

# Death Rituals

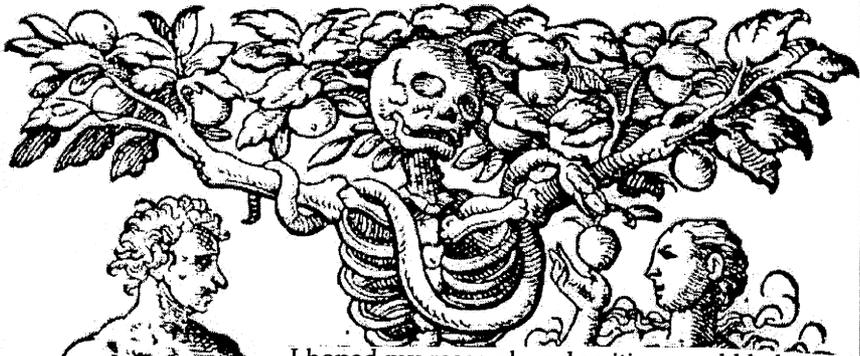
## And DIY Burials



*A collection of thoughts, photos, excerpts from books, resources, instructions, and deadly ideas.*

## Death as a lost art

I can't exactly pinpoint when death became so corporatized and impersonal in Amerika, but I can tell that death is something we are all losing touch with. Has anyone you know ever buried someone themselves? Few of us can answer yes to this question. In the past in Amerika and currently in other cultures funerals and burial rites were an artform that had either simplistic beauty or elaborate celebrations. If we don't start studying burial rituals or just the basics on how to perform a funeral, then we will lose this ability altogether. I hope this zine can be a catalyst to others who want to maintain personal control over our own dead. Let's not let someone else do it for us anymore, let's not let the practice die out, and let's not let our death conditioning keep us from learning how to handle the dead.



I hoped my research and writing would help me to sharpen my own thoughts about death and the afterlife.

I hope that readers will be able to use some of what I say to reflect on the discourse and culture surrounding death in the contemporary world.

### Death as a monoculture

In Amerika we live by monocultures – mass-produced industrial agriculture produces our food, gross and wasteful hollywood produces entertainment, cookie-cutter track homes, pillaging pharmaceutical industries supply 'medicine,' homogenized art – even death has become a monocultured institution in Amerika. Would you want to be buried in a cemetery? A grassed, mowed, non-native, invasive scare on the planet! A lot of cemeteries won't even allow tombstones anymore because it makes it too expensive and difficult to keep the grass neatly mowed. Take a closer look at cemeteries and the death/burial/funeral conditioning in Amerika. The funeral industry is run by big \$\$\$.

Everyone dies...it's a big corporate business just like just like every other industry today. Why do we (the 'alternative' communities) still bow to this corporate elite even after we die? I hope that with death we can finally free ourselves from the corporate/monoculture domination we can't get away from in life. The Amerikan experience of death now is another form of control over life...actually it's a form of institutional control that extends beyond life.

### Natural birth – why not natural death too?

Why is it that people seem to focus almost exclusively on natural childbirth and natural living without even mentioning natural death? I have yet to take part in a workshop on DIY funeral, but death is one thing we all will experience. We need to 'reclaim' (i know this is an overused word now but it seems to fit) our deaths in order to fully reclaim our lives. I'm not any expert at any of this, but it seems to me, that we could use some folks skilled at burial, funerals, coffin making, cremation, etc. to share their skills with the rest of us so we can start taking care of our own dead. Like mid-wives these people can share their experience and expertise in burials and help us along a road that we haven't been down for quite some time. Let's complete the cycle of natural birth and natural living with natural death.

## Which is better for the environment, being buried or cremated?

Usually folks think that cremation is better than burial because it 'keeps the land for the living,' but nowadays cemeteries, burial grounds, and churchyards help protect the land *from* the living, by preventing land from being developed, giving at least *some* refuge for wildlife. (Some of the few bits of green space left in Tokyo are graveyards – although some bodies in Tokyo now have to be kept in special warehouses close to the railway stations until burial space can be found in country graveyards.) I think most of us would assume that the corpse would be cremated on its own, but the truth is that nowadays coffins are all wastefully burnt along with the body. This pollutes the atmosphere and ground water from glues and from heavy metals, hydrochloric acid, carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide and hydrofluoric acid emitted during the incineration. Today, the pollution caused by excessive amounts of cremations, makes burial a more 'eco-friendly' choice if done in the right way. Burial (without coffins) is the closest you'll come to composting your body and returning the nutrients to the earth.

People might still choose to be cremated and perhaps it would be fine if the cremation was performed by loved ones and only the body was burned and the ashes disposed of in a respectful way. Some people believe that cremation speeds up the soul's ability to fully integrate into the nether world. So just because western practices have made cremation a polluting offense doesn't mean people shouldn't do it. If people take back their ability to perform cremations on their own it can be done in a balanced and non-polluting manner.



5. Nyakyusa men dancing at a funeral. Though stylized, the postures of the dance are extremely energetic



Plate 6. Finely carved Berawan mausoleum, with five supporting posts. It stands over thirty feet tall. Originally, it was painted with bold curlicue designs, which have now weathered.

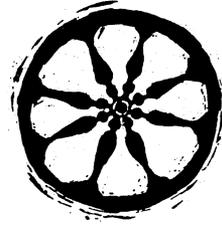


Christian necropolis around the basilica of Saint-Saba, Tipasa, Algeria. These sarcophagi surrounding the walls indicate a profound shift in attitude toward the dead —from a pagan aversion to any proximity to a Christian acceptance of coexistence

Even as night darkens the green earth  
 the wheel turns, death follows birth.  
 Strive as you sleep with every breath  
 that you may wake past day, past death.

...the principal symbols of Buddhism. When eight-spoked it is the Wheel of the Dharma "turned" by the Buddha—that is, the eternal Law as taught by him. It is also emblematic of the Eightfold Noble Path leading to enlightenment. The six-spoked wheel is the "Wheel of Life and Death," corresponding to the six realms of unenlightened existence

The funeral service concluded, it will be your further duty to recite daily for the next seven days the Heart of Perfect Wisdom and the Prayer. Three times in succession the sūtra should be chanted clearly toward the picture of the deceased in a continuing effort to bring him to enlightenment. Food, flowers and candles should be offered anew during this interval for the same reasons stated previously. Incense also should be offered to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas at every service. These rites are to be repeated once a week on the day of death for the following six weeks, or forty-nine days in all. Performed in harmony with the seven-day birth-and-death cycle in the intermediate state,<sup>18</sup> they have as their purpose the awakening of the Mind of the deceased before he enters his next realm of existence. Because the time of rebirth is variable, the rites are extended into yearly cycles.



THE WHEEL OF DEATH

Birth is not a beginning;  
 death is not an end.

—Chuang-tzu



Plate 2. Corpse of a Berawan woman displayed on a special seat. The woman seated to the right of the picture is the daughter of the deceased. She is dressed in white mourning attire. The dead woman is decked in fine clothes and surrounded by valuables. Her hands rest in a bowl containing candy and money, and she holds a cigarette in her fingers. In front of her (partly obscured by the rich hangings) is hung a small bowl into which cooked food is placed from time to time. The deceased's husband is housed in a small cubicle of mats out of the picture to the left.

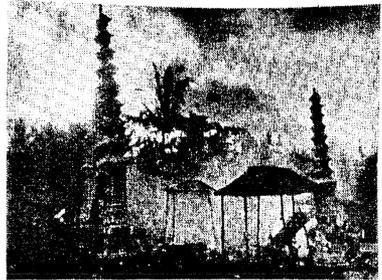
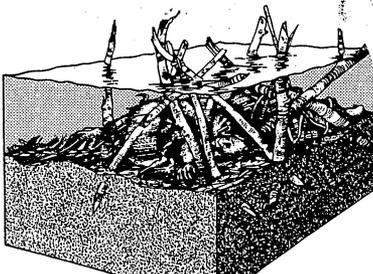


Plate 5. Tall bade towers stand beside the cremation ground in an elite Balinese funeral. Later they will be torn apart by the crowd. The ashes of the funeral pyre are strewn upon the sea

127, 128 Prehistoric burial ritual in Florida (Above) Reconstruction of a burial platform with carved totems of eagles, turkeys, owls and other creatures from a swamp at Fort Center. (Right) A 7,000-year-old burial pool at Windover has so far yielded over 160 bodies, many of them wrapped and staked to the pool bed, as shown here.



## Animal Scavengers

There are numbers of animals that have, when given the chance, partaken of human meat. Alligators, sharks, fish, and crabs have consumed bodies they found in rivers or oceans. The corpses of those who have died on land have become food for vermin (insects and rats), domesticated animals (cats, dogs, and even pigs), and wildlife (leopards, tigers, and bears). Hyenas, jackals, and the other less notorious carrion-eaters have been attracted by the number of bodies resulting from mass disasters. "Man's best friend" has made a meal of his or her master when confined with the corpse for any length of time. Pets have also been known to steal part of a body from the casket as easily as a steak from the grill. The results of all of this ingestion and digestion are mutilated bodies and strewn skeletons, often difficult to identify. The actions of animals may be a detriment to the work of the forensic anthropologist and a nightmare to the family of a devoured victim, but they operate as natural custodians in the cycle of decay.

Even under normal conditions, a body may take ten hours to cool completely. A corpse is supposed to be stiff, but rigor mortis is dependent on air temperature, cause of death, and condition and age of the body. Rigor usually begins two to six hours after death, starting in the eyelids, neck, and jaw, and spreading through the face, down both arms, and into the chest, abdomen, and legs. It is usually complete within twelve hours of death, although it can be "broken" by applying sufficient force. And it subsides in twelve to forty-eight hours, starting in the jaw and proceeding in the same order. Rigor mortis, also called cadaveric spasm, is a stiffening of the muscles that occurs when adenosine triphosphate (ATP, the energy source that allows muscles to contract) disappears some four hours after death. The rigor softens only after the muscle fibers begin to decompose. It will begin more quickly and last longer in a strong body than a weak or emaciated one. An obese person may not develop rigor mortis, but a thin person may develop it rapidly. It will end more quickly in the bodies of infants and convulsive people. In the heat, it will begin and end faster, and in the cold it will begin quickly and end slowly. Violent exercise or struggle before death may hasten its onset, and a slow death may prevent it from occurring at all.

Now we become reconciled  
as you start away. . . .

Persevere onward to the  
place where the Creator  
dwells in peace.

Let not the things of earth  
hinder you.

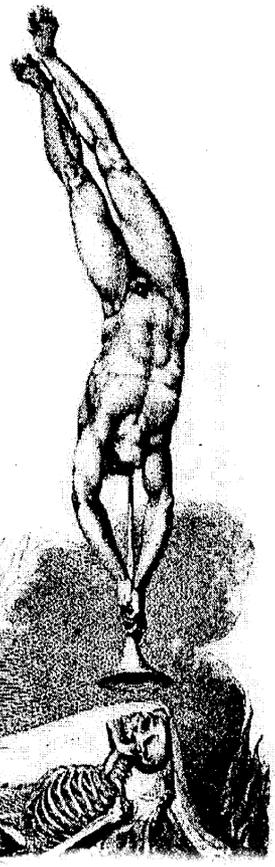
—From an early Seneca  
funeral address

The freshly dead will, on occasion, move. Although such movement is usually limited to reflex twitches, perhaps the bending of a finger, or even the flexing of an elbow, it is not unheard of for a body to make a significant movement, like sitting up.

—Joseph Sacco, *Morphine, Ice Cream, Tears:  
Tales of a City Hospital*<sup>1</sup>



*The head of Tarankhounn*



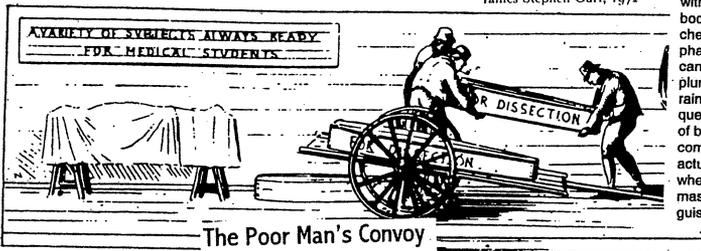
# THE CORPSE AS A COMMODITY

USE OF HUMAN CADAVERS IN  
AUTOMOBILE CRASH TESTING

Agents representing early eighteenth-century surgeons would invite condemned Newgate prisoners not already under sentence of dissection to barter their own corpses for money. Occasionally, prisoners yielded to the temptation: to pay prison expenses, or to purchase the customary decent apparel for their launch into eternity.<sup>3</sup> This source of corpses, however, was fraught with danger and uncertainty for the anatomists. Riots at gallows often sought to deny surgeons dissection rights over the dead, regardless of whether currency had changed hands. So even after what surgeons may have regarded as a *bona-fide* transaction, they may nevertheless have found themselves empty-handed, with no recourse to law for their loss, and violently unpopular into the bargain.

The current obsession with keeping everything tidy, not accepting long grass and leaning tombs, and treating a funeral as a refuse disposal problem, reflects a deep malaise in society . . . Death was never a tidy thing: it is foolish to try and make it so, and to compartment it away from life and the living.

James Stephen Curl, 1972<sup>4</sup>



The Poor Man's Convoy

When scientists first started using corpses on a regular basis for dissection (and experimentation) there would often be physical struggles between the scientists and family members, over who got rights to the body, at the gallows and other places of execution. It was the criminal(?) and poor sections of society who had their corpses treated as commodities. This was also the start of the corpse being used for scientific gain without any respect for the corpse. Today many people 'donate' their bodies to 'science,' without questioning. What is your body going to be used for...a chemical company, the pharmaceutical industry, more deadly cancer treatments (based on the plunder of native habitat and rainforests)? We need to start questioning 'science' and donations of body parts. It's not a compassionate thing to do; it's actually a dangerous thing to do when it allows 'science' to continually mask its capitalist pursuits under the guise of benevolence.

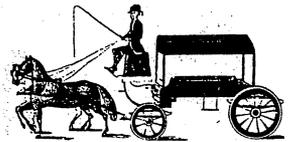
## An Irish Wake

I had never experienced a wake like this in my home county, Kerry, and what surprised me most of all was that the people of the house, who were mourning the loss of a relative, made no attempt to curb the unruly behaviour. The women of the house, an old lady and her daughter-in-law, remained seated near the fire, chatting with neighbours and relatives, while the man of the house made his way here and there through the kitchen, welcoming new arrivals and bidding farewell to those who were leaving. None of them seemed to be resentful of the misbehaviour, nor did they appear to take any notice of it.

The wake had become much more lively by this time. There was a good deal of laughter. Young lads started to push and crush one another on the stools. A few of them chanced to be seated on a sack of potatoes at the bottom of the kitchen, and a large potato was thrown at a man who had bent down to converse with somebody. He wheeled around but couldn't detect the culprit. The potato-throwing then became general; all and sundry were the targets, so long as the pelting could be done without detection. The only light in the kitchen came from a single lamp and from the candles beside the corpse, so that those who were intent on mischief had semi-darkness in their favour.

## French Hearses

### SERVICE ORDINAIRE.



### DEUXIÈME CLASSE.

### PREMIÈRE CLASSE.



It also may not be typical for the dying individual to reach for his bedside telephone merely to be afforded the privilege of hearing a voice. But if it is not typical, it is not so in large measure because the dying are generally not capable of such activity—for the great majority of deaths now occur in hospitals where the dying individual has long been sedated into unconsciousness. One 1967 study of approximately two hundred and fifty deaths in California hospitals, for example, reported that barely a dozen subjects had been conscious when death took place, and none of these had been engaged in conversation at the time.

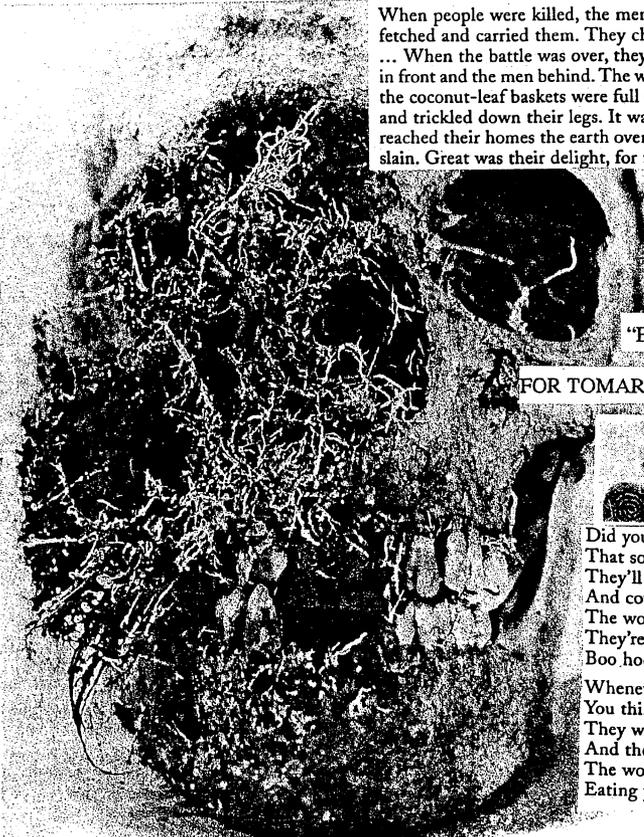


Figure 4.2. Cornelious Garden Bench Stone  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.

Women held as slaves in a South American tribe were impregnated so that their captors could eat their babies. The Batak tribe of Sumatra ate adulterers, traitors, spies, deserters, and members of attacking war parties. A native missionary in the Cook Islands in 1879 recorded one of the benefits of war for the participants:

### Cannibalism

When people were killed, the men tossed the bodies back and the women fetched and carried them. They chopped the bodies up and divided them. ... When the battle was over, they all returned home together, the women in front and the men behind. The womenfolk carried the flesh on their backs; the coconut-leaf baskets were full up and the blood oozed over their backs and trickled down their legs. It was a horrible sight to behold. When they reached their homes the earth ovens were lit at each house and they ate the slain. Great was their delight, for they were eating well that day.<sup>17</sup>

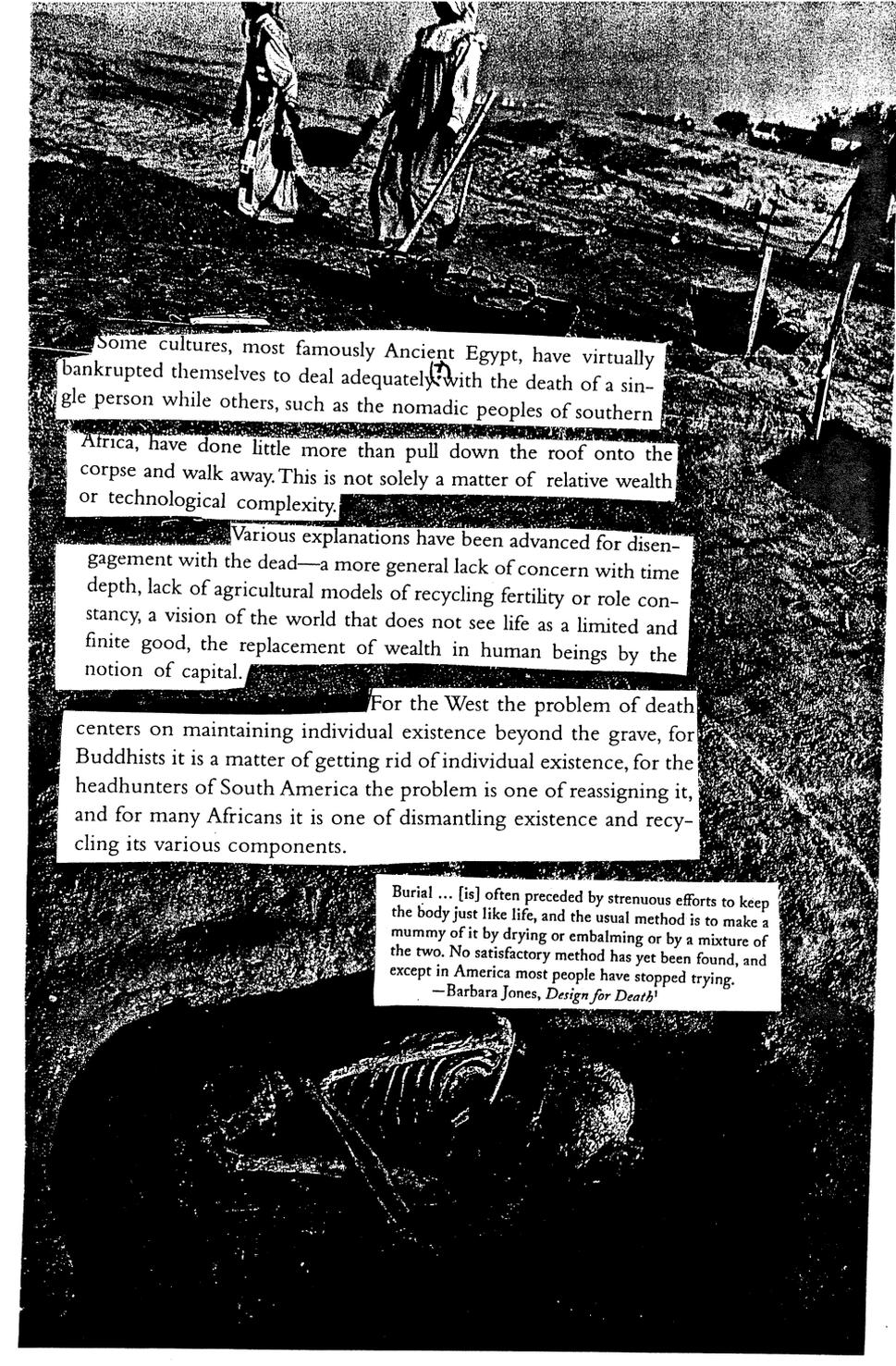


“EAT DRINK AND BE MERRY...  
FOR TOMORROW WE DIE” –old pirate saying



Did you ever think when the hearse goes by,  
That some fine day you are going to die?  
They'll put you in a wooden shirt  
And cover you over with gravel and dirt.  
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,  
They're in your ears and out your snout.  
Boo hoo, boo hoo, boo hoo hoo hoo.

Whenever you see a hearse go by  
You think of the day you're gonna die.  
They wrap you up in a bloody sheet  
And then they bury you six feet deep.  
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out,  
Eating your guts and spitting them out.



Some cultures, most famously Ancient Egypt, have virtually bankrupted themselves to deal adequately with the death of a single person while others, such as the nomadic peoples of southern

Africa, have done little more than pull down the roof onto the corpse and walk away. This is not solely a matter of relative wealth or technological complexity.

Various explanations have been advanced for disengagement with the dead—a more general lack of concern with time depth, lack of agricultural models of recycling fertility or role constancy, a vision of the world that does not see life as a limited and finite good, the replacement of wealth in human beings by the notion of capital.

For the West the problem of death centers on maintaining individual existence beyond the grave, for Buddhists it is a matter of getting rid of individual existence, for the headhunters of South America the problem is one of reassigning it, and for many Africans it is one of dismantling existence and recycling its various components.

Burial ... [is] often preceded by strenuous efforts to keep the body just like life, and the usual method is to make a mummy of it by drying or embalming or by a mixture of the two. No satisfactory method has yet been found, and except in America most people have stopped trying.

—Barbara Jones, *Design for Death*

# American Indian Rituals for the Dead

## THE "NUKIL" AND OTHER RITUALS FOR THE DEAD

The *nukil*, the most elaborate and extensive Cahuilla ritual, was held annually or biennially during the winter to honor the souls of the dead (*lewlawil*). This week-long ceremony honored all members of a lineage who had died since the previous *nukil* ceremony. It was the last in a series of ceremonies which had as their objective the propitiation and disposition of the souls and property of the dead. It was initiated when there was adequate food and other valuables to provide gifts for the assembled guests, at times involving up to several hundred participants, representing several sibs of both moieties (as well as other tribes).

The *nukil* was the culmination of a long series of rituals associated with the dead. Immediately after the death of a lineage member, a series of rituals began—cremation and funeral activities, followed by a period of mourning when men and women refrained from particular activities, women cut their hair, and the home and possessions of the dead were burned or otherwise destroyed. However, it was not until after the conclusion of the *nukil* that family mourning ended and the souls of the dead achieved release from their earthly environs and entrance into the land of the dead.

The frequency of the *nukil*—annually or biennially—was determined by the number of deaths since the last ceremony, and whether there were sufficient economic resources to provide proper gifts for all invited guests.

The *nukil* was a time of intense social and economic interaction, therefore significant ecological functions were accomplished by its observance. While the week-long rituals were being conducted, private exchanges of goods took place, marriages were arranged, personal disputes and lineage enmities were expressed and controlled, and competitive games and gambling activities were held.



Boneset (cross-section)  
*Eupatorium perfoliatum*

## Southern Paiute Cry Ceremony, Cry Songs, and Giveaway

Some say that the Cry Ceremony and Cry Songs first came from the Mohave long before 1870. Others recall that these traditions came from neighboring tribes, the Pahump and Moapa, and from the Chemehuevi as a memorial ceremony. But no one knows quite how old these ceremonies really are.

Today, when someone dies, the Southern Paiutes hold a memorial Cry Ceremony for one or two nights before a church funeral. On the last night, groups of singers sing two cycles, the Salt Songs and the Bird Songs, from sunset to sunrise. During brief pauses between songs, the family and friends make emotional speeches. The participants share traditional stories, especially those that reveal the origins of rituals usually performed during life crises. And they reflect upon the life of the individual whose spirit they have gathered to sing over into the Spirit World. Afterward, at a giveaway, the family distributes the deceased's valuables among the guests.

I want to stay-home  
and die here. Let me  
die in the house and do  
not do anything to it; it is  
an old-age hogan. I'm not  
dying of anything that you  
should be scared of; you  
should not be scared of  
those who die of old age.

—final words of Frank Mitchell, famous

*Yu ni ne-un-ai; ji-bai oke ni  
ki-pi-ai; ni mus se-chu?*

(Here I am; Spirit Land,

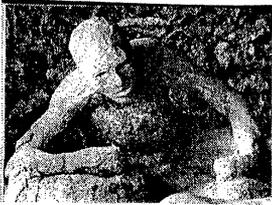
I am coming; must I  
pass away?)



—An old Mohegan Death  
Chant, usually sung along  
with a tobacco offering to  
the Spirit of the Deceased

Some AMERICAN INDIAN customs for dealing with grieving reflect familiar traditions from other cultures. Some rituals help people gain closure. For example, the Lutupahko, the Yaqui death anniversary ritual and fiesta that is held one year after a loved one's death, closes the formal period of mourning. This is not unlike the Jewish ceremony, often held one year after a loved one dies, when a gravestone is unveiled.

The Hurons in southern Canada, northern neighbors of the Iroquois, periodically held a Feast of the Dead. They performed this elaborate ceremony for all those who had died since the last Feast of the Dead was held. These major occasions drew together the families of the deceased. The remains of their loved ones were ritually buried in a large common grave and honored once again.



*A victim of the volcanic eruption that destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum*

PLATE 29

When the women who have gathered around the grave confront a pile of bones instead of the person they buried five years earlier, their hopes are crushed. The joy they anticipated is transformed into grief and pain. They are forced to realize that although the exhumation can return the remains of the deceased to the upper world, it cannot reverse the process of decomposition, which has reduced a person to bones. It cannot bring the dead back to life.

Ἰβὼ βάλᾳ στὴ μαύρῃ γῆν τριαντάφυλλα κὶ ρόδα,  
κὶ τὼρᾳ ἤρῃα κὶ ἔβγαλα κυδώνια σαπιμένα.  
(Mousaiou-Bouyioukou 1965:71)

A  
GREEK  
EXHUMATION

I placed roses in the black earth.  
Just now I came and took out rotten quinces.

When all the bones have been removed from the grave, everyone grows quiet. Then comments are made about the fragility of human life and the futility of human strivings: "That's what we should look at. That's all he is—a pile of bones. Where is all his money? Where are all his troubles, all his worries?" At this moment everyone present at the exhumation is confronted with tangible evidence of human mortality and of the ultimate fate that awaits us all.



When it came to sewing up the dead person's lips, however, there were no longer many village women eager to volunteer for the job, and in the end the family decided to employ a professional dresser. The same woman would be responsible for providing the ceremonial bed on which the dead man would lie during the wake.

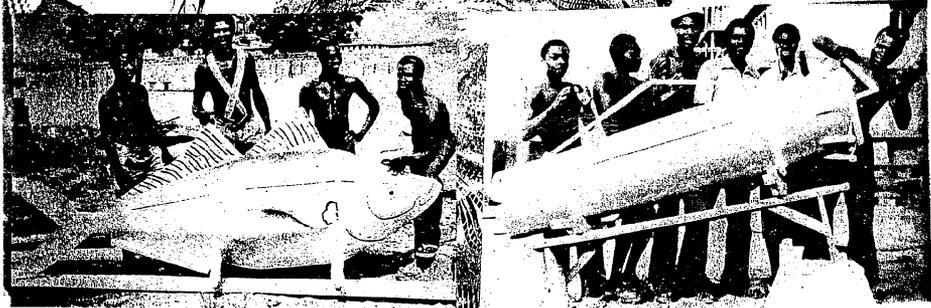
Ga coffins show similarities with the coffins of the ancient Eleku (in Zaïre), which were shaped like pirogues equipped with bird beaks and decorated with lances, knives, etc. In 1959, however, the ethnologist G. Hulstaert described the Eleku funeral art as an 'art that had long since fallen into disuse' and Kane Kwei could scarcely have drawn his inspiration from it.

Along with the large quantities of beer and spirits that were an indispensable part of any funeral service, the coffin constituted the major expense. Only Manko, the oldest of the men present, raised an objection to the additional expense of a dresser-cum-cosmetic artist to prepare the body on the eve of the burial. Manko reminded the others that in his time the village women used to do this themselves.



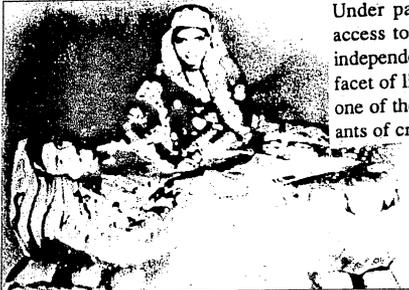
### Ghanaian Burial

Ga coffins can be shaped as anything from boats, cars, fish, fishing nets, drums, fruit, cocoa pods, etc.



She should go near her husband's pyre, with flowers, fruit etc. In her *aanchal* (the end portion of a sari), give the symbols of her fortunate marital status to other fortunate women and then placing a pearl in her mouth, should pray to Agni the fire god, and enter the flames. At the moment of her entering the fire, Brahmins should chant mantras, to the effect that this woman who is entering the flames should be awarded with entry into heaven via her husband's pyre.<sup>29</sup>

Among the Jogee tribe, a widow used to be buried alive rather than burnt. Three months after the regulation of 1812 came into effect, an eye-witness recorded that a sixteen-year-old girl was buried alive with her husband's corpse in a grave six feet deep, with her mother and friends present during the interment. This incident took place some twenty miles from Calcutta.



Roop Kanwar with her husband Maal Singh

Under patriarchal lifestyles, where male domination denies women access to religious knowledge, education and the means of economic independence, male chauvinism becomes a common dimension in every facet of life. Its emphasis over and above these manifestations has been one of the reasons for the incidence of sati, as it has been in other variants of crimes against women in general.



The Harlem rituals of death have parallels with those of the ancient necropolis of Egypt. They are in the continuum of those on the Nile of four thousand years ago. Today, a kindly God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or newly arrived Allah, have replaced Osiris, god of the underworld; the *Bible* with its chants and songs has replaced the old texts of the *Book of the Dead*.

Death is the moment called *quittin' time*, when we freeze in place like tomb figures or ancient wall paintings or photographs on a mantelpiece in Harlem. Family and friends witness the moment when the preacher sings out the life of the deceased, hoping to distract Satan or Anubis, with his great scale, from weighing the bad deeds against the good.

The HARLEM  
BOOK OF THE DEAD

## The Hindu rites of death

After death, the relatives place a simple cloth on the person. Each of the relatives comes and applies sesame oil to the deceased's head. The body is bathed with the water from nine kumbhas, and is placed in the coffin. Each of the grandchildren takes a small-lighted stick and stands around the body and sings.

*-From 'Death and Dying - A Hindu Point of View'*

## Keeping the Body Cool

If the person has died at home, the body could be kept in a room with the window open, in the coldest room in the house or in the basement if necessary. In rural France a special refrigeration plate is often placed under the body so as to make it possible for the body to remain in the house while relatives come to pay their respects. Wrapped ice cubes could be placed by the body. Or dry ice (which gradually breaks down into a carbon dioxide mist) could be used - it has been widely used in Japan in hot weather to allow the body to remain on a futon at home before the funeral.

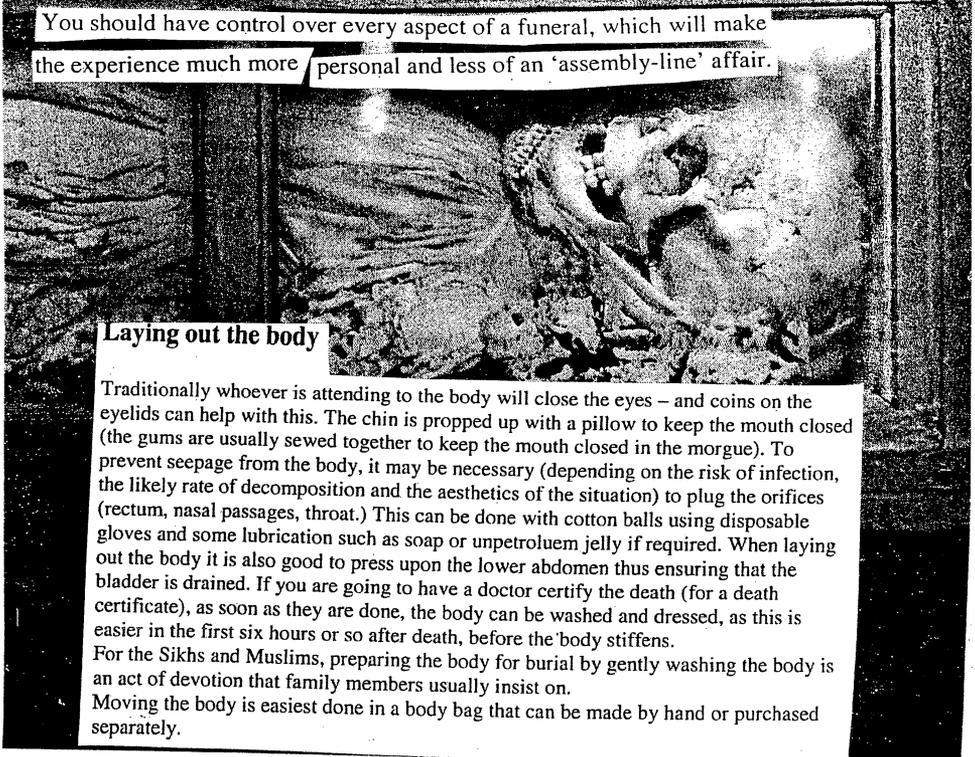
## Why keep the body at home?

In some religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, it is argued that it is best to leave the body undisturbed for several days after death, to allow the complete departure of the soul. And in the West, there are many who emphasize the importance of allowing family members/friends/relatives to see the body - and of giving even young children this opportunity, although not insisting if they prefer to stay away. Also in the past, keeping watch on the body made certain that the person was really dead. Being buried alive happens more often than we would comfortably like to think, and without proper medical examinations, one can only watch the corpse to make sure it is dead. (In a study of 150,000 exhumed American war-dead from WWII in Europe it was revealed that no less than 6,000 (4%) showed signs of having been buried alive)

You should have control over every aspect of a funeral, which will make the experience much more personal and less of an 'assembly-line' affair.

## Laying out the body

Traditionally whoever is attending to the body will close the eyes - and coins on the eyelids can help with this. The chin is propped up with a pillow to keep the mouth closed (the gums are usually sewed together to keep the mouth closed in the morgue). To prevent seepage from the body, it may be necessary (depending on the risk of infection, the likely rate of decomposition and the aesthetics of the situation) to plug the orifices (rectum, nasal passages, throat.) This can be done with cotton balls using disposable gloves and some lubrication such as soap or unpetroleum jelly if required. When laying out the body it is also good to press upon the lower abdomen thus ensuring that the bladder is drained. If you are going to have a doctor certify the death (for a death certificate), as soon as they are done, the body can be washed and dressed, as this is easier in the first six hours or so after death, before the body stiffens. For the Sikhs and Muslims, preparing the body for burial by gently washing the body is an act of devotion that family members usually insist on. Moving the body is easiest done in a body bag that can be made by hand or purchased separately.





### Digging a grave

“6 Feet Under” is a colloquialism. It’s probably best to dig a 4 foot hole, since this will allow about 3 feet between the upper surface of the body, assuming that you will not be using a coffin, and the ground surface. In ordinary cemeteries, a body may be given a 6-foot deep grave, but another body will be placed on top of it in the future. Sandy soils are dangerous to dig in to any depth, and rock will obviously limit how far down you can dig. If you are digging a grave yourself, you need to be careful and have help. If you are fit and enthusiastic, it should take about 3 hours to dig a four-foot deep grave. Try and shore up the first two feet of the grave so that it is supported when the mourners stand around it. You might want to take a bucket to stand on so that you can get out of the grave at the end of the day. You will also need to make careful measurements of the body and any receptacle it will be in. You don’t need a coffin (even “green coffins” use energy to be used in their construction and transportation), the body can be dressed or naked, or it can be wound in a sheet or put in a body bag. To lower the body into the earth, you will need at least two long ropes, probably more, so that it can be carefully rested at the bottom of the grave.



### Making the coffin

The Oregon-based novelist Ken Kesey (author of ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’) wrote to his friends about the death in a traffic accident of his 20 year old son Jed: ‘It was the toughest thing any of us has ever had to go through, yet is also had and always will have a decided glory...A homemade ceremony is legally possible. All you need is the land, the determination and the family.’

Ken and his friends built the coffin for Jed themselves – clear pine pegged together and trimmed with redwood. The handles of thick hemp rope and the lining of Tibetan brocade and a pillow of (locally hunted) goose down covered in white silk.

Ken’s friend said, “The real value of that coffin was in the doing, in the building of it ourselves. Not in the coffin, as a thing, but in the act of creating it, as an event. It made us all feel better to do this ourselves, to take charge of things as much as we could, not just the coffin but the burial as well... So I would say to anybody who feels that they might want to give it a try when someone close dies, absolutely yes; build it yourself. Even if you can’t do basic carpentry, you can nail together a kit. If you do have skills, you can make something that will make you feel good long after it’s buried out of sight.”

They dug a hole and buried Jed between the chicken house and the pond on Ken’s land.

The Natural Death Handbook has directions for making a d.i.y. coffin and Ernest Morgan in his book about funerals in the United States, ‘Dealing Creatively with Death – A manual of Death Education and Simple Burial,’ describes the making of a simple burial box.



Death is the protest of the spirit against the unwillingness of the formed to accept transformation—the protest against stagnation.

## Some deadly points of interest

-Dead bodies will not cause problems once they are buried since the earth acts as a deodorizer and cleaning agent. Infectious disease shouldn't cause you a problem either, unless you die of anthrax, hemorrhagic fever, cholera, plague (which one is not made clear), relapsing fever, smallpox or typhus. Even if you were to die of one of these bizarre illnesses, your family could take you home from the hospital as long as they were going to bury or cremate you immediately. AIDS also creates no problem in burial. Dead bodies are not evil receptacles of disease. They do not corrupt the land or water because the soil and the creatures in the soil and in the body itself will break it down safely and cleanly.

-The idea of Woodland burials in Britain really took off after Princess Diana was buried in the woods. Weird catalyst, but whatever will get people see the alternatives....

-Samhain, the Celtic New Year on the 31<sup>st</sup> October, is the time of year when Pagans celebrate their ancestors and their dead.

-Memorial Ecosystems has started the Ramsay Creek Preserve in South Carolina. It's in an old forest and they only allow simple caskets to be buried, they don't allow embalming, but they do allow small gravestones. They sound kinda corporate and make it explicit that they are for-profit, but it's a start. 113 Retreat Street, Westminster, SC 29693 Email: [information@memorialecosystems.com](mailto:information@memorialecosystems.com) <http://www.memorialecosystems.com/>

-Aldous Huxley (author of 'Brave New World') sat by his wife Maria at her death, urging her with hypnotic repetition to 'go towards the light.' His second wife Laura gave Aldous on his deathbed, at his request, two injections of 100mg of LSD.

-About 200 years ago, Wordsworth, a well-known poet insisted that town cemeteries were inadequate because they failed to provide the comfort which could be experienced from wildlife in fields and woods. Another poet at the same time, Edwards, claimed cemeteries were spiritually inadequate.

-Coffins made of tropical hardwoods, contribute to the death of tropical rainforests.



Figure 5: Catshood All Soul's Day Mexik, Mexico City.



Figure 7: Fancyracy police car. Wire and paper. Mexico City.

## Burial at Sea

I haven't been able to find a lot about this, but in theory, burial at sea seems an attractive proposition because the body becomes food for the fish. The body, I assume, would have to be taken way far out to make sure that it doesn't wash up on shore and there is also the concern about commercial fishing trawling the bodies back up. It would help to have the body (or casket) properly weighted down so that it doesn't float back up to the surface.



## Los Días de Muertos

Townpeople in Xoxocatlán await the arrival of their loved ones.

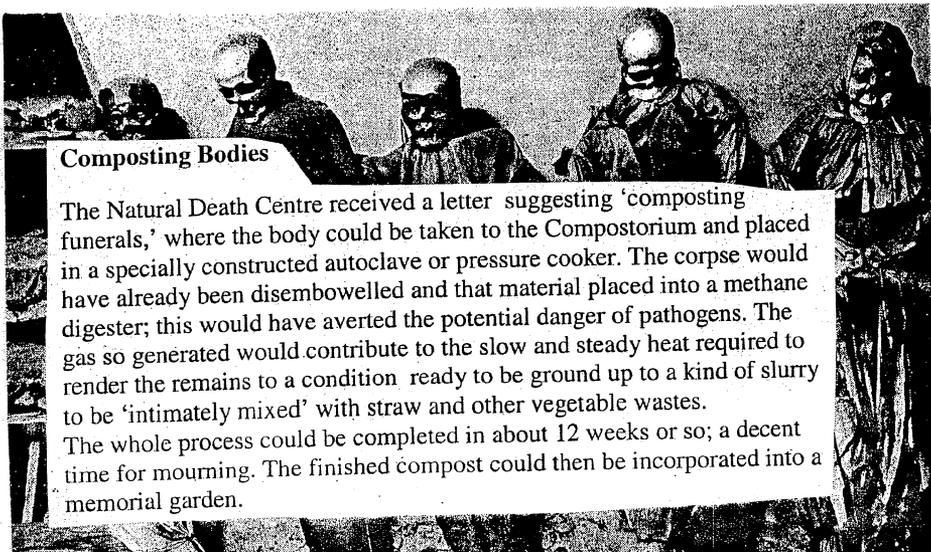
Los vecinos de Xoxocatlán esperan la llegada de sus fieles difuntos.

## Fruit tree planted over body

Often, in the backcountry of Montana, a hole will be dug and the body, in a plain pine coffin or perhaps just wrapped in a tie-dyed cloth, will be lowered into the ground. Instead of a tombstone, a fruit tree is planted over the body. The roots are nourished by the return of that body into the earth from which it was sustained. And in the years to follow, eating the fruit from that tree will be like partaking in that loved one. It touches on the ritual of the Eucharist.

-From 'Who Dies?' by Stephen Levine.





## Composting Bodies

The Natural Death Centre received a letter suggesting 'composting funerals,' where the body could be taken to the Compostorium and placed in a specially constructed autoclave or pressure cooker. The corpse would have already been disembowelled and that material placed into a methane digester; this would have averted the potential danger of pathogens. The gas so generated would contribute to the slow and steady heat required to render the remains to a condition ready to be ground up to a kind of slurry to be 'intimately mixed' with straw and other vegetable wastes. The whole process could be completed in about 12 weeks or so; a decent time for mourning. The finished compost could then be incorporated into a memorial garden.

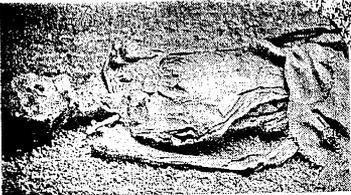


## Body Snatching

I don't mean body snatching like from graves, but snatching of our friends/loved ones from the morgue or other place of internment (before buried I'd hope) so that we can give them the funeral rites that they wanted. One of the main reasons I choose to write this zine is because I love my friends/family and don't want to see people who in life are luddites, or organic farmers, naturopaths, saboteurs, squatters, scavengers (roadkill and off corporate america), green anarchists, eco-warriors, or just plain good people disrespected by being buried in a cemetery like their lives/lifestyles meant nothing. I have a pact with one friend that we will both see that we are disposed of in the way that we've expressed to each other, and I encourage other people to talk to their friends and do the same thing. You should have your affairs in order and plainly state what you want done with your remains so that there is no question about it after you die. I'm even thinking about filling out a will that is specifically about dealing with my remains and I'll ask my family to sign it so I can feel at peace (I don't own anything so there's no need to worry about the material shit). There's also no way in hell I'll let some mortician embalm my friend with toxic substances so that he can stay-fresh like some plastic-wrapped piece of meat on the supermarket shelf. Sometimes I think 'oh fuck it doesn't really matter what happens to my remains when I'm gonna be dead anyhow,' but this kind of thinking makes me feel complacent and if I don't want to go along with the system in life, why would I in death?

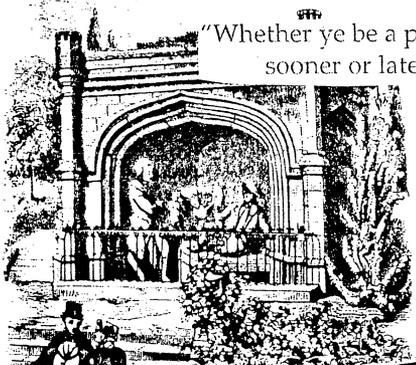


## Ga Coffin



A 2,000-year-old bog body from Rendswühren, Germany, preserved in waterlogged peat.

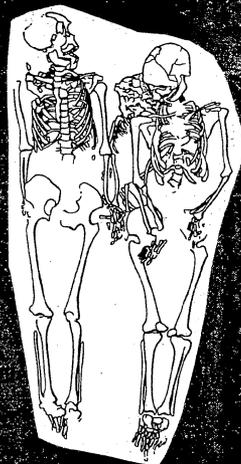
"Whether ye be a prince or a lowly street sweeper,  
sooner or later, ye dance with the reaper."



Relatives lay pairs of fresh marigold petals to help the dead find their way home in Santa Maria Ahucatlán.

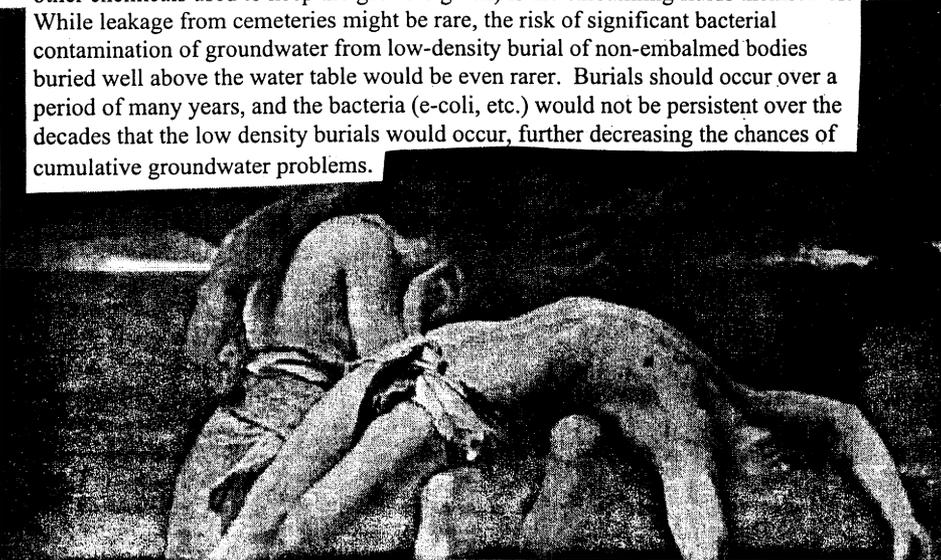
Los parientes hacen pares de flores de cempasúchil para trazar un sendero que ayude a sus difuntos encontrar el camino hacia el hogar en Santa María Ahucatlán.

**Burials from Ertebølle sites**  
*Far left*) Burial of woman with baby from Tybrind Vig. *(Left)* Triple burial of two adults and an infant from Vedbaek Grave 19. *(Right)* Double burial of old man and young woman from Skateholm I Grave 14.



In a society marked by urbanization, declining levels of religious practice, the development of capitalist modes of production and consumption, increasing class stratification, and intense political and intellectual debate about all these issues, decisions about death inevitably bore public as well as private meanings. Montaigne knew in the sixteenth century that a man's character would be read once and for all in the way he died. In the nineteenth century death still provided a final occasion for the expression of personal character, but this was now a more complex composite of religious and political loyalties, family and social position.

Actually, the greatest risk of cemeteries to water quality (other than runoff of dirt during the grading to flatten the area for mechanical mowing, and the fertilizers, and other chemicals used to keep the grounds green) is the embalming fluids themselves. While leakage from cemeteries might be rare, the risk of significant bacterial contamination of groundwater from low-density burial of non-embalmed bodies buried well above the water table would be even rarer. Burials should occur over a period of many years, and the bacteria (e-coli, etc.) would not be persistent over the decades that the low density burials would occur, further decreasing the chances of cumulative groundwater problems.



What could be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten – raw, cooked, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of these ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in a thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death. But it is not a random reaction; always it is meaningful and expressive. No one has a perfect understanding of the mystery of death. We can but recount the collective wisdoms of many cultures, the wisdoms that have been acted, sung, wailed, and danced at funerals through the ages.

—from *Celebrations of Death*, Richard Huntington



While state laws do vary, most states allow families or designated friends to pick up the body for transport to the cemetery. In fact, in most states, the funeral home does not have to be involved with the burial/service at all. Considering that most funeral homes charge a "minimum non-declinable service fee" that can run over \$1,000, some individuals might want to consider other options. Lisa Carlson's *Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love* is an excellent source for this information.

## ***Pictures and Excerpts from:***

Death and the Afterlife in Modern France – Thomas A. Kselman (Princeton University Press)

Death in America – David E. Stannard (University of Pennsylvania Press)

The Corpse A History-- Christine Quigley (McFarland & Company)

Going Into Darkness Fantastic Coffins from Africa -- Thierry Secretan (Thames and Hudson)

Grave Matters -- Nigel Barley (Henry Holt & Co.)

Cemeteries & Gravemarkers – Richard E. Meyer (UMI Research Press)

Death, Dissection and the Destitute – Ruth Richardson (Routledge & Kegan Paul)

Portraits in Life and Death – Peter Hugar (DaCapo Press)

Los Dias de Muertos – John GreenLeigh (Collins Publishers)

The Tibetan Book of the Dead – By Guru Rinpoche according to Karma Lingpa (Shambhala)

Ghosts Along the Cumberland Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills – William Lynwood Montell (University of Tennessee Press)

Celebrations of Death The Anthropology of Mortuary Rituals – Richard Huntington (Cambridge University Press)

The Hour of Our Death – Philippe Aries (Alfred A. Knopf)

The Wheel of Death A Collection of Writings from Zen Buddhist and Other Sources on Death, Rebirth, and Dying – Philip Kapleau (Harper and Row)

People of the Wetlands Bogs, Bodies, and Lake-Dwellers -- Bryony Coles (Thames and Hudson)

The Face of the Past – Paul Jordan (Universe Books)

Dealing Creatively with Death A Manual of death education and simple burial – Ernest Morgan (Celo Press)

and others...



### **The Natural Death Centre**

A non-profit project launched in Britain in 1991, with three psychotherapists as directors.

[www.naturaldeath.org.uk](http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk) email: rhino@dial.pipex.com

20 Heber Rd. London NW2 6AA, UK

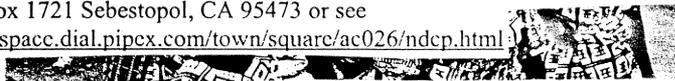
-The Natural Death Handbook, How to Organize a Woodland or Inexpensive Funeral, Creative Endings – Designer dying & celebratory funerals, Green Burial, and more...



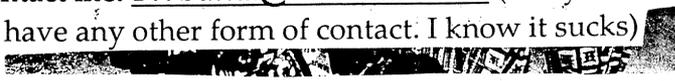
### **The Natural Death Care Project**

For info about caring for your own dead send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to P.O. Box 1721 Sebastopol, CA 95473 or see

<http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/square/ac026/ndcp.html>



**To contact me: [DIYburial@hushmail.com](mailto:DIYburial@hushmail.com) (Sorry I'm mobile and I don't have any other form of contact. I know it sucks)**

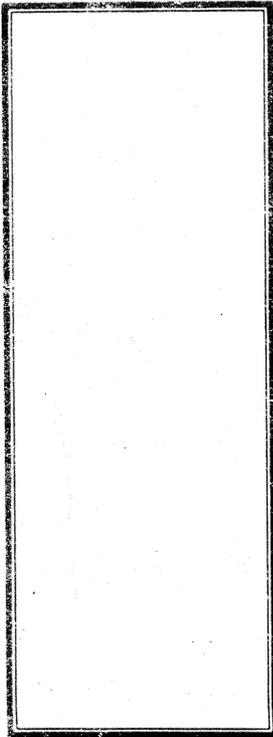
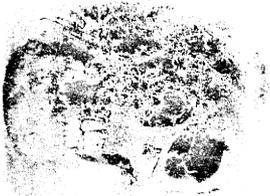


***Email me and I'll try to get you an address that you could send \$2 (per zine) for postage and copy expenses and I'll send em out to ya. You should totally just copy this zine yourself though and give it to your friends/family!***



To Our Ancestors

By India - July 2000



TO:

