesus' willing sacrifice.

Islam accepts a broader view of what constitutes a *martyr*, including anyone who dies in the struggle between those lands under Muslim government and those areas outside Muslim rule. Generally, some seek to include suicide bombers as a "martyr" of Islam,

however, this is widely disputed in mainstream Islamic thought, which argues that a martyr may not commit suicide.

Though often religious in nature, martyrdom can be applied to a secular context as well. The term is sometimes applied to those who die or are otherwise severely affected in support of a cause, such as soldiers fighting in a war, doctors fighting an epidemic, or people leading civil rights movements. Proclaiming martyrdom is a common way to draw attention to a cause and garner support.

## **Suicide**

Suicide is the act of intentionally taking one's own life. The term "suicide" can also be used as a noun to refer to a person who has killed himself or herself.

Views on suicide have been influenced by cultural views on existential themes such as religion, honor, and the meaning of life. Most Western and Asian religions—the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism, Hinduism—consider suicide a dishonorable act; in the West it was regarded as a serious crime and offense against God due to religious belief in the sanctity of life. Japanese views on honor and religion led to seppuku being respected as a means to atone for mistakes or failure during the samurai era. In the 20th century suicide in the form of self-immolation has been used as a form of protest. Self-sacrifice (thus saving lives of others) for others is not usually considered suicide.

The predominant view of modern medicine is that suicide is a mental health concern, associated with psychological factors such as the difficulty of coping with depression, inescapable pain or fear, or other mental disorders and pressures. Suicide attempt can be many times interpreted as a "cry for help" and attention, or to express despair and the wish to escape, rather than a genuine intent to die. Most suicides (for various reasons) do not succeed on a first attempt; those who later gain a history of repetitions are significantly more at risk of eventual completion. Nearly a million people worldwide die by suicide annually. While completed suicides are higher in men, women have higher rates for suicide attempts. Elderly males have the highest suicide rate, although rates for young adults have been increasing in recent years.

## **Euthanasia**

Euthanasia is the practice of terminating the life of a person or animal in a painless or minimally painful way in order to prevent suffering or other undesired conditions in life. This may be voluntary or involuntary, and carried out with or without a physician. In a medical environment, it is normally carried out by oral, intravenous or intramuscular drug administration.

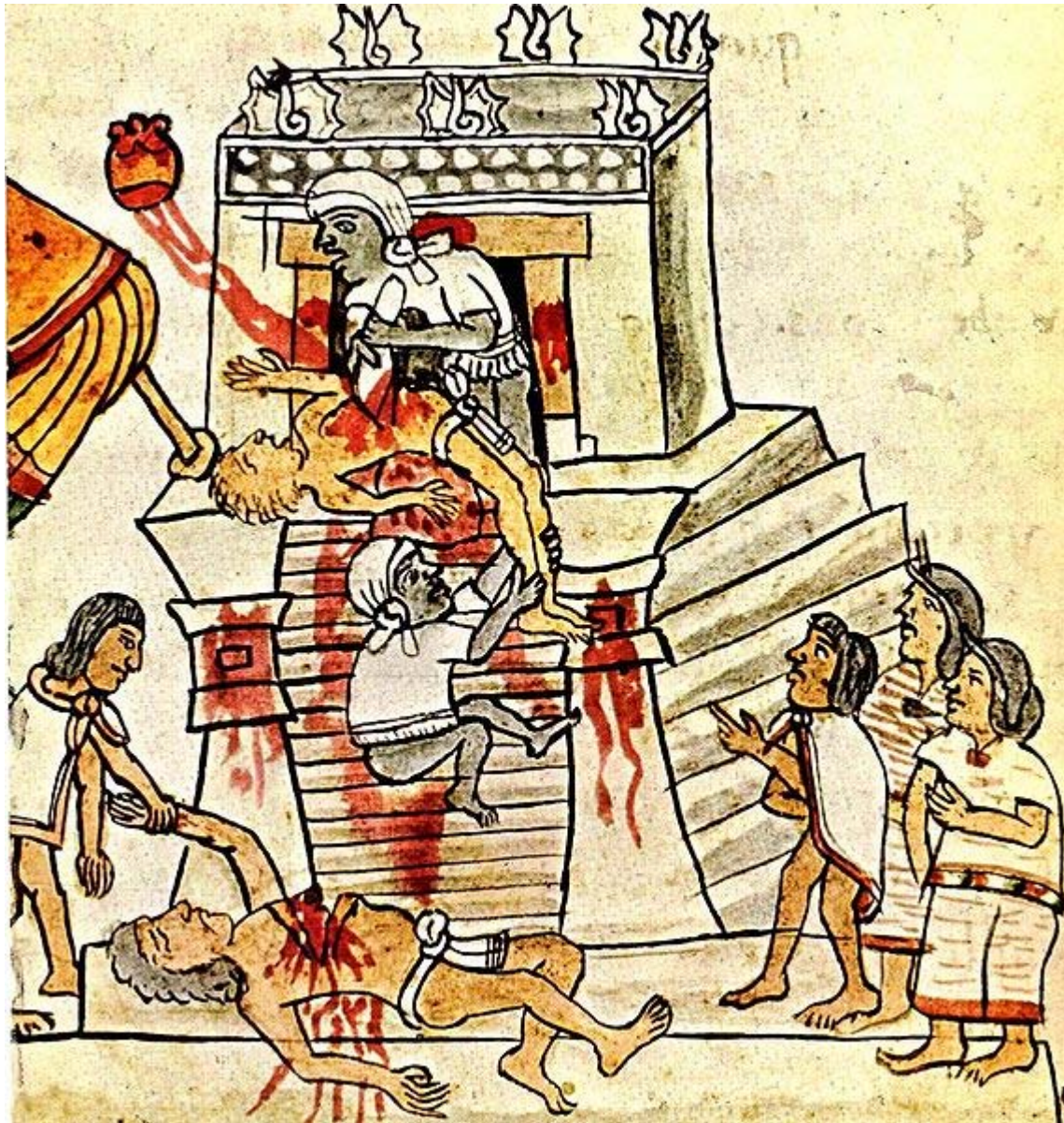
Laws around the world vary greatly with regard to euthanasia and are subject to change as people's values shift and better palliative care or treatments become available. It is legal in some nations, while in others it may be criminalized. Due to the gravity of the

issue, strict restrictions and proceedings are enforced regardless of legal status. Euthanasia is a controversial issue because of conflicting moral feelings both within a person's own beliefs and between different cultures, ethnicities, religions and other groups. The subject is explored by the mass media, authors, film makers and philosophers, and is the source of ongoing debate and emotion.

## **Customs**

Death's finality and the relative lack of firm scientific understanding of its processes for most of human history have led to many different traditions and cultural rituals for dealing with death and remembrance. Some superstitions include: If you don't hold your breath while going by a graveyard, you will not be buried; a bird in the house is a sign of a death; and many more. A widely held custom is shutting the eyes of the deceased. In some cultures, the deceased's house was destroyed or burned; in other cultures, the doors and windows were left open to cleanse the house (and allow the spirit to escape.)

## **Sacrifices**

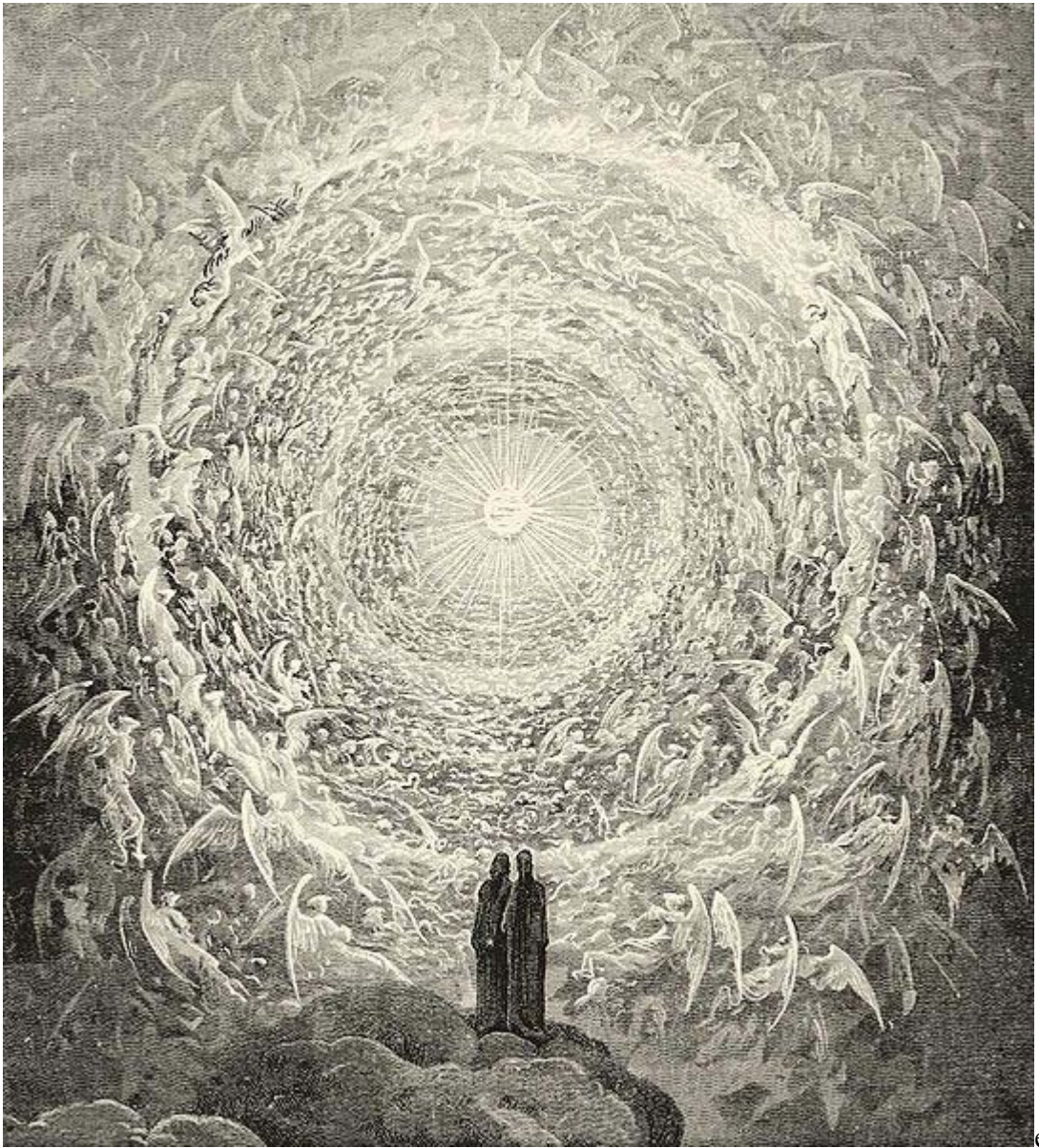


Aztec sacrifices, Codex Mendoza.

Sacrifice includes the practice of offering the lives of animals or people to the gods, as an act of propitiation or worship. The practice of sacrifice is found in the oldest human records, and the archaeological record finds corpses, both animal and human, that show marks of having been sacrificed and have been dated to long before any records. Human sacrifice was practiced in many ancient cultures. The practice has varied between different civilizations, with some like the Aztecs being notorious for their ritual killings, while others have looked down on the practice. Victims ranging from prisoners to infants to virgins were killed to please their gods, suffering such fates as burning, beheading and being buried alive.

Animal sacrifice is the ritual killing of an animal as practiced by many religions as a means of appeasing a god or spiritual being, changing the course of nature or divining the future. Animal sacrifice has occurred in almost all cultures, from the Hebrews to the Greeks and Romans to the Yoruba. Over time human and animal sacrifices have become less common in the world, such that modern sacrifices are rare. Most religions condemn the practice of human sacrifices, and present day laws generally treat them as a criminal matter. Nonetheless traditional sacrifice rituals are still seen in less developed areas of the world where traditional beliefs and superstitions linger, including the sacrifice of human beings.

### **Philosophy, religion and mythology**



A representation of Paradise

Faith in some form of afterlife is an important aspect of many people's beliefs. Such beliefs are usually manifested as part of a religion, as they pertain to phenomena beyond the ordinary experience of the natural world. For example, one aspect of Hinduism involves belief in a continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth (Samsara) and the liberation from the cycle (Moksha). Eternal return is a non-religious concept proposing an infinitely recurring cyclic universe, which relates to the subject of the afterlife and the nature of consciousness and time. Though various evidence has been advanced in attempts to demonstrate the reality of an afterlife, these claims have never been validated. For this reason, the material or metaphysical existence of an afterlife is considered by many to be a matter outside the scope of science.



Green flags mark a graveyard in southeast Afghanistan.

Many cultures have incorporated a god of death into their mythology or religion. As death, along with birth, is among the major parts of human life, deities representing these events or passages may often be the most important deities of a religion. In some religions with a single powerful deity as the object of worship, the death deity is an antagonistic deity against which the primary deity struggles.

In polytheistic religions or mythologies which have a complex system of deities governing various natural phenomena and aspects of human life, it is common to have a deity who is assigned the function of presiding over death. The inclusion of such a "departmental" deity of death in a religion's pantheon is not necessarily the same as the glorification of death. The latter is commonly condemned by the use of the term "death-worship" in modern political rhetoric. In the theology of monotheistic religions, the one god governs both life and death. However, in practice there are many different rituals and traditions for acknowledging death, which vary according to a number of factors, including geography, politics, traditions and the influence of other religions.

Secular humanists often focus on the right to choose how and when a person dies. One such scholar, Jacob Appel of New York University, has described humanist views toward dying as follows:

*How a person decides to die is among the most personal choices any human being will ever make. Some terminally ill patients will wish for the healthcare system to expend every available dollar on prolonging their lives, all the way to the point of imminent medical futility. Others will forgo heroic and extreme measures, preferring to let nature take its course. A third group of individuals--and I am among these--would like to survive only until we can no longer communicate meaningfully and lucidly with our loved ones; then, we want our healthcare providers to terminate our lives with as much speed and as little pain as possible. In an enlightened society, each of these wishes would be honored.*

### **Personification of death**



Drawing of Death bringing cholera, in *Le Petit Journal*, 19th c.

Death has been personified as a figure or fictional character in mythology and popular culture since the earliest days of storytelling. Because the reality of death has had a substantial influence on the human psyche and the development of civilization as a whole, the personification of Death as a living, sentient entity is a concept that has existed in many societies since before the beginning of recorded history. In western culture, death has long been shown as a skeletal figure carrying a large scythe, and

sometimes wearing a midnight black gown with a hood. This image was widely illustrated during the Middle Ages.

Examples of death personified are:

- In modern-day European-based folklore, Death is known as the "Grim Reaper" or "The grim spectre of death". This form typically wields a scythe, and is sometimes portrayed riding a white horse.
- In the Middle Ages, Death was imagined as a decaying or mummified human corpse, later becoming the familiar skeleton in a robe.
- Death is sometimes portrayed in fiction and occultism as Azrael, the angel of death (note that the name "Azrael" does not appear in any versions of either the Bible or the Qur'an).
- Father Time is sometimes said to be Death.
- A psychopomp is a spirit, deity, or other being whose task is to conduct the souls of the recently dead into the afterlife, as in Greek, Roman and other cultures.

### **The number 4 in East Asia**

In China, Japan, and Korea, the number 4 is often associated with death because the sound of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean words for *four* and *death* are similar (for example, the sound *sì* in Chinese is the Sino-Korean number 4 (四), whereas *sǐ* is the word for death (死), and in Japanese "shi" is the number 4, whereas *shinu* is to die). For this reason, hospitals, airports and hotels often omit the 4th, 14th, 24th, floors (etc.), or substitute the number '4' with the letter 'F'. Koreans are buried under a mound standing vertical in coffins made from six planks of wood. Four of the planks represent the respective four cardinal points of the compass, while a fifth represents sky and the sixth represents earth. This relates back to the importance that Confucian society placed upon the four cardinal points having mystical powers.

### **Glorification of and fascination with death**



*The Triumph of Death* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder

Whether because of its very poetic nature or because of the great mystery it presents, or both, death is and has very often been glorified in many cultures through many different means. War, crime, revenge, martyrdom, suicide and many other forms of violence involving death are often glorified in different media. Each of these categories represent larger meanings than simply the cessation of life, and it is the meaning which may be glorified. In modern times death has been glorified in spite of the attempts to depict it without glory.



*Charge of the Light Brigade*. An example of the artistic glorification of death.

For example, film critic Roger Ebert mentions in a number of articles that French director François Truffaut says that he believes it is impossible to make an anti-war film, as any depiction of war ends up glorifying it. The most prevalent and permanent form of death's glorification is through artistic expression. Through song, such as "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" or "Bullet in the Head", artists may show death as poetic, or even through poetic analogy, as in the latter song. Events such as the Charge of the Light Brigade and the Battle of the Alamo have served as inspirations for artistic depictions of and myths regarding death.

Perception of glory in death is subjective and can differ wildly from one member of a group to another. Religion plays a key role, especially in terms of expectations of an afterlife. Personal feelings and perceptions about mode of death are also important factors.

## Chapter- 2

# Disposal of Human Corpses

**Disposal of human corpses** is the practice and process of dealing with the remains of a deceased human being. Human corpses present both a sanitation and public health risk. Like most animals, when humans die, their bodies start to decompose, emitting a foul odor and attracting scavengers and decomposers. For these reasons, corpses must be disposed of properly. The problem of body disposal consists of two parts: disposal of the soft tissues, which will rapidly decompose, and of the skeleton, which will remain intact for thousands of years under certain conditions.

Several methods for disposal are practiced. In many cases, the manner of disposal is dominated by spiritual concerns and a desire to show respect for the dead, and may be highly ritualized. This event may be part of a larger funeral ritual. In other circumstances, such as war or natural disaster, practical concerns may be forefront. Many religions as well as legal jurisdictions have set rules regarding the disposal of corpses. Since the experience of death is nearly universal to all humans, practices regarding corpse disposal are a part of every culture.

## Means of disposal

### Commonly practiced

The most common methods of disposal are:

- Burial of the entire body in the earth, often within a coffin
- Permanent storage in an above-ground tomb
- Cremation, which burns soft tissue and renders much of the skeleton to ash. The remains, known as "cremains" may contain larger pieces of bone which are ground in a machine to the consistency of ash. The ashes may be stored in an urn or scattered on land or water.

### Less common

- Disposal by exposure
  - Traditional examples include Tibetan sky burial and the Parsi Towers of Silence

- A body farm involves a similar method of disposal as an object of scientific study.
- In some traditions, for example that practised by the Spanish royal family, the soft tissues are permitted to rot over a period of decades, after which the bones are entombed.
- Burial at sea
  - Dropping overboard from a ship or plane, a form of burial, often used in a military/naval context, where the corpse, suitably prepared and weighted is deposited into the sea.
  - Ship burial, a form of burial at sea in which the corpse is set adrift on a boat. The Viking funeral combines this practice with cremation.
- Dissolution, e.g. in acid or a solution of lye, followed by disposal as liquid
  - Recently there has been much controversy over Alkaline Hydrolysis as a method of body disposal. Advocates claim the process is more environmentally friendly than both cremation and burial, due to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and embalming fluids respectively. On the other hand, many find the idea of being "poured down the drain" to be undignified.
- Donation for study -donation to a medical school or similar-after embalming and several years of study and dissection the body is usually eventually cremated.
- Cannibalism, ritual or otherwise
- Space burial
  - The disposal of corpses resulting from death during long-duration spaceflight has been discussed but has not yet occurred.
- In cases of war, genocide, or natural disasters including disease epidemics, large groups of people have been buried in mass graves or plague pits.
- Dismemberment, in which the body is divided and different body parts are dealt with separately; for example in the case of the Habsburg royal family as well as the display of the relics of various saints.

New methods in development include freezing with liquid nitrogen and then shattering to dust with vibration or crushing or both.

## **Aquamation**

Aquamation is the most environment-friendly way of disposal of human bodies . The process involves the rapid disintegration of the human body into high quality fertilizers. In comparison with cremation about 10% of energy is used and all of the associated pollution is avoided.

With Aquamation, an individual body is placed in a clean, stainless steel vessel. A combination of water flow, temperature (~90C) and alkalinity are used to accelerate the natural course of tissue hydrolysis. Typically the process takes about four hours to complete.

## **Means of preservation**

In some cases an attempt is made to preserve some or all of a body. These methods include:

- Cryopreservation
- Mummification; the most well-known examples are from ancient Egypt
- Taxidermy: A few people, such as the philosopher Jeremy Bentham, have had their dead bodies stuffed.
- Plastination: The preserved (embalmed) body is prepared by dissection or slicing and fluids are replaced with inert plastic for anatomical study by medical students or display in museums. This technique was pioneered by Gunther von Hagens of the Institute for Plastination.

Human remains of archaeological or medical interest are often kept in museums and private collections. This practice is controversial. In the cases of Native Americans in the United States, possession of remains and related objects is regulated by the NAGPRA Act of 1990.

## **Preparation for disposal**

Different religions and cultures have various funeral rites that accompany the disposal of a body. Some require that all parts of the body are buried together. If an autopsy has occurred, removed parts of the body are sewn back into the body so that they may be buried with the rest of the corpse.

When it is not possible for a body to be disposed of promptly, it is generally stored at a morgue. Where this is not possible, such as on a battlefield, body bags are used. In the Western world, embalming of the body is a standard part of preparation. This is intended to temporarily preserve the corpse throughout the funeral process.

## **Legal regulation**

Many jurisdictions have enacted regulations relating to the disposal of human bodies. Although it may be entirely legal to bury a deceased family member, the law may restrict the locations in which this activity is allowed, in some cases expressly limiting burials to property controlled by specific, licensed institutions. Furthermore, in many places, failure to properly dispose of a body is a crime. In some places, it is also a crime to fail to report a death, and to fail to report the disposition of the body.

## **Special cases**

Certain conditions such as necrosis can cause parts of the body such as limbs or internal organs to die without causing the death of the individual. In such cases the body parts are usually not given a funeral. Surgical removal of dead tissue is usually necessary to prevent gangrenous infection. Surgically removed body parts are typically disposed of as medical waste, unless they need to be preserved for cultural reasons, as described above.

Conversely, donated organs or tissue may live on long after the death of an individual.

Attitudes towards stillborn fetuses have changed in recent years; in the past they were often disposed of as medical waste, but are now commonly given funerals.

## **Clandestine disposal**

In some cases, a body is disposed of in such a way as to prevent, hinder, or delay discovery of the body, to prevent identification of the body, or to prevent autopsy. In such cases, the deceased is considered a missing person as long as a body is not identified, unless death is so likely that the person is declared legally dead.

This often occurs as part of a murder or voluntary manslaughter. In other cases, an individual who did not intend to cause death may still feel guilt about a death (e.g. by involuntary manslaughter or an accident) and may attempt to prevent discovery of the body. This can exacerbate any legal consequences associated with the death.

Other motives for concealing death or the cause of death include insurance fraud or the desire to collect the pension of the deceased. An individual may commit suicide in such a way as to obscure the cause of death, allowing beneficiaries of a life insurance policy to collect on the policy.

### **Means of clandestine disposal**

- Burial, especially in a shallow grave due to time constraints
- Cremation, which may be incomplete if performed without proper equipment
- Leaving the body in a deserted or private place, such as a freezer or body of water
- Dissolution
- Burial in cement or concrete
- Crushing, e.g. within a junked car

Dismemberment is common as a means to facilitate disposal; it also enables disposal of each piece separately.

## Chapter- 3

# Burial at Sea



Burial at Sea for two victims of a Japanese submarine attack on the US aircraft carrier *USS Liscome Bay*, November 1943

**Burial at sea** describes the procedure of disposing of human remains in the ocean, normally from a ship or boat. It is regularly performed by navies, but also can be done by private citizens in many countries.

**By religion**

Burial at sea services are available at many different locations and with many different customs, either by ship or by aircraft. Usually, either the captain (or commanding officer) of the ship or aircraft or a representative of the religion performs the ceremony. Legally, a captain can bury remains at sea, provided that environmental regulations are satisfied. In the United States, ashes have to be scattered at least 3 nautical miles (3.5 mi; 5.6 km) from shore, and bodies can be given to the sea if the location is at least 600 feet (180 m) deep. Special regulations may also apply to the urns and coffins.

The ceremony may include burial in a casket, burial sewn in sailcloth, burial in an urn, or scattering of the cremated remains by ship. Burial at sea by aircraft is usually done only with cremated remains. Other types of burial at sea include the mixing of the ashes with concrete and dropping the concrete block to form an artificial reef such as the Atlantis Reef. Below is a list of religions in alphabetical order that allow burial at sea, with some details of the burial. However, there are always many different beliefs even within the same religion, and views may differ according to those beliefs.

Because of the particular logistics of scattering ashes at sea, there are commercial services that do so for a fee.

## **Buddhism**

There are very few traditional Buddhist burials at sea. Traditionally, the deceased are cremated and the ashes are placed in a grave or columbarium. Particularly in East Asian or Mahayana Buddhism, a physical gravesite is considered important for the conduct of memorial and ancestor rites. The Buddhist Churches of America, the North American branch of Japanese Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, has created a service for Buddhist burials at sea, primarily for military service members.

## **Christianity**

### **Catholicism**

Officially, the Roman Catholic Church prefers normal casket burials over cremations, but does allow for cremation subject to the condition that the ashes are entombed or buried. The Church is against the scattering of cremated remains on the ground, in the air, or at sea; the Church is also against forgoing proper disposal and keeping the ashes in private possession, such as for display on a mantle. Burial at sea in a casket or in an urn is approved for cases where the deceased expired in the sea. The committal prayer number 406§4 is used in this case.

### **Reformed/Protestantism**

The Anglican Communion has detailed procedures for burial at sea. The ship has to be stopped, and the body has to be sewn in sailcloth, together with two cannon balls for weight. Anglican (and other) chaplains of the Royal Navy bury cremated remains of ex-

Naval personnel at sea. Scattering of cremated remains is discouraged, not least for practical reasons.

Many Lutheran naval veterans and seamen prefer to be buried at sea. In those cases either the casket or urn is set to sea, or ashes scattered. The procedure is similar as that with Anglican. Some parishes have specific consecrated sea areas, where ashes can be sprinkled.

## **Hinduism**

Traditionally, the deceased is cremated, the bones and ashes are collected, and the ashes/remains are placed in the Ganges River. The poor, pregnant women, children under 10, and those that died from a snakebite are not cremated but rather dumped into the Ganges intact. However, burial at sea is permitted after consultation with a Hindu priest.

## **Islam**

The sacred texts of Islam prefer burial on land, *so deep that its smell does not come out and the beasts of prey do not dig it out*. However, if a person dies at sea and it is not possible to bring the body back to land before decay, burial at sea is allowed. A weight is tied to the feet of the body, and the body is lowered into the water. This would preferably occur in an area where the remains are not immediately eaten by scavengers. Also, if an enemy may dig up the grave to mutilate the body, it is also allowed to bury the deceased at sea to avoid mutilation.

## **Judaism**

Traditional Orthodox Judaism has always prohibited burial at sea. Reform Judaism, on the other hand, allows burial at sea after consultation with a rabbi. Reform Judaism has a strong preference for burial on land, however, where families have a gravesite to visit.

## **Odinism**

Traditionally Odinists prefer to be disposed in a funeral pyre built upon the shoreline of their native county. This pyre is generally built in the same shape as the sailing vessel known as longship. The flame is built at dusk and the commemorators will stand present until the coals soften, with the tide carrying away the ashes. Alternatively, a functioning ship is pushed out to open water with the remains on board, and lit on fire, being allowed to burn up until sinking. If the construction of the ship is suitable, the shape of the hull will be flat and will be completely destroyed in the fire, without creating flotsam.

## **By country**

### **United States**

A funeral director is not required for the burial of cremated remains at sea; however full body burials require specific preparation to ensure that the body or coffin sinks quickly. California is the only U.S. State that does not permit full body burials. The Environmental Protection Agency regulations for full body burials at sea in the United States require that the site of internment be three (3) nautical miles (3.5 mi / 5.6 km) from land and at a depth of at least 600 feet (180 m). In the northeastern United States this may require travel in excess of 30 miles (48 km) for a suitable site.

### **United States Navy**

The United States Navy has done many burials at sea in its history, with wartime burials as recently as World War II, and peacetime burials still common presently. Most other armed forces also have burials at sea, such as the British Royal Navy and the Canadian Navy.

If the deceased died on land or has been returned to shore after death, the remains may be brought aboard either in a coffin or in an urn after cremation. The ceremony is performed while the ship is deployed, and consequently civilians are not allowed to be present. In the USA, people eligible for a free Navy burial at sea are:

- Active-duty members of the uniformed services
- Retirees and honorably discharged veterans
- Military Sealift Command U.S. civilian marine personnel
- Family members of the above

In preparation, the officer of the deck calls *All hands bury the dead*, and the ship is stopped (if possible). The ship's flags are lowered to half mast. The ship's crew, including a firing party, casket bearers and a bugler, are assembled on the deck. The crew stands at parade rest at the beginning of the ceremony. The coffin is covered with a flag, and is carried feet first on deck by the casket bearers. The casket is placed on a stand, with the feet overboard. In case of cremated remains, the urn is brought on deck and put on a stand.

The ceremony is divided into a military portion and a religious portion. The religious part is specific to the religion of the deceased, and may be performed by a chaplain, or by the commanding officer if no chaplain of the appropriate faith is available. A scripture is read and prayers are said.

After the religious ceremony, the firing party is ordered *Firing party, Present Arms*. The casket bearers tilt the platform with the casket, so that the casket slides off the platform into the ocean. The flag which was draped over the casket is retained on board. For cremated remains, there is the option to bury the remains using the urn in a similar fashion to the procedure used for caskets. Alternatively, the urn can be opened, and the remains scattered in the wind. In this case, the wind direction has to be taken under consideration before burial to ensure a smooth procedure.

The firing party fires three volleys, the bugler plays Taps, and flowers may also be dropped into the ocean. After the flag is folded, the ceremony ends. The relatives will be informed of the time and location of the burial, and given photos and video recordings if available.

## **United Kingdom**

Burial at sea was a method hypothetically suggested by the then Medical Officer of Health for Liverpool, Dr Duncan Dolton, in which unburied bodies could be buried at sea during any extended strike by gravediggers union the GMWU during the Winter of Discontent. The suggestion caused great alarm amongst the public and helped prompt a resolution to the strike.

## **Wartime burial for deceased at sea**

In wartime, attempts are made for burial at sea to follow the same procedure as in the peacetime burial at sea, although a ship on a combat mission may not have all the necessary resources available. Nowadays, it is usually possible to airlift the remains back to shore, and prepare a burial ceremony. However, as recently as World War II, deceased were buried at sea without returning to land. Due to the limited facilities of military ships, this procedure usually does not include a casket, but the body is sewn into a sailcloth with weights. Cremation is usually not possible on a ship. During the Pacific campaign there were some instances where deceased aircrews were buried at sea in the remains of their damaged aircraft, which was ceremonially pushed overboard from their aircraft carrier



Burial at sea for the victims of the USS *Intrepid*, hit by Japanese bombs during operations in the Philippines, November 26, 1944



Navy firing detail as part of a burial-at-sea in 2008 for one of the 316 survivors of the USS Indianapolis (CA-35) sinking on July 30, 1945, during World War II.



Burial at sea on the USS *Enterprise*, May 19, 2004.



Cremated remains at sea on the USS Donald Cook (DDG 75), May 01, 2003.

## **Memorial services at sea**

If no remains of the deceased are available a memorial service may be held, and flowers may be dropped in the water, often over or near the location of the death.

## **People buried at sea**

A few notable burials at sea:

- Sir Francis Drake (1540–1596)
- Stan Getz (1927–1991)
- Robert A. Heinlein (1907–1988) (cremated, and ashes scattered in the Pacific Ocean)
- Edmund Hillary (1919–2008) (cremated, and ashes scattered in New Zealand's Hauraki Gulf)
- Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) (ashes were scattered into the Pacific Ocean)
- Rock Hudson (1925–1985)
- Janis Joplin (1943–1970) (cremated at Westwood Village Memorial Park Cemetery, and her ashes scattered into the Pacific ocean)
- DeForest Kelley (1920–1999) (ashes were scattered into the Pacific Ocean)
- Gene Kelly (1912–1996)
- John F. Kennedy, Jr (1960–1999) (by the U. S. Navy)
- Werner Klemperer (1920–2000)
- Peter Lawford (1923–1984), actor, was cremated and ashes originally buried at Westwood Village Memorial Park Cemetery; they were later removed and scattered in the Pacific Ocean.
- Steve McQueen (1930–1980) (cremated and ashes scattered in the Pacific Ocean)
- Robert Mitchum (1917–1997)
- Vincent Price (1911–1993)
- Admiral of the Fleet Sir Alfred Dudley Pickman Rogers Pound (1877–1943)
- Richard Rodgers (1902–1979)
- H. G. Wells (1866–1946)
- Numerous *RMS Titanic* victims picked up by rescue ships, whose remains were too damaged to preserve or for whom the rescuers lacked sufficient embalming materials, were buried at sea
- Following the 1962 execution in Israel of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi responsible for overseeing the extermination of millions of Jews during the Holocaust, his body was cremated and his ashes scattered at sea over the Mediterranean, in international waters. This was a unique procedure, followed in this special case since Israel obviously did not want such a person buried in its soil, and also did not want a grave elsewhere that might have become a place of pilgrimage for other Nazis.

## Chapter- 4

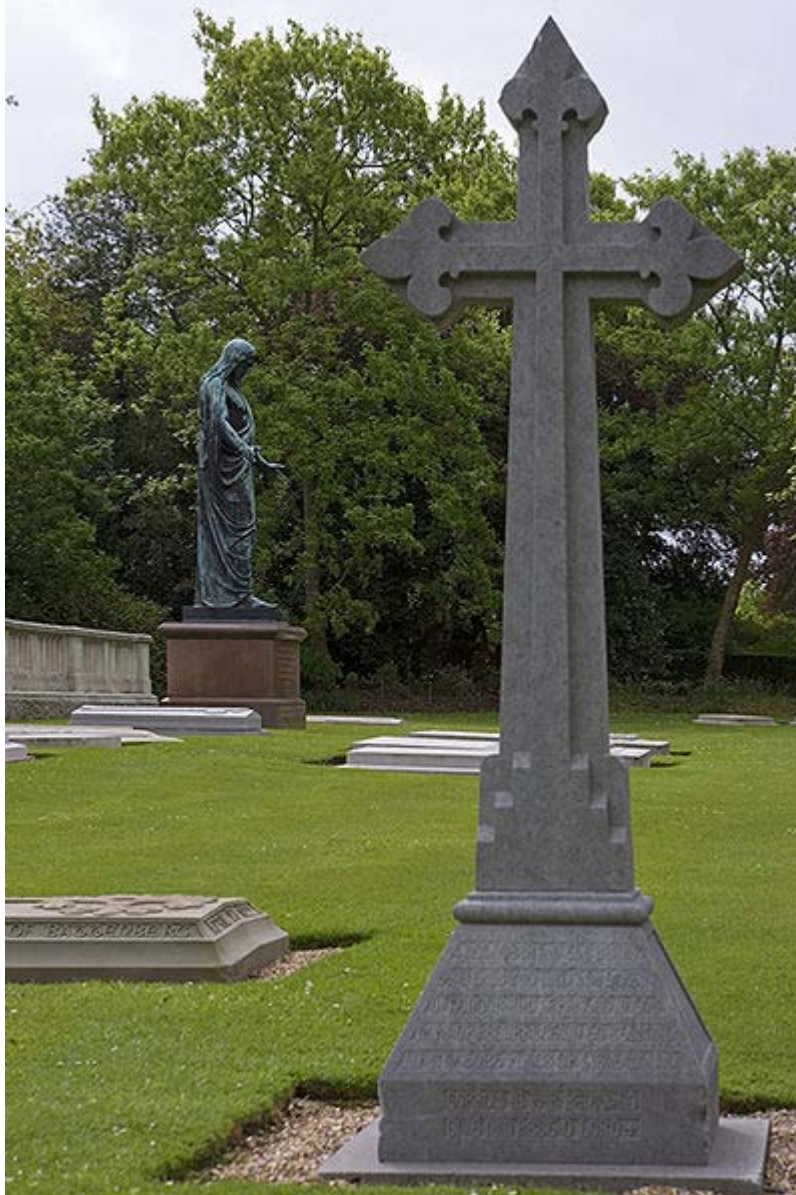
# Cemetery



Common Burying Ground and Island Cemetery in Newport, Rhode Island



A cemetery in Kyoto, Japan



Royal Burial Ground, Frogmore, England

A **cemetery** is a place in which dead bodies and cremated remains are buried. The term cemetery (from Greek *κοιμητήριον*: sleeping place) implies that the land is specifically designated as a burying ground. Cemeteries in the Western world are the place where the final ceremonies of death are observed. These ceremonies or rites differ according to cultural practice and religious belief.

## **Definition**

The Oxford English Dictionary states that a cemetery is "A burial-ground generally; now esp. a large public park or ground laid out expressly for the interment of the dead, and not

being the 'yard' of any church. (Cemetery c)" and that it "... originally applied to the Roman underground cemeteries or catacombs " Cemeteries are normally distinct from churchyards, which are typically consecrated according to one denomination and are attached directly to a single place of worship.

## **Cemeteries through history**

### **Archaeology**

Prehistoric cemeteries are sometimes referred to by the term 'grave field'. They are one of the chief sources of information on ancient and prehistoric cultures, and numerous archaeological cultures are defined by their burial customs, such as the Urnfield culture of the European Bronze Age.

### **Early Christian history**

From about the 7th century, European burial was under the control of the Church and could only take place on consecrated church ground. Practices varied, but in continental Europe, bodies were usually buried in a mass grave until they had decomposed. The bones were then exhumed and stored in ossuaries, either along the arcaded bounding walls of the cemetery, or within the church under floor slabs and behind walls.

In most cultures those who were vastly rich, had important professions, were part of the nobility or were of any other high social status were usually buried in individual crypts inside or beneath the relevant place of worship with an indication of the name of the deceased, date of death and other biographical data. In Europe this was often accompanied with a depiction of their coat of arms.

Most others were buried in graveyards again divided by social status. Families of the deceased who could afford the work of a stonemason had a headstone carved and set up over the place of burial with an indication of the name of the deceased, date of death and sometimes other biographical data. Usually, the more writing and symbols carved on the headstone, the more expensive it was. As with most other human property such as houses and means of transport, richer families used to compete for the artistic value of their family headstone in comparison to others around it, sometimes adding a statue (such as a weeping angel) on the top of the grave.

Those who could not pay for a headstone at all usually had some religious symbol made from wood on the place of burial such as a Christian cross, however this would quickly deteriorate under the rain or snow. Some families hired a blacksmith and had large crosses made from various metals put on the place of burial.

### **Graveyards replaced by cemeteries**



A Soviet military cemetery on the island of Saaremaa, Estonia.

Various conditions in the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century led to the burial of the dead in graveyards being discontinued. Among the reasons for this were:

- A very sharp rise in the size of the population during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution
- Continued outbreaks of highly infectious diseases in towns and cities due to lack of public hygiene. Many graveyards in cities were located on land enclosed within the city walls.
- Limits to, and lack of, space in graveyards for new headstones and corpses.
- A growing resistance in existing churches to bury dead who had never attended their church despite being legally obliged to do so for any "parishioner".

As a consequence of these reasons, city authorities, national governments and places of worship all changed their regulations for burials. In many European states, burial in graveyards was outlawed altogether either by royal decrees or government legislation.

In some cases, skeletons were exhumed from graveyards and moved into ossuaries or catacombs. A large action of this type occurred in 18th century Paris when human remains were transferred from graveyards all over the city to the Catacombs of Paris. The bones of an estimated 6 million people are to be found there.

However, in most places across Europe completely new places of burial were established away from heavily populated areas and outside of old towns and city centers. Many new cemeteries became municipally owned, and thus independent from churches and their churchyards, however even these were still segregated by the faith of the deceased to be buried there.

Thus, cemeteries (certainly in their modern landscaped or garden cemetery form), rather than graveyards, became the principal place of burial for the deceased and continue to this day. Wadi-us-Salaam, located in Shiite holy city of Najaf, Iraq, is reputed to be the largest cemetery in the world. It is estimated more than half a million corpses are interred in the cemetery each year.

### **Modern cemeteries**



The Laird's traditional Scottish graveyard at Kindrogan House, Strathardle.



The town cemetery on the plains of Calhan, Colorado.



The 1,400 square feet (130 m<sup>2</sup>) plot pictured here has the graves of nineteen members of the Hillendahl family, including one who was interred in 1854, in the Spring Branch area of Houston, Texas, United States. A descendant of the family sold all of the land around the grave site, but refused to move the actual graves.

The earliest of the spacious landscaped-style cemeteries is Père Lachaise in Paris. This embodied the idea of state- rather than church-controlled burial – a concept that spread through Europe with the Napoleonic invasions, and sometimes became adapted leading to the opening of cemeteries by private companies. The shift to municipal cemeteries or those established by private companies was usually accompanied by the establishing of spacious, landscaped, burial grounds outside of the city limits.

Cemeteries are usually a respected or protected area, and often include a crematorium for the cremation of the dead. The violation of the graves or buildings is usually considered a very serious crime, and punishments are often severe.

The style of cemeteries varies greatly internationally. For example, in the United States and many European countries, modern cemeteries usually have many tombstones placed on open spaces. In Russia, tombstones are usually placed in small fenced family lots. (This was once common practice in American cemeteries as well, and such fenced family plots are still visible in some older American cemeteries.)

Usually, there is a legal requirement to maintain records regarding the burials (or interment of ashes) within a cemetery. These *burial registers* usually contain (at a minimum) the name of the person buried, the date of burial and the location of the burial within the cemetery, although some burial registers contain far more information about the deceased person. Burial registers are an important resource for genealogy.

In order to physically manage the space within the cemetery (to avoid burials in existing graves) and to record locations in the burial register, most cemeteries have some systematic layout of graves in rows, generally grouped into larger sections as required. Often the cemetery displays this information in the form of a map, which is used both by the cemetery administration in managing their land use and also by friends and family members seeking to locate a particular grave within the cemetery.

Traditionally cemetery management only involves the allocation of land for burial, the digging and filling of graves, and the maintenance of the grounds and landscaping. The construction and maintenance of headstones and other grave monuments is usually the private responsibility of families of the deceased. However, increasingly, many people regard the resultant collection of individual headstones, concrete slabs and fences (some of which may be decayed or damaged) to be aesthetically unappealing, leading to new cemetery developments either standardising the shape or design of headstones or plaques, sometimes by providing a standard shaped marker as part of the service provided by the cemetery. This has led to the development of new styles of cemetery.

## **Contemporary styles of cemetery**

There are a number of different styles of cemetery in use. Many cemeteries have areas based on different styles, reflecting the diversity of cultural practices around death and how it changes over time.

### **Monumental cemetery**



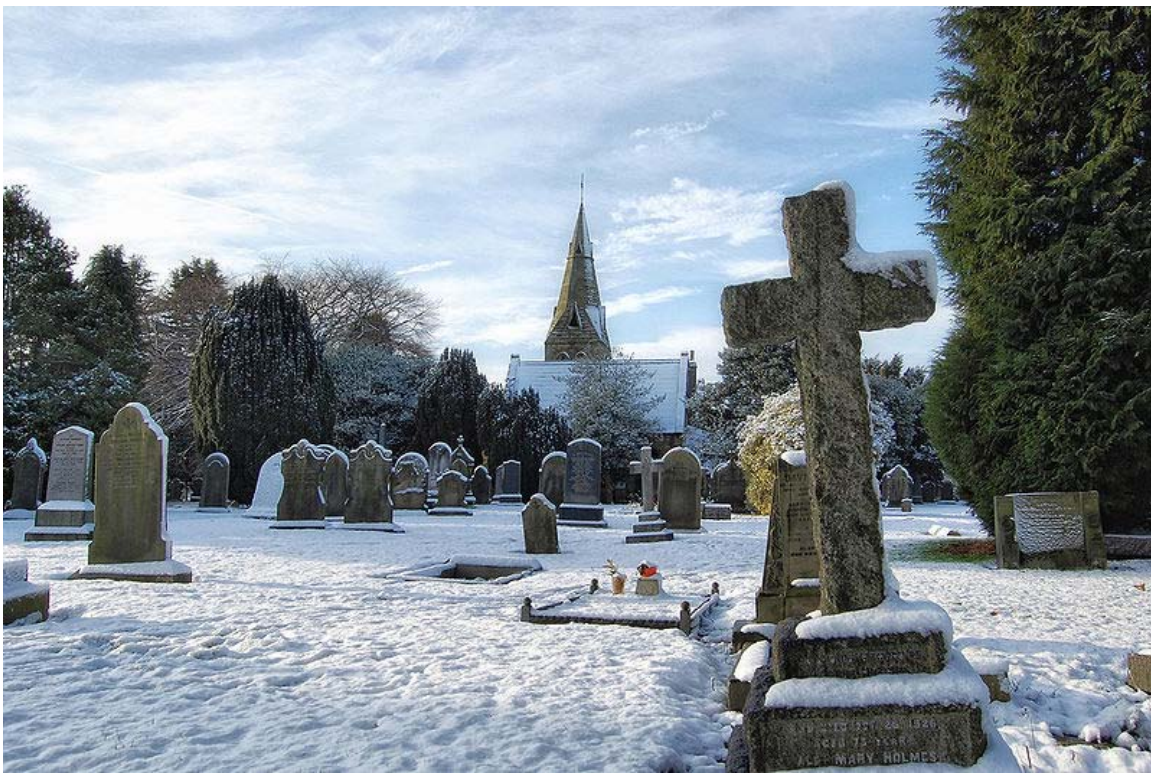
Monument of c. 1910 in the Monumental Cemetery of Staglieno in Genoa, Italy, one of the most spectacular of a number of Italian cemeteries featuring large-scale sculpture.

A *monumental cemetery* is the traditional style of cemetery where headstones or other monuments made of marble, granite or similar materials rise vertically above the ground (typically around 50 cm but some can be over 2 metres high). Often the entire grave is covered by a slab, commonly concrete, but it can be more expensive materials such as marble or granite, and/or has its boundaries delimited by a fence which may be made of concrete, cast iron or timber. Where a number of family members are buried together (either vertically or horizontally), the slab or boundaries may encompass a number of graves. Monumental cemeteries are often regarded as unsightly due to the random collection of monuments and headstones they contain. Also, as maintenance of the headstones is the responsibility of family members, over time many headstones are forgotten about and decay and become damaged. For cemetery authorities, monumental cemeteries are difficult to maintain. While cemeteries often have grassed areas between graves, the layout of graves makes it difficult to use modern equipment such as ride-on lawn mowers in the cemetery. Often the maintenance of grass must be done by more labour-intensive (and therefore expensive) methods. In order to reduce the labour cost, devices such as whipper-snippers are increasingly used in cemetery maintenance, but such devices can damage the monuments and headstones. Cemetery authorities dislike the criticism they receive for the deteriorating condition of the headstones, arguing that

they have no responsibility for the upkeep of headstones, and typically disregard their own maintenance practices as being one of the causes of that deterioration.

### **Lawn cemetery**

A *lawn cemetery* (as the name suggests) is covered in grass. Each grave is marked with a commemorative plaque (around 30 cm x 20 cm is typical) placed horizontally at the head of the grave at ground-level. While families are normally still involved in the design and information contained on the plaque, generally the size and materials of the plaque are constrained by the cemetery authorities, who often strongly encourage (or in some cases mandate) the use of a standard design.



An old municipal cemetery in Otley, Yorkshire, England

Typically, lawn cemeteries comprise a number of graves in this lawn setting with trees and gardens on the perimeter. While aesthetic appeal to family members has been the primary driver for the development of lawn cemeteries, cemetery authorities were initially very enthusiastic about this new style of cemetery, as they appeared to be easier to maintain. By initially selecting (or grading) the land intended for a lawn cemetery to be completely flat, it allows the use of large efficient mowers (such as ride-on mowers or lawn tractors) to be used as the plaques (being horizontally set in the ground) lie below the level of the blades and are not damaged by the blades. Unfortunately, in practice, while families are often initially attracted to the uncluttered appearance of a lawn

cemetery, the common practice of placing flowers (sometimes in vases) and increasingly other items (e.g. small toys on children's graves) re-introduces some clutter to the cemetery and makes it difficult to use the larger mowers. While cemetery authorities increasingly impose restrictions on the nature and type of objects that can be placed on lawn graves and actively remove prohibited items, grieving families are often unwilling to comply with these restrictions and become very upset if the items are removed. Another problem with lawn cemeteries is that over time the grass can grow over and cover the plaque to the distress of families who can no longer easily locate the grave. Grasses that propagate by an above-ground stolon (aka runner) can cover a plaque very quickly. Grasses that propagate by a below-ground rhizome tend not to cover the plaque as easily.

*A lawn beam cemetery* is a recent development which seeks to solve the problems of the lawn cemetery while retaining many of its benefits. Low (10–15 cm) raised concrete slabs (beams) are placed across the cemetery. Commemorative plaques (usually standardised in terms of size and materials similar to lawn cemeteries) are placed on these beams adjacent to each grave. The graves themselves are covered with grass like a lawn cemetery. The areas between the beams are large enough that they are easy to mow with a larger mower. As the mower blades are set lower than the top of the beam and the mowers do not go over the beam, the blades cannot damage the plaques. Up on the beam, the plaques cannot be easily overgrown by grass and there is space between the plaques for families to place flowers and other objects without interfering with the mowing.

### **Natural cemeteries**

*A natural cemetery* or *eco-cemetery* or *green cemetery* is a new style of cemetery and is an area set aside for natural burials (with or without coffins). Natural burials are motivated by a desire to be environmentally conscious with the body rapidly decomposing and becoming part of the natural environment without incurring the environmental cost of traditional burials. Although in principle natural burial can be performed in any style of cemetery, typically the environmental motivations of those requesting natural burial tend to favour the use of a natural bushland or woodland setting for the natural burial. Because of the number of trees usually present in a natural cemetery, burials occur in whatever location and orientation best fits the natural environment as opposed to the more traditional rows or other orderly arrangements in traditional cemeteries. As a consequence, natural burial may actually be less efficient land-use than a traditional cemetery. However because of the rapid decomposition of a natural burial, in principle the re-use of the grave site can occur earlier than in other conventional burials, which would improve the efficiency of land use. However, it remains to be seen if family members will accept the early re-use of natural burial sites, given the general community dislike of re-use of any kind of grave. Another consequence of the lack of orderly burials is the need for highly accurate surveying of the grave site for effective cemetery management, to prevent the accidental re-use of a grave site.

In keeping with the intention of "returning to nature" and the early re-use potential, natural cemeteries do not normally have conventional grave markings such as headstones.

Instead, the planting of a tree or bush or placement of a rock is regarded as the more appropriate way to commemorate the deceased. However, as with other types of cemetery, the intentions of the cemetery authorities may be in conflict with the grieving practices of family and friends, for whom being able to visit the precise location of a grave and see the name of the deceased is often important. In some natural cemeteries, names can be inscribed on naturally-shaped rocks (not carved headstones) but, unless the rock is particularly large and heavy, it can easily be knocked or kicked to another nearby location.

## Columbarium wall



A columbarium wall at Lawnton, Queensland, showing empty niches, plaques and flower holders

*Columbarium walls* are a common feature of many cemeteries, reflecting the increasing use of cremation rather than burial. While cremated remains can be kept at home by families in urns or scattered in some significant or attractive place, neither of these approaches allows for a permanent commemorative plaque to honour the deceased nor provides a place for the wider circle of friends and family to come to mourn or "pay their respects" (the practice of honouring a deceased person by visiting their grave). Therefore, many cemeteries now provide walls (typically of brick or rendered brick construction) with a rectangular array of niches, with each niche being big enough to accommodate a

person's cremated remains. Columbarium walls are a very space-efficient use of land in a cemetery compared with burials and a niche in a columbarium wall is a much cheaper alternative to a burial plot. A small plaque (about 15 cm x 10 cm) can be affixed across the front of each niche and is generally included as part of the price of a niche. As the writing on the plaques has to be fairly small to fit on the small size of the plaque, the design of columbarium walls is constrained by the ability of visitors to read the plaques. Thus, the niches are typically placed between 1 metre to 2 metres above the ground so the plaques can be easily read by an adult. Some columbarium walls have niches going close to ground level, but these niches are usually unpopular with families as it is difficult to read the plaque without bending down very low (something older people in particular find difficult or uncomfortable to do).

As with graves, the niches may be assigned by the cemetery authorities or families may choose from the unoccupied niches available. It is usually possible to purchase (or pay a deposit) to reserve the use of adjacent niches for other family members. The use of adjacent niches (vertically or horizontally) usually permits a larger plaque spanning all the niches involved, which provides more space for the writing. As with graves, there may be separate columbarium walls for different religions or for war veterans. As with lawn cemeteries, the original expectation was that people would prefer the uncluttered simplicity of a wall of plaques, but the practice of leaving flowers is very entrenched. Mourners leave flowers (and other objects) on top of columbarium walls or at the base, as close as they can to the plaque of their family member. In some cases, it is possible to squeeze a piece of wire or string under the plaque allowing a flower or small posy to be placed on the plaque itself or clips are glued onto the plaque for that purpose. Newer designs of columbarium walls take this desire to leave flowers into account by incorporating a metal clip or loop beside each plaque, typically designed to hold a single flower stem or a small posy. As the flowers decay, they simply fall to the ground and do not create a significant maintenance problem.

## **Family cemeteries**



Holland Cemetery: A rural cemetery in northeast Oklahoma



A village cemetery in Jednorozec, Poland

While uncommon today, family (or private) cemeteries were a matter of practicality during the settlement of America. If a municipal or religious cemetery had not been established, settlers would seek out a small plot of land, often in wooded areas bordering their fields, to begin a family plot. Sometimes, several families would arrange to bury their dead together. While some of these sites later grew into true cemeteries, many were forgotten after a family moved away or died out.

Today, it is not unheard of to discover groupings of tombstones, ranging from a few to a dozen or more, on undeveloped land. As late twentieth century suburban sprawl pressured the pace of development in formerly rural areas, it became increasingly common for larger exurban properties to be encumbered by "religious easements," which are legal requirements for the property owner to permit periodic maintenance of small burial plots located on the property but technically not owned with it. Often, cemeteries are relocated to accommodate building. However, if the cemetery is not relocated, descendants of people buried there may visit the cemetery.

More recent is the practice of families with large estates choosing to create private cemeteries in the form of burial sites, monuments, crypts, or mausoleums on their property; the mausoleum at Fallingwater is an example of this practice. Burial of a body at a site may protect the location from redevelopment, with such estates often being

placed in the care of a trust or foundation. Presently, state regulations have made it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to start private cemeteries; many require a plan to care for the site in perpetuity. Private cemeteries are nearly always forbidden on incorporated residential zones. Many people will bury a beloved pet on the family property.

## **Customs and practices involving cemeteries**



The grave of an infant at Horton, Northamptonshire



View over a cemetery in Belgium, 2010.

### **Flowers**

In Western countries, and many others, cut flowers are commonly left by visitors to graves, especially during major holidays and on birthdays or relevant anniversaries. Cemeteries usually throw away these flowers after a few weeks in order to keep the space maintained. Flowers may often be planted on the grave as well, usually immediately in front of the gravestone. For this purpose roses are highly common.

### **Stones**

Jewish cemeteries often have multiple small, usually round, stones left on the top of the headstones. These have a prayer said as they are left. This practice is seen in the closing scene of the film *Schindler's List* although in that case it is not on a Jewish grave.

### **Crosses**

War graves will commonly have small timber crosses left with a red poppy attached to its centre. These will often have messages written on the cross. More formal visits will often leave a poppy wreath. Jewish war graves are sometimes marked by a timber Star of David.

## **Contemporary cemetery management**

Traditionally cemetery management only involves the allocation of land for burial, the digging and filling of graves, and the maintenance of the grounds and landscaping. The construction and maintenance of headstones and other grave monuments is usually the private responsibility of families of the deceased. However, increasingly, many people regard the resultant collection of individual headstones, concrete slabs and fences (some of which may be decayed or damaged) to be aesthetically unappealing, leading to new cemetery developments either standardising the shape or design of headstones or plaques, sometimes by providing a standard shaped marker as part of the service provided by the cemetery.

### **Grave digging**

Usually cemetery authorities dig the grave, usually to ensure it is in the correct place and the correct depth, in order not to interfere with other burials in the cemetery. This is usually done before the mourners arrive for the burial. The cemetery authorities usually fill the grave after the burial, generally after the mourners have departed. Mechanical equipment, such as diggers, are used to reduce labour cost of digging and filling, but some hand shoveling may still be required.

In the UK the minimum depth from the surface to the highest lid is 36 inches. There must be 6 inches between each coffin, which on average is 15 inches high. If the soil is free draining and porous, only 24 inches of soil on top is required. Coffins may be interred as lesser depth or even above the grave as long as they are encased in a concrete chamber. Before 1977, double graves were dug to 8 feet and singles to 6 feet. As a single grave is now dug to 54 inches, old cemeteries contain many areas where new single graves can be dug on 'old ground', which could be a welcome means of survival for many of them.

### **Burial registers**

Usually there is a legal requirement to maintain records regarding the burials (or interment of ashes) within a cemetery. These *burial registers* usually contain (at a minimum) the name of the person buried, the date of burial and the location of the burial within the cemetery, although some burial registers contain far more information about the deceased person. Burial registers are an important resource for genealogy.

### **Land use management**

In order to physically manage the space within the cemetery (to avoid burials in existing graves) and to record locations in the burial register, most cemeteries have some systematic layout of graves in rows, generally grouped into larger sections as required. Often the cemetery displays this information in the form of a map, which is used both by the cemetery administration in managing their land use and also by friends and family members seeking to locate a particular grave within the cemetery.

## Pressures on cemetery management



A tomb retrofitted as a residence in the City of the Dead. Cairo's infamous City of the Dead is a centuries old cemetery that has become home to as many as 1 million Egyptians during the last decades.

Cemetery authorities face a number of tensions in regard to the management of cemeteries.

One issue relates to cost. Traditionally a single payment is made at the time of burial, but the cemetery authority incurs expenses in cemetery maintenance over many decades. Many cemetery authorities find that their accumulated funds are not sufficient for the costs of long-term maintenance. This shortfall in funds for maintenance results in three main options: charge much higher prices for new burials, obtain some other kind of public subsidy, or neglect maintenance. For cemeteries without space for new burials, the options are even more limited. Public attitudes towards subsidies are highly variable. People with family buried in local cemeteries are usually quite concerned about neglect of cemetery maintenance and will usually argue in favour of public subsidy of local cemetery maintenance, whereas other people without connection to the area often argue that public spending comes from their taxes and therefore should be spent on the living in the district rather than being "wasted" on the dead.

Another issue relates to limited amount of land. In many larger towns and cities, the older cemeteries which were initially considered to be large often run out of space for new burials and there is no vacant adjacent land available to extend the cemetery or even land in the same general area to create new cemeteries. New cemeteries are generally established on the periphery of towns and cities, where large tracts of land are still available. However, people often wish to be buried in the same cemetery as other relatives, creating pressure to find more space in existing cemeteries and are not interested in being buried in new cemeteries with which there is no sense of connection to their family.

A third issue is the maintenance of monuments and headstones, which are generally the responsibility of families, but often become neglected over time. Decay and damage through vandalism or cemetery maintenance practices can render monuments and headstones either unsafe or at least unsightly. On the other hand, some families do not forget the grave but constantly visit, leaving behind flowers, plants, and other decorative items that create their own maintenance problem.

### **Re-use of graves**



Prague's Old Jewish cemetery is the last resting place for more than 100,000 people which had been buried here since the 15th century.

All of these issues tend to put pressure on the re-use of grave sites within cemeteries. The re-use of graves already used for burial can cause considerable upset to family members. Although the authorities might declare that the grave is sufficiently old that there will be no human remains still present, nonetheless many people regard the re-use of graves (particularly their family's graves) as a desecration. Also re-use of a used grave involves the removal of any monuments and headstones, which causes further distress to families (although families will typically be allowed to take away the monuments and headstones if they wish).

On the other hand, cemetery authorities are well aware that many old graves are forgotten and not visited and that their re-use will not cause distress to anyone. However, there will always be some older graves in any cemetery for whom there are local and vocal descendants who will mount a public campaign against re-use. One pragmatic strategy is to publicly announce plans to re-use older graves and invite families to respond if they are willing or not. Re-use then only occurs where there are no objections allowing the "forgotten" graves to be re-used. Sometimes the cemetery authorities request a further payment to avoid re-use of a grave, but often this backfires politically.

A practical problem with regard to contacting families is that the original person who organised a burial may themselves also be dead and buried and locating living family members many decades later is virtually impossible (or at least prohibitively expensive). Therefore communication about re-use in local cemeteries tends to occur only through in local publications, which often do not reach family members living further afield who may only become aware of the re-use of the grave after the event (and after the removal and destruction of monuments and headstones).

Some cemeteries did foresee the need for re-use and included in their original terms and conditions a limited tenure on a grave site and most new cemeteries follow this practice, having seen the problems faced by older cemeteries. However, even when the cemetery has the legal right to re-use a grave, strong public opinion often forces the authorities to back down on that re-use. Also, even when cemeteries have a limited tenure provision in place, often funding shortages force them to contemplate re-use earlier than the original arrangements provided for.

Another type of grave site that must be considered for re-use are those that have never been used (but have been purchased at some time for future use). In principle it would seem easier to re-use such grave sites as there can be no claims of desecration, but often this is made more complicated by the legal rights to be buried obtained by the pre-purchase, as any limited tenure clause only takes effect after there has been a burial. Again, cemetery authorities suspect that in many cases the holders of these burial rights are probably deceased and that nobody will exercise that burial right, but again some families are aware of the burial rights they possess and do intend to exercise them as and when family members die. Again the difficulty of being unable to locate the holders of these burial rights complicates the re-use of those graves.



Cemetery excavations, like this one in Madrid, can alleviate overcrowding.

As historic cemeteries begin to reach their capacity for full burials, alternative memorialization, such as collective memorials for cremated individuals, is becoming more common. Different cultures have different attitudes to destruction of cemeteries and use of the land for construction. In some countries it is considered normal to destroy the graves, while in others the graves are traditionally respected for a century or more. In many cases, after a suitable period of time has elapsed, the headstones are removed and the now former cemetery is converted to a recreational park or construction site. A more recent trend, particularly in South American cities, involves constructing high-rise buildings to house graves.

Cemeteries in the United States may be relocated if the land is required for other reasons. For instance, many cemeteries in the southeastern United States were relocated by the Tennessee Valley Authority from areas about to be flooded by dam construction. Cemeteries may also be moved so that the land can be reused for transportation structures, public buildings, or even private development. Cemetery relocation is not necessarily possible in other parts of the world; in Alberta, Canada, for instance, the *Cemetery Act* expressly forbids the relocation of cemeteries or the mass exhumation of marked graves for any reason whatsoever. This has caused significant problems in the provision of transportation services to the southern half of the City of Calgary, as the main southbound road connecting the south end of the city with downtown threads

through a series of cemeteries founded in the 1930s. The light rail transit line running to the south end eventually had to be built directly under the road.

### **Maintenance and mourning**



A roadside cemetery in Hualien, Taiwan



A belltower at Forrest Home Cemetery, in Fifield, Wisconsin, USA. Tolling bells during funerals has been customary in some places around the world.

Cemetery authorities also face tension between the competing demands of efficient maintenance with the needs of mourners.

Labour costs in particular have risen substantially and so finding low-cost maintenance methods (meaning low-labour maintenance methods) is increasingly important. However, as discussed above, the use of large mowers and string trimmers might be efficient but often cannot be used in cemeteries because they physically are too large to fit between graves or because they can damage the monuments and headstones. In this regard, older cemeteries designed at a time of relatively low-cost labour and limited automation tend to present the greatest difficulties for maintenance.

On the other hand, newer cemeteries might be designed to be more efficiently maintained with lower labour through the increased use of equipment, e.g. lawn cemeteries where the maintenance can be performed with a ride-on mower or lawn tractor. However, efficient maintenance of newer graves is often frustrated by the actions of mourners who often place flowers and other objects on graves. These objects often require manual intervention; in some cases objects will be picked up and returned after maintenance, in other cases (e.g. dead flowers) they will be disposed of.

Again, although cemetery authorities try to prohibit the quantity and nature of objects placed on graves (a common restriction is to allow only fresh flowers, not in a vase or pot), but mourning families might ignore any such regulations and become very upset if other objects are removed. In particular, in an era in which the death of children is now relatively uncommon, some parents create quite large shrines at their child's grave, decorating them with toys, wind chimes, statues of angels and cherubs, etc. as a manifestation of their grief, adding items to the pile of objects on the grave progressively over time. Cemetery authorities have to try to deal with such situations sensitively, as strong emotions are involved. However, as well as their own maintenance problems with such "shrines", families with graves in the surrounding area often complain to cemetery authorities about the "mess", as they believe it detracts from the dignity of their family's graves. It is difficult to find a solution that makes everyone happy.

## **Unusual cemeteries**

- The Merry Cemetery in Săpânța, northern Romania.
- The Cross Bones, a disused burial ground in Southwark, London for prostitutes
- The British Cemetery in Madrid, a cemetery for Protestants and Spanish suicides.
- The Manila Chinese Cemetery in the Philippines has richly decorated mausoleums.

## **Cemeteries for pets**

The Cimetière des Chiens in Asnières-sur-Seine in Paris is an elaborate pet cemetery believed to be the first zoological necropolis in the world.

## **Cemeteries and superstition**



Jewish cemetery "Heiliger Sand" in Worms, Germany

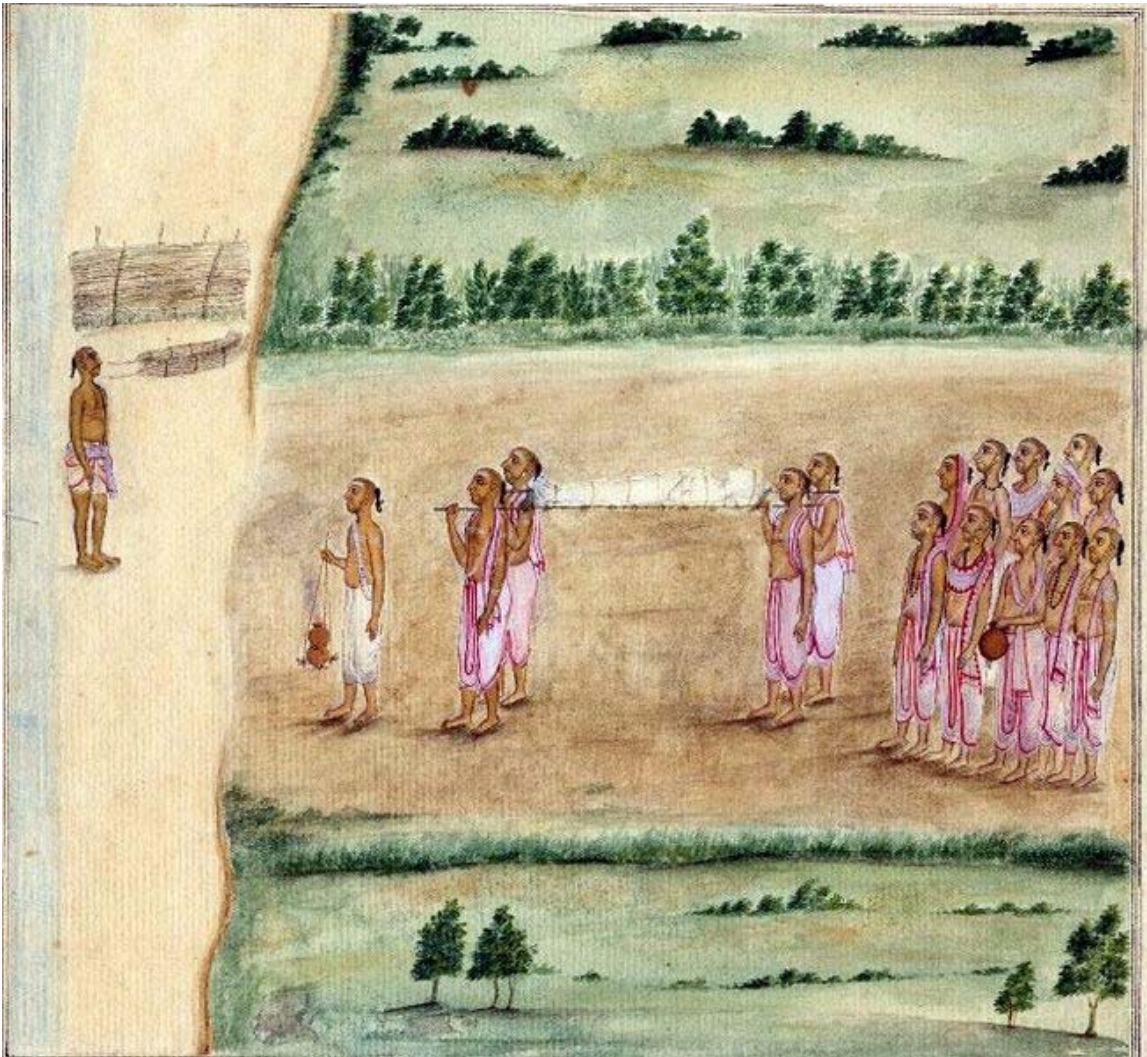
In many countries, cemeteries are places believed to hold both superstition and legend character, being used, usually at nighttimes, as an altar in black magic ceremonies or similarly clandestine happenings, such as devil worshipping, grave-robbing (gold teeth and jewelry are preferred), thrilling sex encounters or drug and alcohol abuse not related to the cemetery aura (see below).

The legend of zombies, as romanticized by Wade Davis in *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, is not exceptional among cemetery myths, as cemeteries are places where witches and sorcerers get skulls and bones needed for their sinister rituals.

In the Afro-Brazilian urban mythos (like Umbanda), there are a character loosely related to cemeteries and its aura: the Zé Pilintra (in fact, Zé Pilintra is more related to bohemianism and night life than with cemeteries, where the reigning entity is *Exu Caveira* or *Exu Cemitério*, similar to Voodoo Baron Samedi).

## Chapter- 5

# Antyesti



Hindu funeral

**Antyesti** or Hindu funeral rites, sometimes referred as *Antim Sanskar*, is an important Sanskara, sacrament of Hindu society. Extensive texts of such rites are available, particularly in the Garuda Purana. There is wide inconsistency in theory and practice, and

the procedures differ from place to place. Further, these rites also differ depending on the caste, jāti, social group, and the status of the deceased person.

## **History**

About 4000 years ago, in the Indian subcontinent, human bodies were either exposed to the elements of nature, and to the birds, or buried in the earth, in a river, and sometimes a cave or an urn. Centuries later, cremation became the usual mode of disposal of the dead bodies, with certain exceptions – the exceptions being bodies of infants, yogis, sadhus, and a few others. Cremation became popular due to the Hindu concept of detachment of soul from the body at the time of death, and the transmigration of the soul from one body to another.

## **Stages**

Hindu funeral rites may generally be divided into four stages:

- The rituals and rites to be performed when the person is believed to be on the death bed.
- Rites which accompany the disposal of the dead body.
- Rites which enable the soul of the dead to transit successfully from the stage of a ghost (preta) to the realm of the ancestors, the Pitrs.
- Rites performed in honor of the Pitrs.

## Process



*Burning ghats of Manikarnika, at Varanasi, India*

Procedures for cremation vary from place to place. Immediately after the death, the body is placed on the floor with the head pointing towards the south which is the direction of the dead. An oil lamp is lit and placed near the body, this lamp is kept burning continuously for the first three days following death. In Hinduism, the dead body is considered to be symbol of great impurity hence minimal physical contact is maintained, perhaps to avoid the spread of infections or germs. Most often the body is bathed by purified water, and then dressed in new clothes, if the dead was a male or a widow then generally white clothes are used, whereas if the dead was a married women with her husband still alive or a young unmarried girl, then the body is dressed either in red or yellow. Sacred ash (*bhasma*) is applied on the forehead of the deceased, especially for the worshippers of Lord Shiva (Saivites), otherwise sandalwood paste is applied on the forehead, if the dead was a worshipper for Lord Vishnu (Vaishnava). Further, a few drops of the holy Ganges water may be put into the mouth of the deceased so that the soul may attain liberation, also a few leaves of the holy basil (tulsi) are placed on the right side of the dead body. The body then may be adorned with jewels, and placed lying on a stretcher, with the head pointing towards the south. Sometimes the body may be kept in a sitting position too. The stretcher is adorned with different flowers including roses, jasmine, and marigolds, and the body is almost covered with the flowers. Thereafter, the

close relatives of the deceased person carry the stretcher on their shoulders to the cremation ground. If it is located at a distance, traditionally the stretcher is placed on a cart pulled by animals like bullocks. Nowadays vehicles are also used.

The cremation ground is called *Shmashana* (in Sanskrit), and traditionally it is located near a river, if not on the river bank itself. There, a pyre is prepared, on which the corpse is laid with its feet facing southwards, so that the dead person can walk in the direction of the dead. The jewels, if any, are removed. Thereafter, the chief mourner (generally the eldest son) walks around the pyre three times keeping the body to his left. While walking he sprinkles water and sometimes ghee onto the pyre from a vessel. He then sets the pyre alight with a torch of flame. The beginning of the cremation heralds the start of the traditional mourning period, which usually ends on the morning of the 13th day after death. When the fire consumes the body, which may take a few hours, the mourners return home. During this mourning period the family of the dead are bound by many rules and regulations of ritual impurity. Immediately after the cremation the entire family is expected to have a bath. One or two days after the funeral, the chief mourner returns to the cremation ground to collect the mortal remains and put them in an urn. These remains are then immersed in a river. Those who can afford it may go to select places like Varanasi, Haridwar, Allahabad, Sri Rangam and Kanya Kumari to perform this rite of immersion of mortal remains.

The preta-karma is an important aspect of Hindu funeral rites, and its objective is to facilitate the migration of the soul of the dead person from the status of a preta (ghost or spirit) to the abode of the ancestors (Pitrs). It is believed that if this stage of funeral rites is not performed or performed incorrectly, the spirit of the dead person shall become a ghost (bhuta). The rites generally last for ten or eleven days, at the end of which the preta is believed to join the abode of the ancestors. Thereafter, they are worshipped during the 'sradha' ceremonies.

If a person dies in a different country, in a war, or drowns, or in any other manner that his body cannot be retrieved for the antyesti, his funeral rites may be performed without the dead body, and similar procedures are followed had the dead body been available. If such a person is later discovered to have not actually died, then "resurrection" rituals are mandatory before his being admitted to the world of the living. The Hindu communities in the United States have begun to look at streamlining the process of cremation rituals and post-cremation observances.

## Tamil Brahmin funerals



### Manual burning

The body is cleaned up by pouring water over it. The water is poured by sons and daughters. Then it is draped in a fresh, washed cloth. The relatives put uncooked rice over the mouth of the deceased. The *karta* ("doer", who performs the rites) has a quick bath (no soap, etc). Sits on the ground in the wet clothes. He wears only a single cloth. The purohit says the mantras and the karta follows them. The body is lifted and kept in the funeral van. The grandson carries a ghee-flame and takes a few steps and the van follows. Then the van speeds up and reaches the cremation ground. The purohit chants the mantras and the karta follows him. Relatives and friends visit and offer their condolences.

The host is not supposed to welcome them. The relatives silently go off without saying goodbye.

There is a choice of manual burning and electric burning.

- Manual burning:

The following is based on Madras brahmin practice. The body is handed over to the Government officials at the crematorium. The officials consent to burn the body once you produce a doctor's certificate of death. The person who does the actual burning is called *vettiyaan*. He covers the body with wooden logs and then with dried dung cakes. The face and chest are left open. The karta is given burning pieces of coal and he places the coal very tenderly on the chest of the departed. Then the face is covered. The funeral party returns home after this. The vettiyan takes care of the further burning. He ensures that the body is fully burnt.



Electric burning: Burning body in a crematory

- Electric burning:

The body is kept on a bamboo frame and frame is kept on a railing near the door of the electric chamber. The door is opened, the railing is moved, the body goes into position

and the railing is pulled back. Then the operator turns the switch on. The target temperature is around 500 degrees Celsius plus. The chamber coils are kept on right from the morning, body or no body. It takes around an hour for the body to burn. The black smoke can be seen from the very tall stack above the chamber. (Here also, the karta puts the burning pieces of coal on the chest of the body before the body is pushed into the chamber). The ashes are given to the karta. Again there are some mantras and work on the ground. Once over, the karta goes to a water body, say a beach, and immerses the ashes in the water (*sanjayanam*).

- Nitya vidhi:

Three stones are buried in two separate places. If you are in a village, one set in the house (*griha dwara kundam*) and another near some water body (*nadi theera kundam*). The first day, the karta pours water on the ground in which the stones are buried. This is done at both sites. In the home site, you break tender coconuts and pour on the stone site. This is done accompanied by mantras. The idea is to quench the thirst of the deceased person. This goes on for another 9 days. Then there are separate functions on 10th, 11th, 12th and 13th days.

- 10th day: Lot of food stuff is prepared and the relatives throw the same (lob) into a cloth spread on the floor.
- 13th day: Puja for gods is done. Includes navagraha homam. The water from the puja is sprinkled all over the house to purify the place.

Thereafter, offerings to the departed are made each month. These events are called *Sodakumbam* and *Masyam*. These are performed on the day of death which repeats each month. Western calendar dates are not used for this purpose. Instead, a concept called *Thithi* is used. There are 15 thithis in a full cycle of thithis and there are two such cycles in a month. The exact is derived from the South Indian Tamil Almanac with the help of a purohit. These offerings are made on two separate days each month. The events are conducted with the help of a purohit (called 'Sastrigal').

This goes on for 12 months. In the 12th month, a function called Aptikam is conducted. As above, this function incorporates the relevant pujas and dhaanam (gifts to brahmins). The value of the gifts depends on how much money you have. In addition functions are held on the 27th and 45th days after the death, where again the main idea is to offer food to the departed soul through living brahmins. Usually the son or the nearest male relative carries the rites.

## **Legality**

### **United Kingdom**

In the United Kingdom, it was formerly illegal to conduct a traditional outdoors Hindu cremation under the 1902 Cremation Act, with Hindus having to cremate their dead in indoor crematoriums instead. In 2006, Daven Ghai, a British Hindu who had been refused

the right to have a traditional funeral by Newcastle City Council, brought a case to court in which he claimed that the current law did in fact allow open air cremations, so long as they were in some enclosed building and away from the public. A High Court ruling disagreed with his claim, and the-then Justice Secretary Jack Straw stated that the British public would "find it abhorrent that human remains were being burned in this way." Nonetheless, upon taking it to the Court of Appeals in 2010, the judge, Lord Justice Neuberger, ruled that such a cremation would be legal under the 1902 Act, so long as it was performed within a building, even an open-air one. Upon his victory, Ghai told reporters that "I always maintained that I wanted to clarify the law, not disobey or disrespect it" and expressed regret at the amount that the trial had cost the taxpayer. He stated that he was thankful that he now had "the right to be cremated with the sun shining on my body and my son lighting the pyre" and he and other Hindus and Sikhs in the country had begun investigations into finding a site upon which they could perform the funerary ceremonies.

## Chapter- 6

# Veneration of the Dead



A Korean *jesa* altar for ancestors



Sending off the dead by burning offerings

**Veneration of the dead** is based on the belief that the deceased, often family members, have a continued existence and/or possess the ability to influence the fortune of the living. Some groups venerate their ancestors; some faith communities, in particular the Catholic Church, venerate saints as intercessors with God.

In some Eastern cultures, and in Native American traditions, the goal of ancestor veneration is to ensure the ancestors' continued well-being and positive disposition towards the living and sometimes to ask for special favours or assistance. The social or non-religious function of ancestor veneration is to cultivate kinship values, such as filial piety, family loyalty, and continuity of the family lineage. While far from universal, ancestor veneration occurs in societies with every degree of social, political, and technological complexity, and it remains an important component of various religious practices in modern times. Here we, will examine similarities and differences in the relationships between the living and the dead. The minimum requirement for veneration offered to the dead is probably some kind of belief in an afterlife, a survival, at least for a time, of personal identity beyond death. These beliefs are far from uniform.

## Description

For most of the cultures, ancestor practices are not the same as the worship of the gods. When a person worships a god at a local temple it is to ask for some favor that can be granted by the powerful spirit. Generally speaking, however, the purpose of ancestor veneration is not to ask for favors but to do one's filial duty. Some people believe that their ancestors actually need to be provided for by their descendants. Others do not believe that the ancestors are even aware of what their descendants do for them, but that the expression of filial piety is what is important. Whether or not the ancestor receives what is offered is not the issue.

Therefore, for people unfamiliar with how "ancestor worship" is actually practiced and thought of, the use of the translation *worship* can be a cause of misunderstanding and is a misnomer in many ways. In English, the word *worship* usually refers to the reverent love and devotion accorded a deity or divine being. However, in other cultures, this act of worship does not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. Rather, the act is a way to respect, honor and look after ancestors in their afterlives as well as seek their guidance for their living descendants. In this regard, many cultures and religions have similar practices. Some may visit the graves of their parents or other ancestors, leave flowers and pray to them in order to honor and remember them, while also asking their deceased ancestors to continue to look after them. However, this would not be considered as worshipping them.

It is in that sense that the translation *ancestor veneration* may convey a more accurate sense of what practitioners, such as the Chinese and other Buddhist-influenced and Confucian-influenced societies, see themselves as doing.

## Africa

Ancestor worship is very prevalent throughout Africa and serves as the basis of many religions. Ancestor veneration is often augmented by a belief in a supreme being, but prayers and/or sacrifices are usually offered to the ancestors who may ascend to becoming minor deities themselves. Ancestor veneration remains among many Africans, sometimes practiced alongside the later adopted religions of Christianity (as in Nigeria among the Igala) and Islam (among the different Mandé peoples and the Bamum) in much of the continent.

## Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptian pyramids are the most famous historical monuments devoted to the dead. Egyptian religion posited the survival of the soul in connection with the survival of a physical receptacle for the soul - hence mummification and portraiture flourished.

Although some historians claim that ancient Egyptian society was a "death cult" because of its elaborate tombs and mummification rituals, it was really quite the opposite. The

philosophy that “this world is but a veil of tears,” and that to die and be with God is a better existence than an earthly one was relatively unknown among the ancient Egyptians. This was not to say that they were unacquainted with the harshness of life in antiquity; rather, it came from sense of national pride. The Egyptian people loved the culture, customs and religion of their daily lives to the extent that they wanted to continue them in the next—although some might hope for a better station in the Beautiful West (Egyptian afterlife). This same strong sense of national and historical pride still exists in modern-day Egypt, although the religion and culture has changed.

Tombs were housing for the Hereafter, and so careful preparation was put into their construction and decoration just as homes for the living were. Mummification was a process by which to turn the corpse into a hardened statue of sorts through which the *ka* (soul) of the deceased could return to in order to receive offerings of the things s/he enjoyed while alive. If mummification was not affordable, a “ka-statue” in the likeness of the deceased was carved for this purpose. The Blessed Dead were collectively called the *akhu*, or “shining ones” (singular: *akh*). They were described as “shining as gold in the belly of Nut” (Gr. Nuit) and were indeed depicted as golden stars on the roofs of many tombs and temples.

The process by which a *ka* became an *akh* was not automatic upon death; it involved a 70-day journey through the *duat*, or Otherworld, which led to judgment before Wesir (Gr. Osiris), Lord of the Dead where the *ka*’s heart would be weighed on a scale against the Feather of Ma’at (representing Truth). However, if the *ka* was not properly prepared, this journey could be fraught with dangerous pitfalls and strange demons; hence some of the earliest religious texts discovered, such as the Papyrus of Ani (commonly known as The Book of the Dead) and the Pyramid Texts were actually written as guides to help the deceased successfully navigate the *duat*.

If the heart was in balance with the Feather of Ma’at, the *ka* passed judgment and was granted access to the Beautiful West as an *akh* who was *ma’a heru* (“true of voice”) to dwell among the gods and other *akhu*. At this point only was the *ka* deemed worthy to be venerated by the living through rites and offerings. Those who became lost in the *duat* or deliberately tried to avoid judgment became the unfortunate (and sometimes dangerous) *mutu*, the Restless Dead. For the few whose truly evil hearts outweighed the Feather, the goddess Ammit waited patiently behind Wesir’s judgment seat to consume them. She was a creature composite resembling three of the deadliest animals in Egypt at that time: the crocodile, the hippopotamus and the lion. (It is interesting to note that the hippopotamus is still the leading cause of human deaths by animal encounter in Africa today.) Being fed to Ammit was to be consigned to the Eternal Void, to be “unmade” as a *ka*.

Besides being eaten by Ammit, the worst fate a *ka* could suffer after physical death was to be forgotten. For this reason, ancestor veneration in ancient Egypt was an important rite of remembrance in order to keep the *ka* “alive” in this life as well as in the next. Royals, nobles and the wealthy made contracts with their local priests to perform prayers and give offerings at their tombs. In return, the priests were allowed to keep a portion of

the offerings as payment for services rendered. Some tomb inscriptions even invited passers-by to speak aloud the names of the deceased within (which also helped to perpetuate their memory), and to offer water, prayers or other things if they so desired. In the private homes of the less wealthy, niches were carved into the walls for the purpose of housing images of familial *akhu* and to serve as altars of veneration.

Many of these same religious beliefs and ancestor veneration practices are still carried on today in the religion of Kemetic Orthodoxy.

## **Ancient Rome**

The Romans, like many Mediterranean societies, had strong prohibitions against dead bodies. Bodies of the dead were often displayed for a time but were then taken outside the *pomerium*, or sacred boundary of the city - in effect, the city walls - for cremation. Ashes and bone fragments were then interred outside the walls. Aristocratic Romans had from their remote past observed the custom of keeping portraits of their male ancestors - they had probably borrowed this custom from the Etruscans. These portraits were originally in the form of masks - probably even death masks moulded on the dead ancestor's face. On significant family holidays, the living members of the family might wear the masks in procession. In the 2nd century A.D., practices shifted from cremation to burial. The reasons for this change are not at all clear. Scholars have posited influences from groups who practiced burial - for instance, the increasing numbers of Germanic *foederatii* (troops settled inside the borders of the empire) - and from the increasing numbers of practitioners of religions that practiced burial for doctrinal reasons, such as Judaism, Christianity, and the Egyptian syncretistic Mystery religions.

## **Christianity**

### **Early Christianity's attitudes**

Many early Christians were persecuted for their faith, leading many Christians in Rome to hide in the catacombs. As a result, they found themselves praying and worshipping God surrounded by the tombs and bodies of the dead. When possible, they sought to pray among the bodies of dead Christians, sometimes using a coffin or tomb for an altar on which to celebrate the Eucharist. From the early apostolic times, it appears the Catholic Church held a respectful veneration for the dead. They reported witnessing miracles in connection with the bodies of dead Christians, such as healing, or observing sweet-smelling myrrh exuding from their bones. This, combined with their belief in the resurrection of Jesus and future resurrection of all Christians, eventually led to the veneration of saints and of their relics. Early accounts of martyrs include Christian witnesses making great efforts to obtain the remains of the martyrs and the Romans sometimes trying to prevent this. Also, it became common to continue to ask Christian leaders to pray for them, even after the leaders had died, as they believed that these Christians were still able to pray and that their prayers would still be effective. Later, most of the various Protestant sects that broke away from the Catholic Church in the 16th

century repudiated the practice of asking intercession from the dead, despite its origins in early Christianity.

### **Catholicism and Anglicanism's attitudes**

The Roman Catholic Church, as well as the Anglican Communion, Eastern Orthodox Churches and Oriental Orthodox Churches venerate saints who are in Heaven. Although not necessarily ancestors, the saints are considered departed from Earthly life. They are honored through prayers and feast days. Such holidays to honor the dead in Christianity include All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, and Day of the Dead.

## **Asian Cultures**

### **China**



This picture was taken at a Malaysian Chinese home. On the left of the altar is a glass filled with rice. Joss sticks are stuck into it after the ancestors are invited to partake in the offering of food specially prepared for them on the Hungry Ghost festival.



Malaysian Chinese food is offered to the ancestors during the annual Hungry Ghost festival prayers

Ancestral veneration in some cultures (such as Chinese) (敬祖, pinyin: *jìngzǔ*), as well as ancestor worship (拜祖, pinyin: *bàizǔ*), seeks to honor the deeds and memories of the deceased. This is an extension of filial piety for the ancestors, the ultimate homage to the deceased as if they are alive. Instead of prayers, joss sticks are offered with communications and greetings to the deceased. According to Confucian principles, there are eight qualities of *De* (八德) for a Chinese to complete his earthly duties with filial piety or *xiào* (孝) the most important. The importance of paying filial respect to parents (and elders) lies with the fact that all physical bodily aspects of one's being were created by one's parents, who continued to tend to one's well-being until one is on firm footings. The respect and the homage to parents, i.e., filial piety, is to return this gracious deed to them in life and after, the ultimate homage. In this regard, ancestral veneration in China is a fusion of the teachings of Confucius and Laozi rather than a religious ritual. The *shi* (尸; "corpse, personator") was a Zhou Dynasty (1045 BCE-256 BCE) sacrificial representative of a dead relative. During a *shi* ceremony, the ancestral spirit supposedly would enter the personator, who would eat and drink sacrificial offerings and convey spiritual messages.

Sacrifices are sometimes made to altars as food for the deceased. This falls under the modes of communication with the Chinese spiritual world concepts. Some of the veneration includes visiting the deceased at their graves and making offerings to the deceased in the Qingming, Chongyang, and Ghost Festivals. All three are related to paying homage to the spirits. Due to the hardships of the late 19th- and 20th-century China, when meat and poultry were difficult to come by, sumptuous feasts are still offered in some Asian countries as a practice to the spirits or ancestors. However, in the orthodox Taoist and Buddhist rituals, only vegetarian food would suffice.



### Burning offerings

For those with deceased in the netherworld or hell, elaborate or even creative offerings, such as toothbrushes, combs, towels, slippers, and water are provided so that the deceased will be able to have these items after they have died. Often, paper versions of these objects are burned for the same purpose, even paper cars and plasma TVs. Spirit money (also called Hell Notes) is sometimes burned as an offering to ancestors as well for the afterlife. The living may regard the ancestors as guardian angels to them, perhaps in protecting them from serious accidents or guiding their path in life.

## **Korea**

In Korea, ancestor worship is referred to by the generic term *jerye* (hangul: 제례; hanja: 祭禮) or *jesa* (hangul: 제사; hanja: 祭祀). Notable examples of *jerye* include *Munmyo jerye* and *Jongmyo jerye*, which are performed periodically each year for venerated Confucian scholars and kings of ancient times, respectively. The ceremony held on the anniversary of a family member's death is called *charye*. It is still practiced today. (차례).

## **Vietnam**

Ancestor veneration is one of the most unifying aspects of Vietnamese culture, as practically all Vietnamese regardless of religious affiliation (Buddhist or Christian) have an ancestor altar in their home or business.

In Vietnam, traditionally people did not celebrate birthdays (before Western influence), but the death anniversary of a loved one was always an important occasion. Besides an essential gathering of family members for a banquet in memory of the deceased, incense sticks are burned along with hell notes, and great platters of food are made as offerings on the ancestor altar, which usually has pictures or plaques with the names of the deceased.

These offerings and practices are done frequently during important traditional or religious celebrations, the starting of a new business, or even when a family member needs guidance or counsel and is a hallmark of the emphasis Vietnamese culture places on filial duty.

## **India**

Ancestor worship is predominant in India among Hindus. In India, when a person dies, the family observes a ten-day mourning period, generally called shraddha. A year and six months thence, they observe the ritual of Tarpan, in which the family offers tributes to the deceased. During these rituals, the family prepares the food items that the deceased liked and offers food to the deceased. They offer this food to cows and crows as well. They are also obliged to offer sraddha (a small feast of specific preparations) to eligible Bramhins. Only after these rituals are the family members allowed to eat.

Each year, on the particular date (as per the Hindu calendar) when the person had died, the family members repeat this ritual.

Apart from this, there is also a fortnight-long duration each year called *Pitru Paksha* ("fortnight of ancestors"), when the family remembers all its ancestors and offers Tarpan to them. This period falls just before the Navratri or Durga Puja falling in the month of Ashwin. Mahalaya marks the end of the fortnight-long Tarpan to the ancestors.

## The Philippines



Wooden images of the ancestors in a museum in Bontoc, Mountain Province, Philippines

In the animistic tribes of the Northern Philippines, worshipping the ancestors was very prevalent until the arrival of the Americans in the 1900. However, unlike in the other places where the images of the folk gods were burnt, the American missionaries allowed these images to be preserved as a memorial of the rich cultural heritage of the different northern tribes.

Many of these carved wooden ancestors, known as the *bulul*, are preserved in museums and serve as a reminder of the sophisticated history of the mountain tribes.

## Western Cultures

### Europe

Traditionally, in Celtic and Germanic Europe, the feast of Samhain was specially associated with the deceased, and, in these countries, it was still customary to set a place for them at table on this day until relatively recent times. After Christianisation, in most Catholic countries in Europe (and Anglican England), November 1 (All Saints' Day, also

known as Day of the Dead) became the day when families go to the cemeteries and light candles for their dead relatives. This is a very ancient practice, already present long before the time of the Roman Empire. In the early Catholic Church, honouring Christian relatives who had died was commonplace, and, during the post-Apostolic period when the Church was forced underground by the Roman Empire, the Mass was celebrated among the catacombs. The official day, according to the Church, to commemorate the dead who have not attained beatific vision is November 2 (All Souls' Day).

### **Britain**

In a British context, the autumn ancestor festival corresponds to Halloween, which derives from the Celtic Samhain.

### **Ireland**

During Samhain in Ireland, the dead are supposed to return, and food and light are left for them. Lights are left burning all night, as on Christmas Eve, and food is left outdoors for them. It is believed that food fallen on the floor should also be left, as someone needed it.

### **Canada and the United States**



Graves

In the United States and Canada, flowers, wreaths, grave decorations and sometimes candles or even small pebbles are put on graves year-round as a way to honor the dead. In the Southern United States, many people honor deceased loved ones on Decoration Day. Times like Easter, Christmas, Candlemas, and All Souls' Day are also special days in which the relatives and friends of the deceased gather to honor them with flowers and candles. In the Catholic Church, one's local parish church often offers prayers for the dead on their death anniversary or on special days like All Souls' Day. Some Latinos of Mexican origin celebrate Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) on or around All Saints Day (November 1), this being a mix of a native Mesoamerican celebration and an imported European holiday. Ofrendas (altars) are set up, with calaveras (sugar skulls), photographs of departed loved ones, marigold flowers, candles, and more. In Judaism, when a grave site is visited, a small pebble is placed on the headstone. While there is no clear answer as to why, this custom of leaving pebbles may date back to biblical days when individuals were buried under piles of stones. Today, they are left as tokens that people have been there to visit and to remember. Some Americans may build a shrine in their home dedicated to loved ones who have died, with pictures of them. Also, increasingly, many roadside shrines may be seen for deceased relatives who died in car accidents or were killed on that spot, sometimes financed by the state or province as these markers serve as potent reminders to drive cautiously in hazardous areas.