Look at the Sky

Death in Cultures Around the World

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"Death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all; all shall die."

— William Shakespeare

INTRODUCTION

We often refuse to accept the inevitable and admit that someday we will die. We are immortal and invulnerable. Death is something that happens to others but never to us. We don't want to talk about it or even think about it. When someone we know dies, often the first emotion we feel is anger at the person for leaving us at an inopportune time. The second feeling is relief that it was someone else who died. (The third is guilt when we realize that the first two emotions are generally inappropriate).

When thoughts of death do invade our minds, we bury them in euphemism and metaphor. Don't people always readily admit that they don't know what to say at funerals? We refer to the dead as the deceased. We say that he or she "kicked the bucket" or "bought the farm." A person has "passed away," "gone to his reward" or "gone to meet his maker." We are not alone in our dislike of the reality. The Kwakiutl, a Northwest Coast

people, refer to dying as “growing weak” or “to be laying down” and to death as “disappearing from the world” (Hickerson 1980:116). The Inuit of northern Canada say that a dead person is “looking at the sky,” a comment on how the dead person is laid out for the funeral (that is, on his back) (Balikci 1989: 176). Unfortunately, no matter how vehement our denials, human beings begin their journey towards death at the very moment of conception. This is a biological certainty in that death is pre-programmed (see Nesse and Williams 1994). There is no way around it nor can we predict when death will occur. The elapsed time between conception and the end of a person’s life can range from a few fractions of a second to slightly more than a century.

Whether we like it or not, there are two realities to consider. First, the living witness the death of loved ones and friends. They feel the sudden acute void in their lives — a gap left vacant by the departure of the deceased. Of course, the gap or void, the degree of loss depends on the closeness of the individual to the deceased (as perceived by the survivor). The survivor must somehow come to grips with the loss. Second, in dealing with another’s death, people also must recognize and acknowledge their own mortality. This awareness that death, particularly one’s own, is inevitable and unavoidable creates a need at some point to explain the phenomenon. Yet there is no way of knowing for sure what happens after death. Death is a door that swings in only one direction. Once the threshold is crossed, there is no possibility of returning that we know of. The living are not permitted so much as a peek through that door until it is their time to enter.

Death is a virtual unknown although many religious practitioners would argue this point. Without an explanation, without some way to offer reassurance that there is “life after death,” people face death with apprehension and fear just as

they do with anything that involves great change and unknown quantities. Tylor and others have argued that an attempt to cope with the idea of death and with dreams, during which it was possible to visit distant relatives and the dead, gave rise to religions.

> In his [Tylor's] view, religion may stem from speculation about such states as dreams, trances, and death. The dead, the distant, those in the next house, animals — all seem real in dreams and trances. The lifelike appearances of these imagined persons and animals suggests a dual existence for all things — a physical, visible body and a psychic, invisible soul. This dual existence formed the basis of a religious belief Tylor called **animism** (Ember and Ember 1991: 433; ***cf*** Tylor 1979).

Not all cultures react to the loss of a fellow human in the same way nor do they explain death in similar manners. "Societies differ in the kinds of supernatural beings or forces they believe in and the character of these beings. They also differ in the structure and hierarchy of those beings, in what the beings actually do, and in what happens to people after death" (Ember and Ember 1991: 433). How peoples deal with these all too common problems is the subject of this book.

Animals and Death

Humans are unique within the animal kingdom in that, although many animal species pay special attention to their dead (that is, their behavior changes as a result of the death of a member of their social group or pair), the non-human animals are not aware of their own mortality. In a study of aging among Japanese monkeys, Pavelka (1991: 595) determined that these monkeys do not seem to be aware that their time on earth is finite and, as a result, have no societal mechanism for coping with the loss.

> Another fact of human life that has profound implications for approaching the end of the life span is the knowledge that one is approaching the end of the life span. Without an awareness of mortality, monkeys could not be expected to experience aging in the same or even a very similar way to that of humans. It is true that monkeys recognize a dead animal as no longer a member of the social group. It is also true that in apes, severe grief can be associated with the death of a close friend or relative (Goodall 1986) ... This is, however, quite different from having a sense of one's own mortality, a sense of self, a sense that life is more than one's self (Pavelka 1991: 595).

Animals, then, have no sense of their own mortality. Some of the higher order animals do respond to a death in the group with grief (Goodall 1986) but it is rather a personal loss that they are grieving. They are not displaying any recognition that the deceased has "departed the world of the living" nor do they recognize that at some point in the future, they will share the

fate of the dead animal they are clinging to. It is the human animal alone who recognizes his or her own mortality, a necessary aspect of our awareness of self.

The Beginnings

We do not know when humans first developed an awareness of their own mortality, their own death. When and how they developed some form of supernatural explanation for death and some technique for dealing with a dead body are subjects still being debated. "Neandertal burials provide the earliest archaeological suggestion of religion. The fact that Neandertals buried their dead and put objects in graves has convinced many anthropologists that they conceived of an afterlife" (Kottak 1991: 240). There is no question that some Neandertals were deliberately buried. For example, at Le Moustier, a boy aged fifteen or sixteen was buried with a well-fashioned stone axe near his hand. Near that same site, a family of two adults and five children had been placed in a communal grave — perhaps a family plot (Ember and Ember 1991: 94-95). At the sites of La Chapelle-aux-Saints and La Ferrassie (in France) and at Kiik-Koba (Crimea), there were graves only just big enough to accommodate the body or bodies in a crouched position. In the cave of Teshik-Tash (Uzbekistan), a Neandertaloid child was surrounded by six pairs of Siberian mountain goat horns arranged in a circle (Clark 1971: 45-47).

In Iraq, at the site of Shanidar Cave,

> A man with a badly crushed skull was buried deep in the cave with special ceremony. One spring day

> about 60,000 years ago members of his family went out into the hills, picked masses of wild flowers, and made a bed of them on the ground, a resting place for the deceased. Other flowers were probably laid on top of his grave; still others seem to have been woven together with the branches of a pinelike shrub to form a wreath (Pfeiffer 1978: 155).

This interpretation is open to question since all we know for sure was that at Shanidar Cave, there were large quantities of pollen (ancestral forms of grape hyacinth, bachelor button, hollyhock, and flowering groundsels) near and on top of the body. This pollen may have resulted from deliberate decorating of the grave site or perhaps by accident (Ember and Ember 1991: 94-95; ***cf*** Starr 1976: 17-18). It is sufficient evidence taken together with the Le Moustier data to suggest but not confirm the possibility of funeral rituals as long ago as 60,000 years. Indeed, this may imply that funerals and a belief in the afterlife predated the emergence of fully modern man. To add to the confusion, both Neandertals (***Homo sapiens neanderthalensis***) and modern humans (***H. sapiens sapiens***) are known to have coexisted for a time in the Middle East and Europe (Kurtén 1972: 123). It is also quite possible that in some regions, modern humans predated Neandertals (Nelson and Jurmain 1991: 535-536).

It may be possible to push the beginnings of the awareness of death even further back to the time of ***Homo erectus*** (about one million years), if we accept the presence of red ochre in association with skeletal remains to be a 'ritual substitute for blood,' a symbolic relationship that is common among anatomically modern human cultures. For example, at the ***Homo erectus*** site of Choukoutien near Beijing, China, human skeletons have been covered with red ochre and if the red ochre is a ritual substitute for blood, it could be interpreted as a symbol of life

after death for those who buried the individuals (Eliade 1978: 9). If this is the case, then the concept of an afterlife began to develop long before the Neandertals or anatomically modern humans appeared on the scene. However, the information from Choukoutien does not indicate if the individuals were intentionally buried and, to date, there is no other evidence for ***Homo erectus*** engaging in ritual activities. Therefore, the application of the 'red ochre as blood' metaphor is tenuous at best.

There are some tantalizing evidence concerning the first modern humans. They share some of the heavy physical characteristics of the Neandertal but also show a gracilization tendency (Nelson and Jurmain 1991: 535-536; Larsen ***et al*** 1991: 148-149). In Skhul Cave, Israel, a number of deliberate burials were discovered. There were more than ten individuals including children, infants and adults of both sexes (Nelson and Jurmain 1991: 561). "One of the children, a four-year-old, reveals an odd incident. Some time after the burial, somebody started digging a hole and happened upon the corpse of the child, causing some damage to the skull. At that point, however, the unknown digger stopped, perhaps in dread of disturbing the peace of the dead, and filled the pit up again (Kurtén 1972: 123)."

It is clear that a large quantity of additional data is needed to deal with the problem of the origins of burial practices and religion in general. We will probably never know where or when it began. We do know, however, that with the evolution of modern humans, ritual behaviors and the like became fully developed. Art in the form of cave paintings and carved objects are typical of these early humans. Upper Paleolithic burials were simple at first and contain small amounts of grave goods (shell or tooth necklaces and bracelets) (Fagan 1990: 169) but grew

more elaborate as their culture became more complex. Researchers now use these burials as evidence for differences in social status among peoples. When there is little or no difference between grave contents, it is assumed that the culture was egalitarian (each individual has equal access to wealth, power, and prestige). Social inequality becomes evident when some but not all graves contain special objects. For example, some of the child burials at Tell es-Sawwan (7500 - 7000 years ago — Iraq) (Ember and Ember 1990: 154-156) and from La Venta (2800 years ago — Mexico) (Flannery 1972: 399-425) were filled with statues and ornaments. That suggests that some of the children had high status at birth since they had not lived long enough to acquire the respect and prestige necessary to justify the elaborate grave offerings (Staski and Marks 1992: 500).

Death and Dreams

In the Islamic Koran (***Qur'ãn***), there is a clear parallel between sleep and death. Sleep is a kind of death and dawn, the time when a person awakes, reflects the resurrection (the final Awakening). In fact, the same verb, ***tawaffã***, is used "…both for 'taking' man in sleep and for 'taking' him in death" (Welch 1977: 187). Further the Koran suggests that some entity, perhaps the soul (al-anfus) "…actually leaves the body at death and in sleep" (Welch 1977: 188). The intent of the parallel is to suggest that "…the soul leaves the body on death as gently as it does in sleep" (Welch 1977: 189). This view has two major benefits: (1) of identifying dreams as "real" events since the soul departs the body during sleep and (2) of reducing the fear of death for true believers since there is no pain involved in it. In that sense, the

Islamic religious tenets accomplish precisely what Tylor (1979) argued were the major goals of religion.

In Western thought, dreams are purposeless (Knowlson 1910: 113-115) side effects of chemical activities within the brain — activities over which we have no conscious control but which tend to reflect the current state of mind of the dreamer. They are products of the imagination, not components of the rational side of human consciousness. However, in some cultures, the meaning of 'real' is literal in that dreams are considered actual happenings. This insistence that dreams are, at least to some extent, real persists for two reasons:

1) Dreams (and sleep for that matter) have yet to be clearly explained from a scientific perspective. The discovery of REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep by Dr. W. Dement of the Mount Sinai Hospital, New York, and statistical analyses of the content and form of dreams has brought us closer to an understanding (Planer 1988: 78-79; ***cf*** Eysenck 1968). However, there remains an aura of mystery surrounding dreams. As research progresses, the mystery deepens. For example, a study of sleep disorders, primarily narcolepsy (the affliction that has people and animals falling asleep anywhere and at any time without warning) at the Minnesota Regional Sleep Disorders Center has demonstrated that the states of being awake, being in REM sleep or of being in non-REM sleep are not as solidly defined as we would like them to be. Some of their patients simultaneously display elements or aspects of all three states. "When we watch them on videotape, they appear to be asleep, yet polygraphs show none of the conventional sleep characteristics" (Nadis 1994: 12). This new research implies that it is not necessary to be asleep to dream. One could be fully awake and still dream. Nadis (1994: 12) suggests that this may explain visions and out-of-body experiences. Although he and the researchers do not suggest

that dreams are real, they weaken the connection between sleep and dreams — a connection that has been at the heart of both sleep and dream research.

In other studies of dreams, contrasting conclusions have been reached. For example, while Freud argued that dreams fulfilled forbidden wishes, Crick suggested that dreams erased and reorganized memories (Nesse and Williams 1994: 229; ***cf*** Crick and Mitchison 1983). Symons (1993) offers what might be the most cogent observations concerning dreams. He points out that dreams are usually visual to the almost total exclusion of the other senses and that this was important to the species' survival.

> We could afford visual hallucinations, because closed eyes made sight useless; it was too dark for effective vision anyhow. By contrast, a cry of alarm, the smell of a tiger, or the panicky grasp of a child were important cues that required unimpaired vigilance of our senses of hearing, smell, and touch (Nesse and Williams 1994: 229).

The bottom line on dream research is that we understand very little and know even less about the subject.

2) In many societies, the soul is believed to be loosely connected to the body and it is therefore prone to wandering when it is not confined, that is, when the body is asleep. Indeed, in many instances, the changes the body goes through in sleep — the lack of responsiveness, the reduction in respiration and pulse rates — are regularly attributed to the soul having left the body. By extension, the ceasing of these functions entirely (death) is the result of the soul leaving the body permanently (Barber 1988: 183). Then, the person who appears in a dream

is not some artificial construct of the mind but instead is the real thing. When you dream of a deceased relative, he or she is actually visiting with you. When you dream of someone who is still alive, either you are in his/her dream or s/he is in yours in a literal sense. Similarly, the events that occur in those dreams are real events that actually occur.

This belief that souls go visiting has led to the emergence of a number of interesting superstitions. It is said, in European folklore, that you can kill a witch by changing her position while she sleeps. Then the witch's soul cannot find its way back into her body (Kyll 1964: 179). A normal person could die if awakened too quickly or abruptly. We can see this in the North American belief: "Never wake a sleepwalker up quickly, or he will die" (Puckett 1981: 121-141). Dreams then in many cultures are external phenomena. They take place outside the sleeping body and in a supernatural world. If that is the case, sleep is dangerous because the soul is at risk. It is out wandering around contacting and being contacted by other souls — human, animal, and plant — some of whom may wish to do it harm. People die in their sleep. Incidentally, that belief could be the source of the children's prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take
(Barber 1988: 178-187).

The Cult of Decay

Beginning in the thirteenth century in Europe, the time of the great Black Plague, the general populace (noble and commoner alike) developed a fascination with death. This is not surprising since large percentages of the population were dying within an unnaturally short time period. This constant reminder that death always won the final battle resulted in a kind of reverse materialism, a complete rejection of all things mortal and material (Chambers ***et al*** 1991: 475). Images of death came to dominate the art of that time. One of the most popular motifs was the ***Danse Macabre***, the "… dance of death, depicting people from all walks of life—rich and poor, clergy and laity, good and bad—dancing with a skeleton, which represented their own future selves" (Chambers ***et al*** 1991: 475). This dance of death was literal as well as figurative. Variously called "St. John's Dance," "St. Vitus's Dance" or "Tarantism," people, for no apparent reason would begin dancing and not stop untl exhausted. Some people have suggested that the dancing was a symptom of one of the diseases that traveled with the plague although Zinsser (1971: 59) disagrees:

> For the most part, the dancing manias present none of the characteristics which we associate with epidemic infectious diseases of the nervous system. They seem, rather, like mass hysterias, brought on by terror and despair, in populations oppressed, famished, and wretched to a degree almost unimaginable to-day.… For those who broke down under the strain there was no road to escape except to the inward refuge of mental derangement…

Zinsser does feel that although the majority of dancers

were suffering a form of dancing hysteria, he states that some of the dancers may have been inflicted with some form of disease of the nervous system. Symptoms included abdominal pain and swelling, permanent tremors and, in some cases, death.

> The most severe dancing mania began in 1374, in the wake of the Black Death, at first at Aix-la-Chapelle, … Men, women, and children lost all control, joined hands, and danced in the streets for hours until complete exhaustion caused them to fall to the ground. They shrieked, saw visions, and called upon God. The movement spread widely, and undoubtedly the numbers of the truly infected were enhanced by multitudes of the easiy excited, in a manner not unlike that observed in modern … evangelistic gatherings (Zinnser 1971: 60-61).

During the Middle Ages, people did not fear death. They feared Hell instead (Teneti 1957; ***cf*** Turner 1993). Even the personification of Death changed and it became more personalized. Death was not some abstract or untouchable idea. It was symbolized by each individual's personal demons. "It is not Death, but rather his own dead self with whom he dances…" (Illich 1975: 29). Religious fanaticism reached unprecedented proportions during the plague years. Devil worship, Satan-based witchcraft and other manifestations grew out of this morbid fascination and recognition of the nearness of death. The plague killed off hundreds of people daily and the general population believed that the plague was a supernatural phenomenon forced upon them by God or Satan (to them, it could have been either). The dance and the religious fanaticism were not isolated phenomenon but rather went hand in hand with a loss of self-

confidence and a loss of control over one's own destiny. The plague and general decadence generated a rapid breakdown of the social order. That old order was not meeting the needs of the people primarily because there were not enough people to accomplish the tasks. The plague killed millions and millions more fled the cities for the countryside and, they hoped, safety. General dissatisfaction with the then current world order and the failure of their leaders to protect them from the rampaging epidemic forced many of the people to rethink their views and a social revolution began.

That revolution continues even today as does the intense interest in death and the Black Arts although the original reason for it has ceased to exist. Satanism and witchcraft are enjoying sizable followings. For example, there are at least two dozen 'Occult' shops catering to the New Witches in New York City alone. The 'New Age,' a 1980's phenomenon, is simply another manifestation of that interest in the occult and in the need for something beyond the mundane. People need to know that there is something beyond their current existence.

The Prospect of Death

All animals, including humans, live and die. Humans however are aware of their own mortality. They observe themselves growing old and know that some day they will certainly die. One day they are going about the daily business of living and the next, they will have left the world of the living. How people react to a death depends on their society's perception of death in general. Some consider it a natural progression from life and look upon it with anticipation. Others fear death and

anything associated with it. Most perspectives fall somewhere between these two extremes. These views and their attendant traditions will be the focus of this book. It will explore the cultural beliefs and practices that are associated with death. It is only a beginning, a broad survey of some of those traditions. It is not complete nor is it comprehensive. It is more a sampling of some of the various cultures and their beliefs without analysis or explanation.

In the following pages, definitions and approaches to death will be discussed. In addition, some practices relating to the body of the deceased will be examined. Those customs and traditions include ways of preparing the deceased for disposal and of disposing of the remains. Preparation ranges from neglect to a form of ritual cannibalism to sophisticated embalming techniques such as those used by the ancient Egyptians. Disposal practices are equally varied. Some cultures simply leave the body exposed to the elements and scavengers. Others place them in exposed locations such as in trees but make sure scavengers cannot get to the bodies. Tombs, natural or specially constructed, are commonly used. They range from simple caves to elaborate pyramids. In almost all instances, some form of ritual behavior that is as varied as the disposal procedures accompanies the preparation of the body and its final disposal.

Many cultures believe that some aspect of the human survives the experience called death. For some cultures, death results in total oblivion. Either the deceased simply ceases to exist or goes into a deep sleep forever. In others, the soul goes on a journey that may or may not be eternal. It may go to a paradise or a place of eternal suffering. Such a place may be similar to the earthly world or it could be fantastically different. Some of those afterworlds will be explored here. Finally, the adjustment of the living to the loss of a member of their group

as well as the continued contact between the living and the dead in some cultures will be considered. In all, the ways some cultures confront death and adjust to what is a biological certainty is our subject.