

DEATH CUSTOMS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Death is one of life's inevitabilities. The way we mourn, remember and dispose of loved ones remains varies greatly throughout cultures. Funerals I have attended have all been much the same. Friends and families arrive, often traditionally dressed in black. We take our seats for a sombre ceremony where memories are shared, prayers are often read and tears shed. We slowly follow the coffin out single file to an awaiting hearse, where we either drive to the cemetery or to a wake where more memories are shared over food and drinks.

Throughout time there have been many unusual death rituals or customs. Such as that of the ancient Egyptians and their embalming/sarcophagus and elaborate tombs, or the finger amputation in Papua New Guinea, the suspended burials of the Bo people of Southwest China, or even Endocannibalism, none of which are practised today (Dorsky, 2012).

Here is a list of some of the most fascinating and unusual death rituals from around the world that are still practised today.

Varjrayana Buddhists of Mongolia and Tibet practice ritual dissection or "sky burials". This tradition involves dissecting the deceased body, placing it on a mountain to feed animals, particularly birds of prey. Sometimes the body is left intact for larger birds of prey like vultures. Buddhists see the body of the deceased as an empty vessel, and see it only fitting that one's final act is to have their remains used to sustain the life of another. This practice has been carried out for thousands of years. Today 80% of Buddhists still choose a sky burial (Newcombe).

In Madagascar the Malagasy people exhume the remains of their relatives, wrap them in a cloth and spray them with wine (maybe because of the smell) they then dance around the tomb with the remains to live music. This is done every seven years. Famadihana or "turning of the bones" is seen as a way to help the spirits get to the afterlife, it allows families a chance to pass on news to the deceased and to ask for their blessing (Newcombe).

Australian Aboriginal mortuary rites consist of a smoking ceremony. It is first held to drive away the deceased spirit, followed by a feast where mourners are painted with ochre as they take part in food and dance celebrations. Some tribes will not mention the deceased name as this is to ensure the deceased spirit doesn't hang around with the living (McGrath & Phillips, 2008).

In South Korea there is such limited space for burial that bodies must be exhumed after 60 years. Cremation is becoming ever more popular, families are having the ashes of their deceased pressed into colourful beads which are often displayed in urns or bottles (Newcombe).

People in Ghana opt to be buried in coffins that represent their life. These "fantasy coffins" are creations that take on a symbol that represents the deceased, for example a pilot may have a coffin in the shape of a plane (Brown, 2017).

Hindus believe in liberating the soul quickly. This is done by cremation, usually within 24hrs. The ashes are then scattered over water, the most desirable place being the river Ganges. Mourners wear white and a ceremony is held 13 days after cremation.

In India the river Ganges is personified as the goddess "Ganga". She is worshipped and it is believed that bathing in the moving water such as a river can absorb and take impurities away. They believe the river grants remission of sins and can liberate one from the cycle of life and death. The water is considered pure when in fact the opposite is true. Raw sewage, industrial waste and religious offerings wrapped in non-biodegradable plastics are deposited into the river.

Those lucky enough to live close to the Ganges are wrapped in a shroud, their hands placed in a prayer position and placed on a pyre on the banks of the river, family members submerge themselves in the river and circle the pyre before setting it alight (Andrus, 2021).

Sea burials are often given to those who had a strong connection to the sea such as navy personnel. They require a sea dumping permit, the site must not interfere with other marine users such as shipping and dredging. There is a minimum depth required of 3000 metres, the body must be sewn into a shroud and weighted sufficiently to ensure the body remains submerged (Environmental Protection (Sea dumping) Act 1981).

Although not all of these rituals are an option in Australia, people are choosing what might be seen as unconventional options, environmentally friendly options such as wicker caskets or shrouds.

So what are some of the more unconventional options available today?

Green burials or natural burials are becoming a more popular choice offering an environmentally friendly and ecologically sustainable option. There are no embalming chemicals used, the deceased is placed in a biodegradable covering either a body bag, wicker, cardboard or linen shroud. There are no headstones or grave markers, family are given a GPS location of their loved ones. Often a tree is planted to offset the carbon emissions. The land is then returned to natural pasture, a plaque on the entry is the only tell tale sign that this is not an ordinary farm paddock.

Alkaline hydrolysis is the process where the body is placed in a stainless steel drum which is filled with hydrogen peroxide and heated. After a short few hours the only solid remains are the bones, similar to that of cremation. The liquid remains are then poured onto forest plantations (Kremer, 2017). But if that's not your cup of tea then maybe Promession is. This involves freezing the body with liquid nitrogen, ultrasonic vibrations are then used to shatter the body into tiny pieces, the remains are then put into a biodegradable vessel and buried in a shallow grave. This promises to be emission neutral (RAYMOND, 2020). However, this is not currently available in Australia.

So there you have some past, present and future options for send-offs for you and your loved ones. Whatever option you may choose as your final send-off, may you rest in peace or pieces!

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