



Celebrations of Death

22

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22.1 Introduction

Across the world, societies have developed different customs, traditions, and practices to memorialize the death of a loved one. Commemorations vary greatly between cultures, and may incorporate different intensities of grieving and celebration. We have selected six unique cultural observances for the deceased which have found beauty and celebration in death.

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22.2 Hungry Ghost Festival

Observed by Buddhists and Taoists in China and East Asia on the fifteenth night of the seventh Lunar month (often July, August, or September in the Western calendar), the Hungry Ghost Festival incorporates practices and rituals dedicated to souls of the deceased [1]. On this day, it is believed that the realms of Heaven and Hell, as well as the realm of the living, are open. Following this opening, ancestors are thought to visit the homes of their relatives for offerings of food, luxuries, and entertainment [2]. For those ghosts without descendants, collective festivities in the city center or marketplace provide offerings and appeasement [2]. Celebrations, therefore, take place both in the household and in the community.

Veneration of the dead is central to the celebration. Extravagant meals are prepared and delivered to empty seats at the table, conducting the repast as if the dead were alive and present. Paper money and paper offerings representing items of value are burned in veneration to gods, ghosts, and ancestors. This sacrifice is undertaken with the intention of acting as an offering for peace. Religious rituals held by Buddhists and Taoists relieve the ghosts' suffering, incorporating altars built for the deceased and throwing rice and food into the air for the benefit of the ghosts. Release of lanterns and paper boats onto water provides guidance to the spirits of the forgotten deceased to the afterlife.

Entertainment and live performances are held, with the first row of seats empty for admittance of the ghosts. Performances traditionally include opera, but concerts and dramas have become prevalent over recent years. Believed to entice and engage the ghosts, these shows are performed at night and at high volume.

The Hungry Ghost Festival is characterized by celebration of the deceased and communal unity. Many comparisons are made between the Hungry Ghost Festival in the Far East and *Dia De Los Muertos* in North and South America. While many similarities exist, there are rich differences between the two observances.

22.3 *Dia De Los Muertos*

Bright flares of magenta and marigolds, hundreds of candles, and gravesites and ofrendas beautifully decorated during *Dia De Los Muertos* vibrantly contrasts with the traditional Western archetype of death being dark, quiet, and dim. *Dia de los Muertos* is one of the most well-known celebrations of the dead. It originated in central Mexico from the indigenous Nahuatl people and predates the pre-Columbian Mesoamerica period of the Aztecs [3].

Dia de los Muertos is celebrated from October 31 to November 2. During this holiday, spirits of the dead can reunite with the living. Humans are thought to be the bridge between heaven and earth from which the souls travel. Families leave offerings of tools and food to facilitate the spirit's journey through Mictlan or land of the dead [3]. It is believed that this quest consists of 9 levels, including crossing razor blade mountains, flesh-scraping winds, the realm of raining arrows,

dark rivers, and giant jaguars. The long arduous journey takes roughly 4 years for the souls to reach Mictlan (the final resting place) [4].

The celebration was brought to the New World by Spanish conquistadors. In recent years, it has become popularized through mainstream culture. The Disney animated feature, “Coco,” tells the story of a young boy who travels to the land of the dead. On this journey, he learns that one’s identity is enriched by the history and traditions of our culture and ancestors that preceded us.

22.4 Ghana

Believing that life transcends death, Ghanaians have developed rituals and celebrations to represent the passage from life to the spiritual realm. Ghanaian funerals are most notable for the inclusion of “fantasy” coffins. These caskets represent the deceased’s passions, values, or careers, and serve as a social event for the community to mourn and celebrate the life of the departed [5]. Ghana funerals are often extravagant in cost and scale and heavily steeped in symbolism and social convention [5].

Funerals may cost nearly as much as weddings and celebrations may include hundreds of guests [5]. Larger gatherings directly correlate to how influential, charitable, or sociable the deceased was in life. Dressed in black or red, mourners may travel great distances to honor the deceased. In return, the expectation is that the bereaved family will provide food, drinks, and entertainment for the guests.

The event maintains an expected decorum of the hosts and attendees. Specific seating arrangements are predetermined, appropriate clothing is adorned, music and activities are performed, and orchestrated presentations are designed to satisfy the expectations of mourners. Prominent members of the community are announced and given recognition for their attendance. Guests will publicly announce their donations to the bereaved which assist with the cost of the celebration. Eventually, dancing, drinking, and additional announcements of gifts to the deceased and bereaved will complete the celebration. These funerals can last anywhere from two to eight hours before burying the body [6].

Possibly one of the most stunning and ostentatious customs of Ghanaian funerals, which has captivated Western audiences, is the *adebuu adekai*, better known as fantasy coffins [7]. The tradition originated with the Ga people in southern Ghana in the 1960s but has been adopted by the Ewe, Asante, Adangbe, and Fanti [7]. These vessels are designed to transition the deceased into the afterlife [8]. Ghanaians believe that the departed will continue their profession in the afterlife, and these coffins are designed to represent their careers and passions while alive. Caskets may resemble ships, buildings, animals, cars, or planes, and are decided on by the family of the deceased. Depending on the materials, details, and craftsmen, a fantasy coffin may cost between \$5,000 to \$15,000 [8]. These intricate creations have been exhibited globally, introducing the remarkable Ghanaian funeral celebration and its fantasy coffins to the world.

22.5 Aboriginals

Despite the rapidly changing environment and industrialization of Australia, the central and northern Australian Aboriginal peoples have retained a strict adherence to their traditional mourning rituals and celebrations of death [9]. Their ceremonies are honored by the participants, and take precedence over other pursuits. These commemorations incorporate practices such as the smoking ceremony, marking the house of the deceased, and the death ceremony [9].

The purpose of the smoking ceremony is to drive away the deceased's spirit [9]. This is most often performed within one to two weeks of a death, and most frequently occurs in the house of the deceased. However, any living space previously occupied by the departed may be substituted. Specific rooms, their car, or a place personally special to the deceased can be "smoked." Special coals and fires are brought into the designated location with the intention of filling the air with smoke [9]. There are many regional differences between Aboriginal customs, but it is not uncommon for the family of the deceased to leave the home temporarily before returning.

While the interior of the selected living space is smoked to advance the spirit, the exterior of the living space is painted with a red ochre which serves a similar purpose [9]. Similar to smoking, the red ochre will be painted on any place where the deceased spent significant amounts of time. The intention of this practice is to help release the spirit of the dead to join the spirit world [9]. Additionally, marking the home or vehicle informs the community of the place of the deceased. Regional variations in practice determine how long the ochre stays up, and if the practice is followed at all. Cultures that favor traditional practices are more likely to mark the home of the deceased.

Finally, the body is laid to rest at a formal death ceremony. The celebration may last between several days to over five weeks depending on how far the mourners travel. Initial preparations can take several weeks and include decorating the inside of the house with flowers, perfume, and incense to make the house a beautiful haven for the body to rest before being placed into the ground [9]. Following the beautification of the home, the burial ceremony is conducted. This involves painting the bodies of the mourners, chilling the body of the deceased, and dancing. Mourners from multiple communities travel to the event, and camp next to the road in pitched tents. They celebrate by dancing, singing, and sharing food. Dancing occurs throughout the day and for many days. On the last day of the ceremony, a church service is held for several hours, followed by more dancing. After the church service is completed and the sun begins to set, the coffin with the body is laid in the ground to rest.

22.6 Nordic

References to Nordic death traditions in Western culture often inspire depictions of Viking funerals with thousands of arrows setting ablaze a boat carrying the body of the deceased, lavishly adorned in gold coins and other valuables. However, these elaborate send-offs were most often reserved only for royalty, the wealthy, or warriors who died during combat. In these rituals, fire represented the soul transitioning to the afterlife, while boats symbolized safe passage [10]. Typical Nordic funeral also included cremation, ground burial, or a hybrid where small burial mounds contained cremated ashes [10]. The funeral tradition was followed by a feast on the 7th day after the person's death called Sjaund, accompanied by singing, chanting, and drinking funeral ale in honor of the deceased [11].

A great importance was placed on grave goods, which are often objects that the deceased had valued while alive, or objects to help prepare the deceased through their journey in the afterlife. These goods served as a symbol of status [11]. To guarantee that their status was maintained in the afterlife, Nordic societies practiced forms of human sacrifice to ensure that the privileged members of society were accompanied by their servants or spouse in the afterlife [12].

Perhaps the most famous Nordic boat funeral was excavated in 1904–1905 by Swedish archeologist Gaboril Gustafson in Tonsberg, Norway [13]. Christened the Oseberg, the massive vessel was 970 sq ft with a 33 ft mast and held the remains of 2 women [14]. One of these women was believed to be Queen Asa of the Yngling clan located in Agder, Norway (Kruger). Additionally, there were remains of 15 horses, 2 cows, and 6 dogs, as well as luxurious textiles, household items, and agricultural tools [15].

Honoring the deceased was particularly important because of the trepidation that inadequate burials would lead to hauntings by the undead, referred to as Draugr [11]. Fear of the Draugr was so profound that Nords would refuse to answer a knock at the door when someone had died, believing the undead would be let into their homes unintentionally [11]. Conversely, three knocks symbolized the holy trinity, and admittance was granted [11]. Due to these superstitions, talismans and crosses were frequently worn for protection from the supernatural [11].

Furthermore, spirits distinct from the Draugr, known as Haugbui, resided at burial sites that were disturbed by the living. These creatures haunted the living when the deceased were unsatisfied. Concern for incurring the wrath of the Haugbui or Draugr was so overwhelming that some Nordic societies practiced blind folding the deceased or carrying them feet first to prevent them from being able to find their way back to the living [11].

Once a soul passed on to the afterlife, it arrived at different locations depending on circumstances surrounding their death and social status. The four most notable destinations were Valhalla, Folkvanger, Ran, and Hel. Valhalla and Folkvanger were ruled by gods Odin and Freyja, respectively, and were for the passage of kings and warriors who died in combat “honorable deaths”. Ran was the residence of those who died due to drowning. Finally, Hel held the overwhelming majority of souls, most of whom had passed due to a “natural death or old age” [11].

Nordic death culture was highly complex, glorifying death while simultaneously fearing the possibility of supernatural hauntings. The fashion in which a body was prepared and the residence of the soul in the afterlife served as a reflection of the deceased's social status in life, in addition to the circumstances of their death.

22.7 Jazz Funeral

New Orleans is defined by the sound of brass instruments, Jazz music, and celebratory dancing on Bourbon street during Mardi Gras. More obscure is the juxtaposition of Jazz music in local culture. Music joyfully celebrates life but also serves as a prominent component of death commemorations. Jazz funerals were first established in the nineteenth century during the civil war as a way of honoring lost African American soldiers [16]. It was thought to be a blend of Christianity and West African culture of rejoicing at death through music [17]. Initially, they were referred to as musical funerals. Only in the 1950s, during the rise in popularity of Jazz music, was the term Jazz funeral christened.

A Jazz funeral starts with a marching band called the "first line" at the home, church, or funeral, and concludes at the cemetery. First, the procession begins with a slow and somber hymn. This line was led by a grand marshal adorned with a black top hat and followed by band members dressed in white and black. These musicians accompanied the horse-drawn hearse cavalcade. Arriving at the cemetery, the body of the deceased was buried or "cut loose," a term symbolizing freedom. These funerals are sometimes funded by the Benevolent Society as a way to support the African American community that was often deprived of social services during the Civil war.

Once the body is "cut loose," the celebration becomes energetic and enlivened. The music changes to upbeat melodies, including favorites such as "The Saints Go Marching In." This change represents the commencement of the "second line," designed to celebrate the life of the deceased and facilitate their journey to heaven. It is also believed that the music would please the spirits who protect the dead. As the procession returns home, the cortege marches with a forward strut, handkerchiefs, and parasols twirling. Passersby are encouraged to join the second line [17].

While the tradition of Jazz funerals emerged from a dark period, it remains an important part of American history and symbolizes the inequality that many African American men faced during the nineteenth century. More recently, Jazz funerals have been primarily held for musicians and celebrities more frequently than for the general public, especially with the practice becoming less popular due to the extravagant cost.

In conclusion, many different cultures celebrate death in various ways that are highly complex and are incredibly unique. While some are fear-based, others are about honoring the legacy of the deceased. The common theme though is that death

is not the end. The deceased are never forgotten as their memories are immortalized through the living. This notion that the living and the dead are two sides of the same coin is what connects us.

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