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Funerals and Memorial Practices



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Synonyms

[Funeral ceremonies](#), [Funeral memorialization](#),
[Memorial ceremonies](#)

Definition

Funerals and memorial practices refer to the various religious, cultural, and kinship rituals that mark the death of an individual and provide social support to the bereaved individuals.

Overview

From time immemorial, humans have gathered in the face of death to ritualize the passage from life to death. First credited with coining the term, “rites of passage,” in the early twentieth century, van Gennep (1960) studied tribal ceremonies to better understand how people groups utilize rituals to express emotion following a community or family member’s death. Anecdotally, traditional funeral practices are more widely embraced by

older members of a society while younger members of a group seem open to experimentation and new styles of memorialization.

Funerals and memorial practices exist for two reasons and individuals and groups may hold one or some combination of these beliefs. Among many people groups, funerals are thought to hold significance primarily for appeasement of the dead or are a necessary component to assure the deceased person’s “safe passage” to the next plane of existence. Among others, funerals are seen as commemorative ceremonies primarily designed for the comfort of bereaved family and/or community, including perhaps, the expiation of guilt over words and actions between bereaved survivors and deceased (Pine 1972) (See ► [“Social support in bereavement”](#)). Nearly all communities studied have one or more ritual “experts” who take their cues from the primary interests of the community according to one or some combination of these two broad patterns.

Key Research Findings

Funerals, as part of a wider interest in ceremony and ritual, have been widely studied in academic and popular literature, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century but organized methods for death rituals are found at least dating to the Cerny (4600–4300 BCE) who buried their dead with grave goods such as arrowheads, pottery, and shell jewelry (Thomas et al. 2011). The

utilization of “gifts” to accompany the deceased is seen throughout history including trinkets placed in the coffin or cremation container of a contemporary deceased person or the libations poured into a grave before burial of a fallen military comrade.

Van Gennep’s (1960) early work created a three-part structure for understanding funeral rituals: rituals of separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (postliminal). Rites of *separation* provide mourners with an opportunity to say goodbye to the relationship, as previously known, while the rites of *transition* reference the “between and betwixt,” liminal time. Finally, van Gennep suggested, ritual carries the participant into a period of *incorporation* where the new roles and responsibilities are taken on, with rituals demarcating the new life that begins for mourners.

Malinowski (1948) declared that death creates a paradox in which humans are both drawn to the dead in an attempt to stay connected and repulsed by the transformation that death brings to the body. Memorial practices, Malinowski believed, attempt to reconcile these two contradictory purposes of keeping the relationship alive while severing the physical bond. Geertz (1973) reflected on Malinowski’s premise by suggesting that “Mortuary rituals maintain the continuity of human life by preventing the survivors from yielding either to the impulse to flee panic-stricken from the scene or to the contrary impulse to follow the deceased into the grave” (p. 163).

Communities employ various systems to care for their dead. In many communities, deceased individuals are cared for by the family and community members as an act of filial devotion. In some societies, this familial-based care eventually gives way to a system of death care managed by variously trained-and-certified professionals such as funeral directors, the “ceremonial tender” of the funeral (Pine 1972). In the United States, for example, this second era began in earnest with the popularization of arterial embalming in the late nineteenth century making possible the return of some military dead to their hometowns during the American Civil War as well as the public funeral rituals for President Abraham Lincoln. Many common citizens embraced the notion of

temporary preservation of their dead when they saw the option employed in the war dead’s return and the president’s funeral (Laderman 2003).

In a few western societies, a minority of individuals have embraced the idea of returning funeral rituals to the hands of community and away from professionals; this can be seen in the North American movement of providing care for one’s own dead (Slocum and Carlson 2011).

Fulton (1994) posited that the funeral is more important than simply a means to dispose of the corpse; its purpose extends to gathering the community, providing a “socializing experience for the participants, particularly the young . . . [and] serves as an important vehicle of cultural transmission,” (p. 309).

Memorial practices seem to serve at least four purposes. Funerals make real the fact of the death. Funeral rituals also provide stability in the chaos of early loss. Community funeral rituals remind mourners that in a real sense, the community has been here before and knows the way through. Whether it is the highly prescribed funeral ritual of Roman Catholicism or the beating of a tribal drum on the African continent to notify the entire village of a death, ritual gives order to the chaos. Pine (1972) wrote that funerals are more than religious ceremonies and that their purposes extend to helping community members cope with their loss while dealing with the reality of their own future deaths.

Third, funeral rituals help consolidate the legacy of the dead. In the face of a loved one’s death, bereaved individuals tend to find in the deceased person’s life one or more character qualities worth imitating, and those qualities become the values talked about in the funeral eulogy, sermon, or remembrance speech. Tribute-speakers often use stories and anecdotes to articulate the positive values evidenced in the deceased’s life: compassion, courage, respect, generosity, enthusiasm, humor, positivity, warmth, politeness, peacefulness, and heroism. Funeral rituals provide socially sanctioned places for mourners to honor the legacy of the deceased person.

Fourth, funeral rituals remind mourners of social continuation. The re-incorporative task of rites of passage (van Gennep 1960/1908) remind

mourners that while death changes the landscape of relationships, the death – even of a community leader – does not end the social order. State funerals are thought to help provide psychological reassurance to citizens that their government is safe and will be peacefully transferred to the next administration. Funerals after the assassinations of world leaders such as the US President John F. Kennedy in 1963, the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, and the former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 2007 are examples of how the order of funeral rituals provides psychological reassurance to citizens.

Much recent scholarship has pointed to the efficacy of memorial practices for the healthy integration of the loss experience and funerals are viewed as positive in contemporary theories and models of the bereavement process (Hoy 2013, 2016; Worden 2018). Romanoff and Terenzino (1998), for example, noted, “Rituals can serve moderating, mediating, and connecting functions within the bereavement process, and thus facilitate intrapsychic transformation, the psychosocial status transition, and the continuation of communal and symbolic connections” (p. 697).

Hoy (2013) articulated five attributes in funeral rituals, indicating that in grounded theory research with more than 135 people groups across the historical periods and contemporary cultures, these “anchors” or ritual attributes were found to be present in the death rituals of all groups. *Significant symbols*, the first of these anchors reminds observers that while words are important, images and material objects are paramount. Ritual symbols such as the earth, water, fire, and air accompany the well-known symbols of death such as caskets, flowers, and hearse. In contemporary memorial gatherings, these traditional symbols are mixed – and even sometimes supplanted by – “life symbols” such as the deceased’s golf clubs, doll collection, and toolbox.

Gathered community create the second anchor of funeral rituals, characterized by people from varied communities important to the deceased and the bereaved. In contemporary western communities, it is not uncommon for individuals to attend the memorial gatherings for the parents of

colleagues as a show of support even though the deceased was not known to the attendee. Also present in communities around the world and throughout history, Hoy identified the anchor of *ritual action*, demonstrating that grief includes behaviors as well as feelings. Rather than standing by as casual observers, many groups of mourners become actively involved in carrying out the duties of mourning and memorialization.

A fourth anchor is that of *cultural heritage*, reminding observers that funerals and memorial gatherings are created within a cultural framework, often with ideas, rituals, and concepts handed down over many generations. The incensing of the coffined body at a Roman Catholic funeral mass belongs to a traditional ritual hundreds of years old and that carries theological and emotional meaning for mourners. *Presence of the dead*, the fifth anchor identified by Hoy seems has lost some prominence in recent North American funeral rituals (Long 2009) even though this seems to be a largely western, Caucasian phenomenon.

A mid-twentieth century movement by some to remove the corpse from the funeral and replace that increasingly elaborate ritual with a simple cremation and memorial service seemed at least temporarily quelled when, as historian Gary Laderman (2003) wrote the assassination of John F. Kennedy brought the body back to the center of the funeral: “(Kennedy’s funeral) did momentarily reveal the complex set of relations that exist between the living and the dead. In this case, as with (President Abraham) Lincoln roughly 100 years before, private and public attachments to the dead body required its presence and accessibility to mourners participating in the final ceremonies. . .” (p. xli).

Though not necessarily central to the body’s presence at funeral rites, the technical process of embalming often accompanies funerals with the deceased present. Mayer (1990) summarized *embalming* procedures as chemical treatment of the dead human body to reduce microorganism growth, slow decomposition, and to restore “an acceptable physical appearance” (p. 14). Mayer continued, “The goal of restoration of the dead human body is not so much to make the deceased

look lifelike, but rather to try and remove from the body the devastation caused by many long-term diseases and illnesses” (p. 17). Whether employing embalming, other preservation techniques, or no artificial preservation strategy at all, it appears that the majority of the contemporary societies employ the dead body’s presence at the funeral rites.

Future Research Directions

Starting in the first decades of the twentieth century, calls for reform and alleviation of elaborate funeral practices became louder in the years following World War II. These criticisms questioned the social and emotional value of funeral rituals as well as the economic cost born by the bereaved families.

Global development workers have long expressed concern over the large parts of family finances dedicated to funeral costs in much of the developing world, frequently levying strong criticism over such practices. In a work in Uganda, however, Jones (2009) found that funeral rituals without bodies were seen by the Katine people as proof the west had lost its way in caring for its elderly. Sometimes even in a quest to protect public health, European and American aid workers have resorted to mass burials during public health crises like the 2010 Haitian earthquake and the west African Ebola crisis, leading to significant distress on the part of grieving family members and communities (Delva 2010; Maxmen 2015). Clearly, more research is needed to discover the perceived value versus economic cost of various kinds of funeral options chosen.

Funeral rituals are also often the impetus to ignite passion for sweeping social change. In addition to the public funeral for Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, the funeral rituals for Medgar Evers in 1963 and Jimmie Lee Jackson in 1965 provided impetus to the growing Civil Rights movement in the United States as have 21st century funerals that utilize eulogy to call for social justice. Sociological researchers will be interested to discover how rituals can inspire and encourage social change.

Summary

That funeral customs will continue to change seems obvious, but if past trends predict future activity, these changes will come slowly. *Cremation*, and other alternative disposal methods take the place of burial but do not impede the use of funeral rituals. The physical act of corpse-disposal in no way erases the tendency of humans to engage in diverse memorial practices, even when the body is not available to be included in the rites. Older populations may or may not readily embrace these changes.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Professional Grief and Burnout](#)
- ▶ [Rumination in Bereavement](#)
- ▶ [Social Support in Bereavement](#)

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