

# From mummification to 'sky burials'—why we need death rituals

June 13 2016, by Jonathan Jong, Coventry University

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Traditional song and dance at a Torajan funeral. Credit: Sergey/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Few liturgical phrases from the [1662 Book of Common Prayer](#) are so familiar to so many, even those who have never darkened the doors of a church. This part of the funeral service, taken from the book of Genesis, is also reflected in what priests say when they sign the cross in ash on people's foreheads during Ash Wednesday: "You are made from dust, and to dust you shall return".

Death is central to Christianity. After all, its main symbol – the crucifix – is an instrument of torture and execution. Death also takes pride of place in the two central sacraments of the church. Baptism signifies a drowning in which one participates in the [death](#) of Jesus, as well as his resurrection. This death and resurrection are also regularly recalled in the celebration of the Eucharist (holy communion). Christians also observe special days dedicated to death, such as Good Friday and the feasts of All Souls and All Saints. Indeed, most saints' days fall on the dates of their deaths, rather than the anniversaries of their births.

From an anthropological and psychological standpoint, Christianity's apparent obsession with death is neither surprising nor special; religious traditions all over the world and across time are similarly morbid. Virtually all cultures have some sort of death ritual – varying from the simple to the extremely elaborate, the sanitised to the macabre.

The earliest evidence for human religion comes from [Upper Palaeolithic burial sites](#) dating from 50,000 to 100,000 years ago. It is difficult to know what our hominid ancestors believed, but grave goods and other similar burial practices indicate at least rudimentary afterlife beliefs. Even now, among the most common forms of religious practice is the veneration of the dead, such as in ancestor worship and devotion to saints.

Mortuary rituals are ubiquitous across cultures, but exactly how death is dressed up can differ widely. [Kalahari bushmen](#), for example, leave

corpses where they lie, then immediately abandon the area en masse, not returning for many years. This onerous move is not necessary for the sanitary disposal of corpses. But then nor for that matter are the expensive lined and cushioned mahogany or walnut caskets often used in modern Western burials.

And while Western funerals are often stoic affairs, others, such as those in many Mediterranean and Asian cultures, [involve professional mourners](#) who are paid to wail loudly. Bodies are variously entombed, buried, cremated or even [excarnated](#). The Zoroastrians used to place corpses atop specially constructed Towers of Silence for the scavenging birds. Tibetans still practice "[sky burials](#)", leaving the bodies of their loved ones exposed on hill tops.

Muslims, for example, bury the body as quickly as possible – ideally before the next sunset. In other groups, such as in [traditional Torajan society](#) in Indonesia, the funeral might only occur months or years after a person's biological death. In the meantime, the corpse is mummified to prevent putrefaction and remains at home. It is dressed up and spoken to as if it were still a person. Even after the funeral, every few years there is a *ma'nene'*, during which the corpse is exhumed and given new clothing before reburial.



Sky burial site in the Yerpa Valley, Tibet. Credit: John Hill, CC BY-SA

## The psychology of rituals

The ritualisation of death is both universal and universally varied. But why? And is there anything that ties together the human tendency to make much ado about death? Across many different [religious traditions](#), the well rehearsed answer is that we do so for the good of the dead: we venerate them and offer sacrifices to them for their benefit, to ease their passage into the afterlife. The psychologist's answer, perhaps predictably, is that we ritualise death for our own sake, to quell our own sorrows and anxieties. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that rituals in general do serve to regulate our emotional reactions.

[Experiments conducted at Harvard University](#), for example, showed that rituals – even simple rituals just invented by the researchers – reduce people's feelings of grief, including grief over the death of a loved one. These studies also revealed that rituals aid bereavement by increasing people's sense of control. That is, rituals help us to feel less helpless in the face of loss. This evidence also complements [previous findings](#) from studies that associate absence of mortuary rituals with prolonged grief.

Rituals may also serve to stave off our own anxieties concerning mortality. Certainly, [studies have shown](#) that people's behaviour becomes ritualised – more rigid and repetitive – when they are put in stressful situations, which [researchers interpret](#) as being a means of reducing anxiety. Furthermore, group rituals, particularly those involving synchronous behaviour, also [foster a sense of social cohesion](#) that can help us to feel more physically formidable: rituals bind us together, which helps us when we are feeling threatened.

Another interesting idea not yet properly tested, which has its roots in the work of Sigmund Freud, is that ritualising death helps us to deal with the feelings of guilt associated with disposing of a corpse. We need symbolic rites that help us to reconceptualise the dead bodies of loved ones, so that they cease to be people and become objects that we can therefore abandon.

In a sense, Torajan death rituals of keeping dead bodies around for years could not be more different from the Muslim or Christian traditions, where most corpses are cremated to be buried or strewn, never to be seen again. And yet, despite this wide diversity of practice, it seems our death rituals serve the same psychological functions: to make us feel less helpless in the face of our sorrow and terror.

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