

Funeral Directors and Embalmers

Cultural Differences in Understanding Death and Attitudes Toward Death

Every culture is different. They all have their own beliefs, customs, and traditions. But, all people are the same. We all are born, live, and die. Every culture handles death a little differently. Even though all cultures have differences, all cultures share common beliefs and traditions with some other cultures. All of us are also human, and



experience the same emotions when we deal with emotional situations, like death. But even though we all share the same emotions, people in different cultures handle them differently. By knowing about different cultures, and what they believe and do about death, we become better people and are better equipped to deal with people from these different backgrounds.

In an Aborigine tribe, when a person is dying, the village is very quiet and calm. They believe a dead person is like poison and will cause bad hunting. They feel that a death is always a murder; there are no natural causes. “How else could you explain how a person died so suddenly, who before had been so full of life?” was their reasoning. The relatives of the dead are responsible for finding the murderer. They would have to question everyone. After a person dies, everyone in the camp raises up a wailing, and shows their pain of mourning. Sometimes they would do this so they would not be suspected of the murder.

Once the person is dead, they spread red earth on the body, which looks like the blood shed at birth. This indicates that the dead person is being reborn into another world. They then paint the

designs of the clan in white and yellow on the chest and stomach. They believed that “these signs would change the dead man into a sacred being who could then enter the world of the spirit”.

They then placed the body in a tree. After three months, the body is removed, and the bones are cleaned. They then watch the bones for 2-3 months, to make sure the spirit is gone. Then, the bones are placed in a log in the center of the camp. The aborigines try to help the dead on their way to the spirit world, and continue watching to make sure that the spirit has made it. Through this, and in the treating of the dead’s remains with respect, they show caring towards the dead of their tribe.

The Christians of Ireland practices are similar to all other Christian burial practices. When someone dies, they are kept in a “wake house”, which is traditionally the house where they lived and died. Traditionally people placed salt on the bed, which was believed to keep evil and ghosts away from the mourners. People may still do this because it makes them feel more at ease, even though they do not believe that it has any effect. Candles are also traditionally placed around the bed. Friends and family walk into the room where the dead is laying, and say a prayer for the soul of the dead. In Irish custom, everyone shares a smoke - the tobacco was important to have at a wake. It probably helped people be more at ease, and be able to share their feelings and cope with their loss. The friends and family of the deceased sit around and talk how good of a person the deceased had been. They also share all of their memories of the dead, showing respect for and honoring the dead as they did. They also talked so that they would forget their sorrow.

The mourners later put the body in a coffin and carry it to the graveyard, taking a long route. This was done to fool the “other ones” (fairies and the dead who have died before). If anyone

was walking along the road and met the procession, they would walk along with it for a ways and say a prayer.

There is a custom of “keening”. It is an old custom that dates back to Celtic times. Keeners sang and wailed about the person’s life and virtues. This is done at either the grave or the bedside. The women also wail and lament about the deceased while standing over the grave. After the funeral rites are done, people leave the grave one by one. The men go to the pub, and the women to home. They believed that too much mourning was not good for the dead.



Some believed that on a day when more than one burial was taking place, the deceased carried in the last of the processions to reach the cemetery had to take care of the other dead souls buried that day. This happened in big cities, and sometimes fights even broke out.

Another major monotheistic religion is Islam. Islamic people believe in a peace from “total submission to and acceptance of the One and Only God (Allah) and His will”. People who submit themselves to Allah are called “Muslims”. Muslims believe that their lives on this earth are only a transition that precedes their afterlife.

Muslims ancestors were ancient Arabs. “The ancient Arabs had no conception of either resurrection or the existence of another life after death”. Even so, they seemed to believe that the dead continued on after death. It has been shown that they had ideas of wandering and thirst associated with dying. They believed that the dead who were left without burials and those whose death was not avenged were left with their spirits wandering and thirsty. With the advent of Islam, they believed that life and death were divine decrees, given by god, not by events or

parents. They also believe that their God judges them after death and that the spirit continues on after death. Said said, “by embracing Islam, Arabs substituted the notion of community of faith to the previous notion of community of blood”.

In an Islamic cemetery, funerary monuments are always common. But, sometimes only a stone with no writings might be used to mark a grave’s location. Islamic cemeteries are normally placed on the exterior of the city walls, near the gates of the city. The slope or foot of mountains is also a place where cemeteries are sometimes placed. This traditional placement away from the populace may come from a superstitious fear of the dead. Apparently, it is a practice that if forty years pass since the last burial, “the land of a cemetery can be reused for burying the dead or any other use.”

Muslims have their own set of funeral rites, which somewhat resemble the rights practiced by other religions. “According to the Sunna, it is preferable to whisper the shahada in the ear of a dying man whose face is turned to Mecca”. The “Sunna” is the teachings of the Islamic prophet Mohammed, and the “shahada” is an Islamic prayer. This act is similar to the sacrament of anointing of the sick, which is practiced in the Catholic and other Christian religions (The anointing of the sick was traditionally known as the “Last Rites”).

After someone dies, they wash the body several times, but always an even number. “Muslims have this common tendency to start everything from the right,” commented Said. Even after they have died, they are washed starting from the right side.

When placed in the grave, a white shroud is commonly worn. Other colors are allowed, but not red. The eyes of the dead are closed, they tie up the jaw, and the clothes are tied tightly, but then loosened once the body is placed in the grave. This is similar to many other religions. Both the

Islamic and Christian religions close the eyes of the dead. Many religions in the past have bound their dead. They may have bound their dead for the reasons of fear of the dead, but it is more likely that they do it now more out of tradition than out of any real fear.

When an Islamic funeral procession passes along a street, the people sitting along it are obligated to stand as it passes, as a sign of respect. This is similar to the



tradition in some Christian religions where passers-by walk along with the procession or say a prayer. People in both of these cultures show respect for other people's loved ones when they die.

Said commented, "the burial must be done on the same day of death or the following day, but there are some exceptions." A nighttime hurried burial is not approved. When it actually comes time to put the body in the grave, it is placed in the grave by the nearest relative. Muslims always make sure the body is buried facing Mecca. Following their tendency, they place the body on its right side.

There are multiple purposes to building a tomb, or just placing a tombstone. The one thought of most in recent times is for respect, but the original purpose of a tomb(stone) is just as likely to have been to hinder spirits in affecting the living. Tombstones may go back to the belief that ghosts may be "weighed down". The spirit would be bound to the tombstone, and be unable to affect the living. Many tombs, walled up with boulders and mounds of earth may have been for the same purpose. Another purpose of tombs is to confuse the spirit. An example of this is placing a maze in the entrance (or exit, from the ghost's point of view). This was believed to be

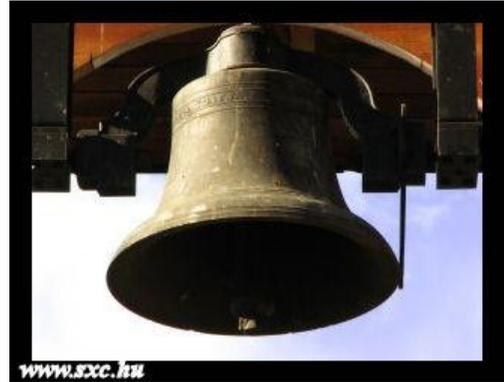
very effective since it was also believed that ghosts can only travel in a straight line. Another way used to keep a ghost way was to build it a nice, comfortable “house”.

Every culture has some things in common with some of the other cultures, and all cultures include people with the same type of fears, needs, and all descend from the same ancestry cultures. Along with understanding the beliefs and customs of other cultures, we can obtain better understanding just by understanding and learning about our own culture and heritage.

Many of our funeral customs have their historical basis in pagan rituals.

- Modern mourning clothing came from the custom of wearing special clothing as a disguise to hide identity from returning spirits. Pagans believed that returning spirits would fail to recognize them in their new attire and would be confused and overlook them.
- Covering the face of the deceased with a sheet stems from pagan tribes who believed that the spirit of the deceased escaped through the mouth. They would often hold the mouth and nose of a sick person shut, hoping to retain the spirits and delay death.
- Feasting and gatherings associated with the funeral began as an essential part of the primitive funeral where food offerings were made.
- Wakes held today come from ancient customs of keeping watch over the deceased hoping that life would return.
- The lighting of candles comes from the use of fire mentioned earlier in attempts to protect the living from the spirits.

- The practice of ringing bells comes from the common medieval belief that the spirits would be kept at bay by the ringing of a consecrated bell.
- The firing of a rifle volley over the deceased mirrors the tribal practice of throwing spears into the air to ward off spirits hovering over the deceased.
- Originally, holy water was sprinkled on the body to protect it from the demons.
- Floral offerings were originally intended to gain favor with the spirit of the deceased.
- Funeral music had its origins in the ancient chants designed to placate the spirits.



Stages of Death Acceptance

First Stage: Denial & Isolation

- The first reaction is **shock**. The universal first reaction to hearing the news was, “No.” Then a feeling of numbness sets in. Some people simply say that life seems unreal.
- The second stage that quickly follows is **denial**. “This can’t be happening to me.” We are a death denying society. Even our language tends to deny the reality of death by using terms such as “passed away” instead of the word “dead.” We want to deny that death has taken place. In the denial phase, people hope that it isn’t true. They may feel like this is just a bad dream and when they wake up, every thing will be all right.

Second Stage: Anger

- The third stage is **anger**. Once the mind accepts the fact that death will indeed take place, anger usually erupts. Again, this anger may be directed at God (which for a religious person results in a feeling of guilt for feeling that way about the Almighty) or it may be directed to doctors, medicine in general, another family member or even directed inwards (“If only I had...”). Again, guilt enters. Anger may also be directed at the world in general. No matter what or who the anger is directed at it needs to be understood by the family because it will usually become directed at them at some point.

Third Stage: Bargaining

- The fourth stage is **bargaining**. The patient typically hoped that God would extend their life or cure them in exchange for promised behavior.

Fourth Stage: Depression

- The fifth stage is **Depression**. This is usually the longest lasting stage of the cycle and is marked by deep depression and mood changes. There is also a certain amount of grieving that occurs in this stage. Grief is seen as a process. It is long-lasting and does not follow a fixed pattern.
- Grief has also been termed “work.” A person must “work-through” their own grief. Anyone who has been through grief knows that it is indeed “work.” Grief hurts. When we refer to the pain of grief, that pain is very real. Just as one must heal from a physical wound, one must also heal from the emotional and psychological wound known as grief. Grief can become physical. Many real physical diseases and conditions can be traced to grief as a cause.

- One author compares grief to peeling an onion. “It comes in layers, and you cry a lot.” Grief is very personal. Everyone must heal in their own way in their own time. There is no magical point on the calendar when grief is over.

Fifth Stage: Acceptance

- The final stage is **acceptance**. Once this stage is reached, the patient usually used whatever time remaining to “put their house in order.” There was a marked peace in the patient’s mood. Death was not a feared event.



Mourning

Margaret of Spain (*pictured*), Empress of Austria, in Mourning, 1666; note the children and servants in mourning dress behind her.

Mourning is in the simplest sense synonymous with grief over the death of someone. The word is also used to describe a cultural complex of behaviors 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, somber 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.

Social Customs and Dress

Continental Europe

Catherine de' Medici (*pictured right*) as widow, c. 1560s

Mary Queen of Scots (*pictured left*) in *deuil blanc* c. 1559 following the deaths of her father-in-law, mother, and first husband Francis II of France.

The custom of wearing unadorned black clothing for mourning dates back at least to the Roman Empire, when the *toga pulla* made of dark-colored wool was worn during periods of mourning.

Through the Middle Ages and Renaissance, distinctive mourning was worn for general as well as personal loss; after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of Huguenots in France, Elizabeth I of England and her court are said to have dressed in full mourning to receive the French Ambassador.

Women in mourning and widows wore distinctive black caps and veils, generally in a conservative version of the current fashion.

In rural areas of Portugal and Spain, widows will wear black for the rest of their lives. The immediate family members of the deceased will wear black for an extended period of time.

White Mourning

The color of deepest mourning among medieval European queens was white rather than black.

This tradition survived in Spain until the end of the fifteenth century, and was again practiced by the Spanish-born Belgian Queen Fabiola of King Baudouin's funeral. It was the custom for the Queens of France to wear *deuil blanc* or "white mourning"; this is the origin of the **white**



wardrobe created by Norman Hartnell for Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, in 1938, when Elizabeth was required to make a state visit to France while in mourning for her mother.

United Kingdom

Nowadays there is no special dress or behavior required for those in mourning and even the wearing of black at funerals is in decline. Traditionally however there were strict social rules to be observed.

By the 19th century, mourning behavior in England had developed into a complex set of rules, particularly among the upper classes. Women bore the greatest burden of these customs. They involved wearing heavy, concealing, black clothing, and the use of heavy veils of black crêpe. The entire ensemble was colloquially known as *widow's weeds* (from the Old English "Waed" meaning "garment").

Special caps and bonnets, usually in black or other dark colors, went with these ensembles. There was even special mourning jewelry, often made of jet or the hair of the deceased. The wealthy could also wear cameos or locketts designed to hold a lock of the deceased's hair or some similar relic.

Widows were expected to wear special clothes to indicate that they were in mourning for up to four years after the death. To remove the costume earlier was thought disrespectful to the decedent, and if the widow was still young and attractive, suggestive of potential sexually promiscuity. Those subject to the rules were slowly allowed to re-introduce conventional clothing at different time periods; stages were known by such terms as “full mourning”, “half mourning”, and similar descriptions.

Friends, acquaintances, and employees wore mourning to a greater or lesser degree depending on their relationship with the deceased. In general, servants wore black armbands when there had been a death in the household.

Mourning was worn for six months for a sibling. Parents would wear mourning for, “as long as they feel so disposed.” A widow was supposed to wear mourning for two years and was not supposed to enter society for twelve months. No lady or gentleman in mourning was supposed to attend balls. Amongst polite company the wearing of simply a black arm band was seen as appropriate only for military men (or others compelled to wear uniform in the course of their duties); wearing a black arm band instead of proper mourning clothes was seen as a degradation of proper etiquette and to be avoided.

Formal mourning culminated during the reign of Queen Victoria. Victoria herself may have had much to do with the practice, owing to her long and conspicuous grief over the death of her husband, Prince Albert. Although fashions began to be more functional and less restrictive for the succeeding Edwardians, appropriate dress for men and women, including that for the period of mourning, was still strictly prescribed and rigidly adhered to.

The rules were gradually relaxed and acceptable practice for both sexes became to dress in dark colors for up to a year after a death in the family.

United States

Mourning dress, circa 1867 Museum of Funeral Customs

Mourning generally followed English forms. In the antebellum South, with social mores that rivaled those of England, mourning was just as strictly observed. The sequence in the book and film of *Gone with the Wind* in which Scarlett O'Hara scandalizes the



attendees at a ball by accepting Rhett Butler's invitation to dance, despite the fact that she is in mourning for her late husband, accurately reflects the social customs of the time.

Africa

Bark cloth, a rough traditional fabric, was worn in some communities to denote that family members were in mourning. White garments are also used; following the advent of Christianity, black garments were worn, following European custom.

Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, an *edir* (or *iddir*) is a traditional community organization in which the members assist each other during the mourning process. Members make monthly financial contributions forming the Edir's fund and they will be entitled to receive a certain sum of money from this fund, the rate of which varies based on how close the deceased is to the Edir member. The purpose for such payment is to help cover the funeral and other expenses associated with the

death. In addition, female members of the Edir take turns to do the house work like preparing food for the mourning family and people coming to comfort them. Usually, the male members take the responsibility to arrange the funeral, erect a temporary tent to shelter guests who come to visit the mourning family. Edir members are also required to stay with the mourning family and comfort them for three full days.

State & Official Mourning

State mourning, or in the case of monarchies, **court mourning**, refers to displays of mourning behavior on the death of a public figure or member of a royal family.

The degree and duration of public mourning is generally decreed by a protocol officer. It was not unusual for the British court to declare that all citizens should wear full mourning for a specified period after the death of the monarch, or that the members of the court should wear full- or half-mourning for an extended period. On the death of Queen Victoria, (January 1901), the Canada Gazette published an “extra” edition announcing that court mourning would continue until January 24, 1902, and directing the public to wear deep mourning until March 6, 1901, and half-mourning until April 17, 1901.

The black-and-white costumes designed by Cecil Beaton for the Royal Ascot sequence in *My Fair Lady* were inspired by the “Black Ascot” of 1910, when the court was in mourning for Victoria’s son, Edward VII.

All over the world, states usually declare a period of **official mourning** after the death of a Head of state. The signs may vary but usually include the lowering or posting half-staff of flags on public buildings.

In contrast, in the United Kingdom, the Royal Standard is *never* flown at half-mast, because there is always a monarch on the throne. On the death of the Emir of Kuwait in January 2006, a 40-day mourning period was declared. On Tonga, the official mourning lasts for a year; only afterwards is the royal heir crowned the new king.



On the other hand, the principle of continuity of the state must be respected. The principle is reflected in the French saying “*Le Roi est mort, vive le Roi!*” (“The king is dead, long live the king!”). Regardless of the formalities of mourning, power must be handed on; if the succession is uncontested, that is best done immediately. Yet a short interruption of work in the civil service may result from one or more days of closing the offices, especially on the day of the state funeral.

Religions and Customs

Judaism

Shiva is a Jewish mourning practice in which people adjust their behavior as an expression of their bereavement. In the West, typically, mirrors are covered and a small tear is made in an item of clothing to indicate a lack of interest in personal vanity. The bereaved dress simply and sit on the floor, short stools or boxes rather than chairs when receiving the condolences of visitors. English speakers use the expression “to sit shiva”.

Christianity

The European social forms described above are, in general, forms of Christian religious expression transferred to the greater community.

Roman Catholic funeral masses today use the liturgical colors white or gold rather than the pre-Vatican II black, as a sign that the funeral represents a Mass of the Resurrection and, in that sense, is an occasion for joy

Christian Churches often go into mourning symbolically during the period of Lent to commemorate the sacrifice and death of Jesus. Customs vary among the denominations and include the covering or removal of statuary, icons and paintings, and use of special liturgical colors, such as violet/purple, during Lent and Holy Week.

In more formal congregations, parishioners also dress according to specific forms during Holy Week, particularly on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, where it is still common to wear black or somber dress or, as mentioned, the liturgical color purple.

Hinduism

Death is not seen as the final “end”, but is seen as a turning point in the seemingly endless journey of the indestructible “atman” or the soul through innumerable bodies of animals and people. Hence Hinduism, prohibits excessive mourning or lamentation upon death, as this can hinder the easy passage of the departed soul towards its journey ahead.

Hindu mourning begins immediately after the cremation of the body and ends on the morning of the thirteenth day. Traditionally the body is cremated within 24 hours after death, however the cremations are not held after sunset and before sunrise. Immediately after the death an oil lamp is lit near the deceased and this lamp is kept burning for three days. During these mourning days,

the immediate blood family is considered must not attend social functions like marriages, parties etc. On the day on which the death has occurred, the family do not cook hence usually close family and friends will provide food for the mourning family. White clothing (the color of purity) is also the color of mourning and many will wear white during the mourning period.

On the morning of the thirteenth day, a Shraddh ceremony is performed. The main ceremony involves a fire sacrifice, in which offerings are given to the ancestors and to gods, to ensure the deceased has a



peaceful afterlife. Typically after the ceremony, the family cleans and washes all the idols in the family shrine and flowers, fruits, water and purified food is offered to the gods. Now the family is ready to break the period of mourning and return back to daily life.

Modern Customs

Mourning attire became less customary after the mid-twentieth century, by which time it had already been determined that mourning was not to be worn in the business arena. It is still customary, though not as universal, to indicate mourning through somber, semi-formal dress, particularly at the funeral and among the family and close friends of the deceased. As such, men often wear a suit and tie, while a woman may wear a dark-colored, long-sleeved dress or pantsuit. The armband is still seen, but mostly amongst Irish, German, Austrian, and other northern- and central-European Catholic groups such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians. A few modern customs have evolved, for example the use of sunglasses in order to hide tear-swollen

eyes. Mourning is used as a statement of respect, solidarity or commemoration by a particular group in an unusual circumstance. For instance:

- The wearing of black armbands by the Israeli Olympic team in 1976 to commemorate the attack on the team during the 1972 Olympic Games.
- A sports team may wear black armbands, or affix a black stripe to their uniforms, for a specified time period following the death of an owner, coach, teammate or (if the decedent is a high school student), classmate.
- A community wearing special-colored ribbons on a designated day or for a particular time period. For instance, the wearing of red, white and blue following the September 11th attacks.
- Observing a “moment of silence” and/or flying flags at half-staff following a death. This most frequently happens in conjunction with national periods of mourning (such as the death of a former or current Head of State or other notable leader).
- However, flags are sometimes lowered to half-staff in other circumstances, such as after the death of a high school student or noted local figure; such circumstances vary widely and are usually influenced by local customs.
- In all cases, when a flag is to be flown at half-staff or half-mast it is first to be fully hoisted and only then lowered half-way, never raised only to half-way and left there.
- Local-, state- and federal-uniformed employees who wear badges to place a black band around the badge when a fellow employee has been killed in the line of duty.

- A wedding ring, either the original or the dead partner's, may be worn for a period after the death.

