

Death Rituals:

Connecting with the After-life

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New Visual Studies
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April 23rd 2013

Since the very beginnings of modern human civilization, there is evidence of death rituals. As our societies become more sophisticated, our rituals are morphed into more complex and intricate events. What does this say about us as a people and the meaning of these traditions? Humans have a need to manifest abstract ideas into visual rituals and/or artifacts. These manifestations represent something we cannot see but deeply believe in. Cultures and societies express these beliefs in so many different ways through out time in history. In this paper, I have only chosen a few cultures and people to examine, but it is not to say that these cultures rituals are any more or less important than others found in the world.

Rituals are defined in this paper as a set of actions, performed mainly for their symbolic value (“Ritual”, Wikipedia, 2013). Rituals can be performed by one individual, by a group, or by the entire community. The location can be arbitrary or specific, and time of day can be important as well. And lastly, these events can be performed publicly, privately, or only before a specific/selected group of people.

In order to completely understand death rituals, I find it necessary to research the origins of these events to the very beginning of modern human civilization. Cognitive scientist Dr. Phillip Lieberman is a professor at Brown University in Providence Rhode Island, and he is interested in the nature and evolution of the biological bases of human language and cognition (http://www.cog.brown.edu/people_lieberman_personal.htm). His work essentially deals with the evolution of modern humans and how they differ from apes. Lieberman in *Uniquely Human* states that human religious thought and moral sense clearly rest on a cognitive-linguistic base. Therefore, archaeological evidence of ritual burials with grave goods indicates the presence of language and cognition beyond the base level represented by present day-to-day life, reflecting “religious” beliefs (Lieberman,

1993). Furthermore, Lieberman says indication of burials containing ritual grave goods appear 100,000 years ago with the anatomically modern human. For example, the population living in Jebel Qafzeh buries a child in a cave with ritual goods that is clearly not floor debris. In addition, the Skhul V people who 100,000 years ago lived in modern day Israel found signs of ritual goods in burial sites. The evidence of their burials with grave goods is consistent with their having possessed cognitive abilities that approach our own (Lieberman, 1993).

There is further evidence that even Neanderthal graves dating 60,000 years ago have signs of burial rituals. Ralph Solecki (1971) finds flower pollen in one of the grave sites and states that it had been placed there deliberately as a burial offering. In contrast, Howard Dibble (1989) argues that it was not possible to verify if the pollen was put there on purpose or if it fell into the gravesite. Also the animal remains that have been found in the grave may not have been deliberately placed but animals perhaps feeding on the remains became trapped in the gravesite. However, later Neanderthal Burials dating after 60,000 years has clear evidence of grave goods. It is possible burial goods being incorporated into death rituals was invented by the modern human, who emigrated 100,000 years ago from Africa to the Middle East. Potentially, the Neanderthals encountered these modern humans and imitated these burial rituals into their own communities. As Lieberman states, “If we assume that the minds of our distant ancestors worked like ours, we can take burials that include grave goods as evidence for religious beliefs that predicate an afterlife, rebirth, or reincarnation.” (Lieberman, 1993, p.164)

In addition to this research, I have the privilege of conducting a brief interview via email with Dr. Lieberman. I asked him why does he think humans perform these rituals and what does this say about the human experience. He replies “Death rituals signify

cognitive capacities that transcend the immediate present- some form of honoring the dead. However, there isn't an absolute gulf between humans and other species. It's a question of degree. When chimpanzee Washoe's infant died, she held its body for days and was grieving. Grief undoubtedly is innate, but its expression clearly varies in different cultures (and for the individuals in a given culture) as do death rituals." As modern humans become to be more sophisticated and have more cognitive ability, their ceremonies and rituals developed into more complex and intricate events. The deep symbolic meaning of rituals and artifacts have become more than just grieving, but into complex social event. As we look into the cultures presented in this paper, we'll see that death rituals are so much deeper and layered than what they to be appear on the surface.

We can begin with one of the most prominent religions in the history of the western hemisphere: Catholicism. Saint Caterina de' Vigri at the church of Corpus Domini in Bologna Italy died in 1463 at the age of 49. She is mummified by her sisters and on display at the church because it is said that she came down to see them soon after her death and she told them she wanted to keep them company (Warner, 2006, p.2). As described by Marina Warner in *Phantasmagoria*, "I found la Santa, in a reliquary chamber of her own, oval in shape, musty, shadowy, glinting with silver and gold ornament, crystal and velvet; there are no windows, and the walls are all richly encrusted with dusty *ex votos* in the shape of flaming hearts and other body parts. The whole room is her reliquary." She continues to say how she is wearing a narrow ring on her wedding finger (as a bride of Christ), and all around her, on the circular walls of the reliquary shrine where she keeps vigil, there are bones among the offerings, resting on faded silk cushions in crystal caskets. She is sitting surrounded by these memorials to her earthly existence, preserved in her embalmed body.

A holy person, especially a virgin, will remain in corrupt in death while awaiting the reunification of body and soul on the Last Day.

This specific site is unique because she is classified as a Saint, but the underlining idea is consistent with the religion: the importance in preservation of the body. As stated above in Warner's description, it is believed on the last day when Jesus comes to earth the soul will reunite with the body and thus be resurrect and face the last judgment. Russell D. Moore who is an American Evangelical Theologian said, "For Christians, burial is not the disposal of a thing. It is caring for a person. In burial, we're reminded that the body is not a shell, a husk tossed aside by the 'real' person, the soul within. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, but the body that remains still belongs to someone we love, someone who will reclaim it one day." (Moore, 2007) In this religion, the body is a sacred vessel after death that must preserved and protect for it is connect to the soul in the after-life. How the body is handled after death is strongly connected to their beliefs of what happens to that person in the afterlife.

In Christianity, there are a set of rules and procedures for people to follow during life in order for them to reach heaven for eternity. It's interesting to me how our lives are so short and insignificant in the whole view of time and existence, but in this religion there is so much importance on how we behave and what we believe in during life that will affect our souls for the rest of eternity in death. There are no gray areas, either you live by the rules and structure set up by the religion to live a happy peaceful afterlife or you will be tortured and condemned for all eternity. And you only get one chance to get it right in this life in this realm. This is not to say that these beliefs are good or bad, just an observation on how much emphasis is on the afterlife on living your life in this religion.

Christianity isn't the only religion with a strong emphasis on the afterlife and preservation of the body. Ancient Egypt makes strong links between rituals performed in life and how this affects the soul in the afterlife. Egyptians think there are physical and spiritual parts composed in every human. The body has a shadow, personality/soul, life-force, and a name. Instead of the brain as we know it, the heart is the center of thought and emotion ("Ancient Egypt," Wikipedia, 2013). As said by archeological experts in the documentary *Egyptian Secrets of the Afterlife*, the most important burials are those of the pharaohs mostly because they are believed to be gods and if they do not make it to the after-life the world could end. After the pharaoh goes through the mummification process and ritual, the coffin is placed in its tomb. This is where the real journey into the afterlife begins. Each Pharaoh's tomb is unique with its ritual goods, furnishings, artifacts, etc. In addition, it is unique because each Pharaoh imagined how the journey in the afterlife would be is different and as time went on the journey became more elaborate and complex with each passing ruler.

In ancient Egypt, it was thought that everyday at sunset that the sun died and in sunrise the sun was reborn again. The sun is the most important element to the Egyptians because without it would be the end of life. The pharaoh's death is the same as the sun rising and setting. There are 12 challenges for the pharaoh to face, could be compare to our notions of hell in the Christian faith, in order to merge with the sun god Ra. Each task is one hour in the night making up 12 hours altogether. The challenges are meant to test the Pharaoh's purity and worthiness for eternal life. Having the Pharaoh be destroyed is like having the sun destroyed and it would mean end of all life. This is why the Pharaoh's success into eternity was essential. The journey into the afterlife is real and everything to the ancient Egyptian people, and it started in the tomb. Craftsman spends years preparing

the tomb for the Pharaoh giving the art on the walls its magical powers. These drawings and writing on the wall isn't only for decorative purposes, but also gave the dead Pharaoh guidelines or map to use for resurrection in the afterlife. To paint or write these guidelines would, in a symbolic way, guarantee the journey would happen and be successful. Once the soul has gone through the 12 challenges and his heart weighed against a "feather of truth," if the body is recognizable enough to the soul, they will join and resurrect the body and live for eternity joined with the sun god Ra.

Everything about the architecture of the tombs and buildings in ancient Egypt speaks about the afterlife and hold so much weight of importance to the daily life of these people. There is a strong connection between the ceremonies and rituals performed with the person's experience in the afterlife. Just like the Christians, the body is sacred and treated with extreme care and preparation in the embalming process.

There are religions that don't hold the body to be sacred after death in their rituals, such as the Tibet Sky Burial. Most Tibetans have Buddhist beliefs that teach rebirth and reincarnation making it unnecessary to preserve the body for it is believed to be an empty shell after death. There is no connection between the body and the afterlife; in addition, the soul of a person does not exist for eternity, but transforms into another life form. The soul is reincarnate into another existence and can be reborn into a lifetime over and over again.

Since the human remains are unimportant to the Buddhist religion, the function in sky burial is primarily to discard the body. In this procedure, the corpse is cut in specified location throughout the body then placed on a mountain top laying bare for the natural elements and predatory animals ("Sky Burial," Wikipedia, 2013). There are practical reasons for this: the earth is mostly rocky and tough, so burials are generally unmanageable. Also, Tibet is typically in high elevation and is over the tree line, so timber

for the most part is unobtainable for cremation of the body. Only high lamas and other high ranking individuals receive burials, but sky burials are most commonly used. However, in more contemporary times some of the funeral practices have changed. As more Tibetans pass away in hospitals, predatory animals are repelled by the stench of disinfectant and medicine. In addition, cremation has become more of a practical option with the lower cost of fuel and more availability of lumber ("Sky Burial," Wikipedia, 2013).

One might think that Buddhist religion does not focus on death, but in actuality their practices are strongly centered with preparing for death. Anyen Rinpoche is a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism and in his book *Dying with Confidence* he states, "For Buddhists, the moment of death is the most potent opportunity to practice. Indeed, it is the key opportunity to attain realization or a positive rebirth. Thus, meditation practice is Buddhism is actually practicing for death." (p.3) And it is the responsibility of the individual to practice medication and mindfulness every day to prepare for the moment of death. Rinpoche further explained how if we die without confidence and in fear the only choice is to return to samsara, to re-enter the cycle of birth, suffering, and death over and over again. Our consciousness is the only part of us that is transferred from one form of life to another. So in essence, Buddhism meditation is contemplating the impermanence of life, and to understand that death will happen so one must mentally and spiritually prepare for it.

Unlike the Tibetan rituals, the Malagasy of Madagascar throw a big party for the deceased in a ritual called Famadihana. However, they wait about five to seven years for the body to completely decompose because only then have their loved ones joined the ancestors. The living relatives open the tomb and remove the corpse and then have a large celebration for the family, friends, and community. There is food, rum, music, and dancing

with the deceased involved in this celebration. They literally hold the wrapped body up over their heads and dance around with them. After dancing and celebrating with the dead, the body is rewrapped and placed back in the tomb (Bearak & Ou, 2010). This culture has a huge emphasis on ancestor veneration, where it is very important for the ancestors to be honored in rituals, celebrations, and traditions in the community. By showing respect, giving attention, and honoring the ancestors, they would more likely help the living. If the memory of the dead is neglected, unfortunate events could fall upon the Malagasy people (“Madagascar,” Wikipedia, 2013). There is a very strong link between the living and the ancestors and this is symbolically demonstrated in these types of death rituals. As quoted in *How Societies Remember*, “For images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances.” (Connerton, 1989) Malagasy remember and honor their dead through the Famadihana ritual because this is how they visually connect with their ancestors through direct connect and interaction of the deceased body. They party and celebrate their memory and in return hoped to be looked after by their ancestors.

The Ekpe people of Calabar, Nigeria have a celebration for their dead like the Malagasy; however, their connection with the body and afterlife is more symbolic than literal. Expert in African Art History, Dr. Jordan Fenton did his dissertation exploring notions of secrecy, power, knowledge, and agency through the local use of masquerade performance, rituals, and nsibidi (a pictographic and pantomimic language that symbolizes the grades of initiation, esoteric lore, and history of Ekpe) to begin what role secret societies play in postcolonial Calabar (Fenton, 2010). He was initiated into the Ekpe during his first trip in 2008 and in returning trips continued to be initiated through different levels of the society. He was accepted into their culture and gave him a chief status. It’s not

uncommon to be apprehensive talking or dealing with a white man because of colonial history. So acceptance and given chief status is very selective and not just given to anyone, especially an outsider.

I interviewed Dr. Fenton and he gave me an in-depth explanation of the death rituals he participated with. The city of Calabar is an old slave trade center, rich with culture and history. They have a lodge structure where only members can enter, and this is where they gather to honor their fallen brother. There is feasting, drinks, drumming, singing, so it's an atmosphere of celebration. The masquerade of the society will come out of the lodge. The institution of these people is called Ekpe, meaning leopard or lion. The masquerader visually references the lion when presenting itself. This is one of the few ways for the society to become public in the community to demonstrate it self. The masquerade will start in the institutions lodge and parade through town towards the deceased home. Once in the home, the masquerader will go to the casket and will rub it to remove the spirit and take his energy out of the institution. This is especially important if the deceased is a title holder or high up in the society, so another member can take the place in society of the deceased. If this is not performed, the member could not know he is dead and be stuck in limbo trying to participate in the society and events of the living. The spirit would be stuck in between worlds where they don't fit anywhere, which could create havoc and disorder for the Ekpe. The masquerader has to remove the spirit completely from the institution and transfer the deceased into the ancestral realm. Once in this realm, the ancestor will be honored (ancestral veneration).

The masquerade culture has these symbolic cycle rituals. For example, the young boy transitions into manhood then into the elders. Once the elders die, they pass on into the accessorial world. This very circular institution makes it so that the dead need the help of

the living to enter the ancestral world. In contrast, the living pour libation (which can be gin, spirits, or alcohol) to ask the ancestors for help or guidance. The ancestors are in and around everything. There is a mystical element in these performances that reveals the ancestral intervention.

In Nigeria, there are 200 different cultures and several different states, but local chiefs with local politics still have power and authority that govern the community; these chiefs are usually men. Masquerades affect power and agency, and use these visual displays as demonstrative power. Ancestors are poured libation, which activates the masquerader. People are fearful of what the masquerader can do and only the elders can control. If you don't respect the institution's space during the masquerade you will get beaten. The urban city of Calabar is much more forceful and interactive with people in the community than what you'll find in rural areas because they have more of a reason to demonstrate power and status. There is more power to be acquired in the city than in the rural areas. People will run away from the masquerader and can back up traffic for miles. People know not to yell or honk at the masquerade because if you do the masquerader will march on the car roof or hood and ruin the car.

This is not only about ancestral veneration or honoring the dead, but it is also about a demonstration of status. When the family is honoring the dead clan head, the son taking the leadership needs to show his family and people that he is strong and powerful enough to take on this role. In order to do this, he would put on a weeklong celebration, in which he would pay and higher different masqueraders for these celebrations and events. So it's not just for ancestors but it's also to make a statement of leadership. These rituals are very layered and people have different reasons for participation, such as greed, ancestors, power, social status, etc. These rituals are centered on the life cycle and the ancestral

world, but it is also about the living and their political and economic agendas. It's a very layered situation where there is so much more to it than just a ceremony or ritual. It is using performance to not only honor the ancestor, but to demonstrate status and achieve a political agenda. The masquerade is visually demonstrating something to influence its audience and that can be universally understood.

As humans developed more cognitive and linguistic abilities, their culture and societies became more complex and layered, as do their rituals of death. In these ceremonies, it's not just about manifesting ideas and beliefs about the afterlife, spirituality, or religion, but it has so much more to do with the living. These rituals are used as an expression of power, status, wealth, politics, etc. that has everything to do with the living and not the dead. There is so much more involved and we can see this throughout history in religions in the world. Religion and ritual acts are very powerful and can create strong visual statements that can control what we believe in and how we think. These ceremonies are a way to symbolically express societies' ideas about the afterlife and also life of the living. In every religion I researched, there is an element of how we practice and live our life directly affects our experience in the afterlife. This is further evidence on the complexity and depth of death rituals, and how there is so much more than what can be merely seen on the surface.

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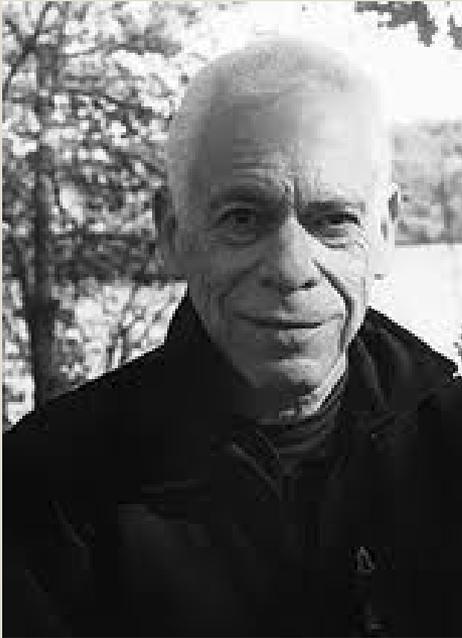


Saint Caterina de' Vigri, Church of Corpus Domini, Bologna Italy

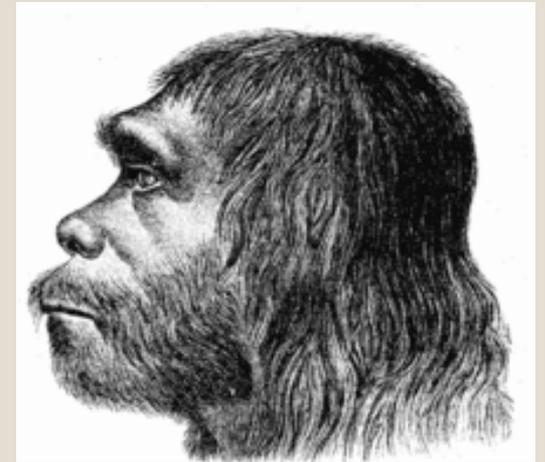
What are rituals?

- Set of Actions performed for symbolic value
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- Arbitrary places or specific location
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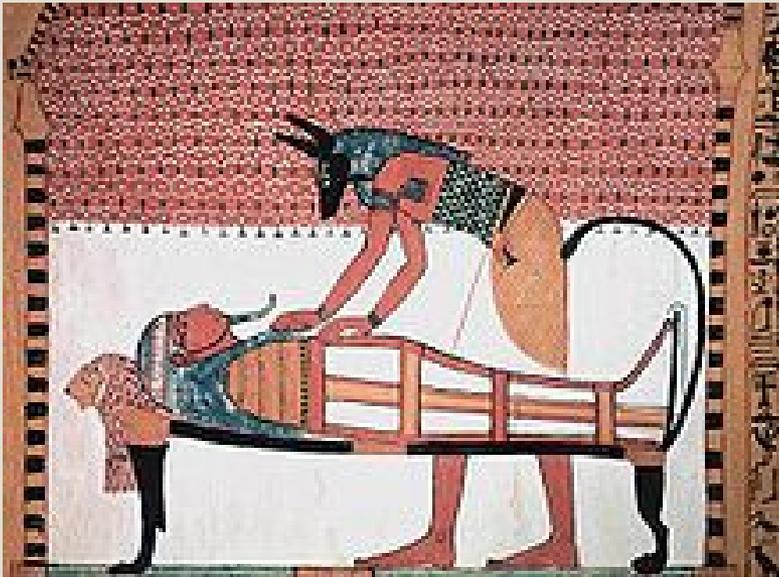
Origins- Dr. Philip Lieberman



Neanderthals



Ancient Egyptian Burial Rituals



Tibet Sky Burial



Madagascar Dancing with the Dead

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UmWPkSDwtVI>



Masquerade Death Rituals in Nigeria

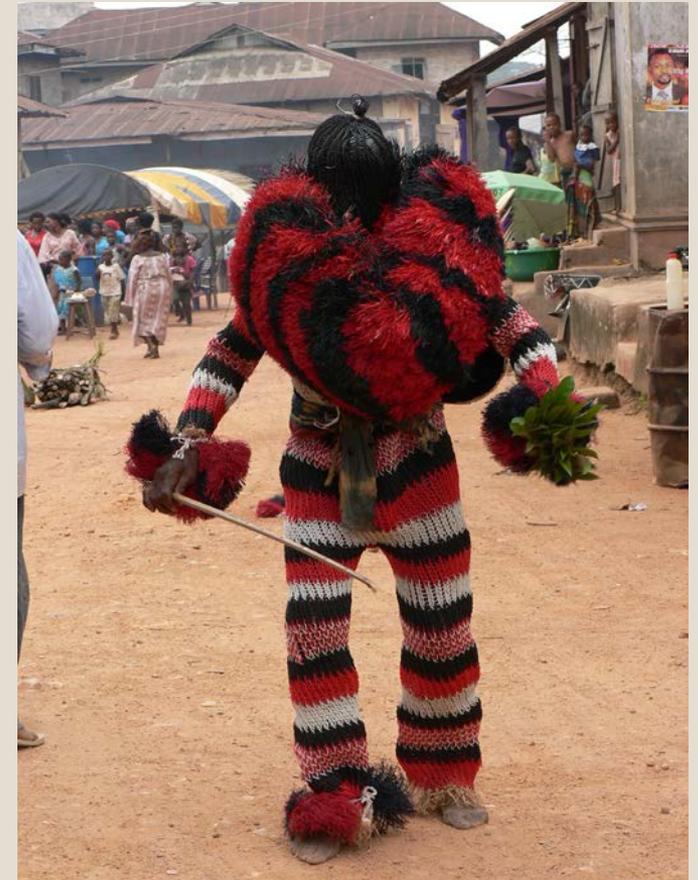
Dr. Jordan Fenton



Ekpe Street Performance in Calabar, Nigeria



Npge Ikom Masquerade Death Ritual



Calabar Ekpe Masquerade

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYmxjMw1PEM>