

Meaning and Rituals of Death: An Insight into Selected Ethnic and Religious Communities of Bangladesh

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Abstract: Bangladesh has been a place of religious harmony for centuries. The vast displays of cultural and religious properties on show here have been shaped over the last 5,000 years, following numerous political regimes including those of the Pal (Buddhist), Sen (Hindu), Mughal (Muslim), and British (Christian). The centuries-long peaceful coexistence of different religious groups and sects has led Bangladesh to be a place of varied religious beliefs and practices, associated with the life cycle (Rights de Passage: birth, maturity and death) of people from various ethnic communities living in different geographical and ecological locations. The lives of the local people have also been intertwined with various tangible and intangible sacred cultural spaces, where people from different religions interact with each other and perform various activities related to their death. Different religious and cultural groups have different interpretations about the sacred practices (stories, rites, customs, beliefs, and rituals) associated with death and funeral. Thus, the objective of this paper is to see the variations of death and funeral-rituals and practices among a number of specific ethnic and religious communities of Bangladesh, from a broader global context and from the perspective of anthropology of death.

Keywords: Anthropology of death, beliefs, rituals, ethnic communities and Bangladesh.

Subject classification: Anthropology

1. Introduction

“Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never

send to ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” - John Donne.

The tradition of the rites of death and funerals are as old as the human race itself.

Religion has played a significant role in funeral practices throughout the history. Different religions have different beliefs and rituals related to death and to the traditions/customs for funeral and burial services (religious rites). The ceremonies for showing respect for the deceased person and the departed soul dates back to the ancient period of the history of Neanderthal man. Over the history, each society has created and practices their own form of remembrance for the dead with their own time-honored traditions, some of which are very elaborate or some with a very simple grave marker. The practice of rituals associated with death and funeral vary from religion to geographic culture in Western civilisation, and could be viewed by the "other" as being just as exotic as a death ritual deep in the jungles of Africa, in Israel, in Ireland, in Russia or in Asia. Studies show that in every culture, religion and civilisation, there is strong tradition of caring for deceased people and there exist three common themes for death and the disposition of their dead which include funerals, burials and memorials.

Religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Islamism, Judaism, and Sikhism have different beliefs, rituals and traditions associated with their death, funeral and cremation. These traditions cover funeral etiquette, disposition options, religious rites, wakes, vigils, alternative to traditional funerals and burials (cremation, burial at sea, anatomical gifts, home funerals, green funerals, Jazz funerals (in New Orleans,

Louisiana): a mixture of African spiritual practices, French martial musical traditions and uniquely African-American cultural influences, life celebrations, Hospice care (England, America, Canada and other English speaking countries etc.), as well as, mourning and grieving practices [44]. It also includes pall-bearers, eulogies, processions, obituaries and more. There are many variations in the traditional concept of what death is or what funeral (burying or burning) is and should be. Many people believe that a death is not a time of mourning and sorrow only; it is rather a time for celebration of the deceased life and his/her accomplishments.

It is observed that beliefs and rituals associated with death and funerals are varied from religion to religion, though the essence of death is more or less same in every religion [11], [12]. In many African societies, both orthodox Christians and Muslims follow very strict burial rites [10]. They are seen performing similar rituals with similar type of beliefs. In both religions, reminders of God's mercy and forgiveness to give comfort of the person are noticed when he is about to die. They may recite verses from the Bible/Qur'an, to give physical comfort and encourage the dying one to recite words of remembrance and prayer [10].

2. Anthropology of death and funerals

The anthropology of death and funerals explores how human societies around the world respond to death (end of life/ cessation

of all biological functions) and the funerals (the disposition of death: burying or burning). It is concerned with both the conceptual and organizational aspects, that is, what people believe about death and the afterlife, as well as what they actually do when faced with the crisis of death. Two main methodological approaches used in anthropology in dealing with the death and funerals are: ethnographic and the comparative.

The ethnographic approach examines how each of these cultures copes with the demise of their family members and close associates, while the comparative approach tries to make sense of the enormous cultural variations in issues such as the disposing of the corpse, the expected behavior of the bereaved, and the ongoing relations between the living and their dead [44]. Many comparative ethnographic studies have revealed that death rituals which are seen as a defining aspect of human culture are not always universal in practices. For example, the widespread practice of crying at a funeral is strongly discouraged among the Balinese. Nevertheless, anthropologists have uncovered a number of key metaphors, which help to make sense of the enormous diversity of mortuary rituals. The anthropology of death takes as its task to understand the phrase: “All humans die”, yet in every culture, each dies in their own way’ [1].

3. The concept of death in anthropology

Within Anthropology, study of death and funeral belongs to the “Anthropology of Death and Dying”, “Anthropology of Mortuary

Rituals” or “Anthropology of Ancestors” [1], [45]. The study of death ranges from classic texts to contemporary ethnographies. It ranges from the exotic mortuary cannibalism in the Amazon (Beth Conklin), head-hunting in the Philippines (Rosaldo) and “death by cop” in the United States to more familiar and contemporary concerns with nursing homes, funeral parlors, undertaking, and forensic anthropology [53]. Major works in anthropology on death ranges from the classic writings on death, loss, mourning, and remembrance by Bronislaw Malinowski, Ernest Becker, Robert J Lifton, Johannes Fabian, Sigmund Freud, Ellen Badone, Margaret Lock, Godfrey Lienhardt, Evans-Pritchard, James Frazer, Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Van Gennep, Robert Hertz, Clifford Geertz and others [14], [18], [20], [21], [26], [29], [34], [35]. Anthropology of death primarily explores the inventions and reinventions of death over time and space, the conceptualizations of death (friendly death, death as taboo, death sorcery and pollution), rituals and celebrations of death (wakes, wake games and amusements, death meals), common deaths (the good death, sudden death) and uncommon deaths (suicide, homicide, genocide, voodoo death, death by sorcery), traumatic deaths and deaths before their time. It also looks at the historical transformations of the meaning and timing of death, from the middle ages to the late modern period.

4. Studying death in anthropology

Anthropologists started paying attention to the study of death mostly from the late

nineteenth century. During this early period of study, special attention was paid to the study of “belief in spiritual beings associated with life after death and attitudes to the corpse”. Following that from the 1960s, anthropologists started giving emphasis on the study of “socially restorative functions of funeral rites and the significance of the

symbolism of death-related behavior as a cultural expression of the value system”. During the same period or afterwards, another important aspect of anthropological investigation was “the recognition and analysis of the ambivalence of the living toward the dead, involving the theme of transition and the concept of liminality”.

Table 1: Major Schools of Thought in Death Study

Phase	School	Thinkers/ Theorists	Deals with	Studied in
Classical	Evolutionary School	Tylor	Origin of religion, theories of animism, meaning of soul, notion of spirit and supreme being [47], [49]	Melanesia, Polynesia, New Guinea, India, Asia, Africa, Southern, Eastern and Central Africa.
		Frazer	Universality of the fear of the corpse, the belief in the soul and the afterlife [19]	
		Bachofen	The way sexuality and fertility dominated the symbolism of funeral, connections between sexuality and death in mortuary rituals [2], [3]	
	Sociological School	Durkheim	Organizational aspects of death in society, religion and suicide [15], [16]	African Societies
		Hertz	Burial ritual, process of decomposition, death as a social event, afterlife and rebirth [29]	

Modern/ Contemporary phase and Late- modern and Post- modern	Functionalist School	Malinowski	Mortality rite and ceremonies of death [36], [38]	Trobri and Islands
		Radcliffe Brown	Death as partial destruction of social cohesion, rituals expression of sentiments and emotion [43]	Andaman, Australia and Africa
	Rite de Passage School	Van Gennep	The entire life-cycle of an individual, from birth to childhood to old age to death itself, for both men and women [22]	
		Goody	Conceptual and organizational aspects of death [23], [24]	
		Bloch & Parry	Death and the regeneration of life, horror of the pollution of decomposition of the body [6], [7].	Merina of Madagascar
		Woodburn	Conceptualizing and ritualizing death by simple societies, treatment and disposal of the body [4].	Four African hunting and gathering societies (Kung and Pygmies)
		Danforth	Structural analysis of "death as transition," demonstrating parallelisms between weddings and death ritual. Particularly the discussion of funeral laments [9].	Greece
		Lifton	Death imagery, sense of immortality, cultural orientations to death, symbolic immortality [34].	

Goody	Discussed about mortuary customs and mortuary practices. Goody tried to build a natural social bridge between life and death and shows the passage of a human being from the land of the living to the land of the dead [23], [24].	Among the LaDagaa, a society with dual descent.
Huntington & Metcalf (Celebrations of Death)	Renewed attention to the symbolic importance of the corpse and revalidation of key cultural values throughout the funeral process [32], [39], [40].	American funerals
Clifford Geertz The Religion of Java (1960)/ "Religion as a Cultural System"	Developed a social scientific approach for studying religion. Discussed about "symbol", "world view" and "ethos" of religion associated with the death and funerals. Geertz tried to show the intricacy and depth of Javanese spiritual life and the problems of political and social integration reflected in the religion. It also deals with the beliefs and attitudes concerning death [26], [27].	Worked in Indonesia among Santri, Abangan and Priyayi communities

Source: Author, 2016 taken from different sources.

Cultural implications of death phenomenon have not only been studied by anthropologists, but also by sociologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and psycho-historians. But the later professionals are obviously more prolific than the anthropologists in their reactions to the moral and psycho-cultural implication of the scientific and technological revolution characterizing modern society. The whole period of study of death can be divided into two major phases in terms of school of thoughts. They are: classical and contemporary phases. The “classical phase” has four major schools: evolutionary (Tylor, Frazer, Bachofen, Bendann), sociological (Durkheim and Hertz), functionalist (Malinowski, Radcliffe Brown) and rites de passage (Van Gennep) [13], [19], [21], [31], [37], [42], [48]. Thinkers of the contemporary phase include: Bloch, Parry, Woodburn, Danforth, Lifton, Godfrey, Goody, Huntington, Glasser, Strauss, Metcalf and others (See, Table 1).

In anthropology, the study of death rituals provides a unique opportunity for studying the core values of any culture. The functionalist perspective emphasized the problem of death for society, and especially the issues of inheritance, redistribution of rights, and statuses, as well as the reintegration of mourners into day-to-day life. Many of the anthropologists now agree that there is a great need for more cross-cultural studies on death and dying to investigate cross-cultural differences and to see how various modern institutions such as hospitals, old people's homes, hospices, or their equivalent handle death [25]. In general, it is important to understand how the manner of dying affects variation in grief and mourning custom whether in war, or by accident,

homicide, suicide, or after a long or sudden illness with different ‘dying trajectories.

5. Death as a journey or rite of passage: myth about death

Rites of passage play a central role in the socialization process in different societies demarking the different stages of an individual's life cycle. Most cultures conceptualize death as a transition, or rite of passage and such transition is seen as a journey to an ultimate destination that may culminate in rebirth, ancestral abode, reunion with nature or divinity, or indeed total oblivion [41]. Death rituals, like all rites of passage, have a three-part structure, first delineated by Van Gennep: separation, liminality, and reincorporation [32]. The spirits of dead people must be separated from their social roles as members in the community of the living and enter an undefined “in-between” state, finally being reincorporated into a new status as the end of the “journey.”

Different societies present different types of myths about the origin of death [8]. The myths about death in African societies are different from the myths of many Asian societies (Indonesia, Philippines, South Korea, Mongolia, Tibet and others). For example, there are no myths in Africa though, about how death might be overcome and removed from the world. However, death is thought to have originated, every time a person dies, his or her death is due to a cause. The cause of death is significant. Death can be caused by lightening, trees, poison, drowning,

warfare, and various forms of accidents. When death is caused by sickness, there are two broad types: normal and unclean. The cause of death determines the rites and rituals that are to be performed. In many cultures, death is considered as a journey to the ancestral world [50]. Those undertaking that crucial journey must be prepared for it. This explains why often a dead person will be buried with different objects to assist them, such as weapons, tools, food, drink, and even money to be presented as a gift to the ancestral spirits. Almost in every culture, before being buried, the corpse must be prepared by washing, shaving and cutting the fingernails. The body may be dressed as well. In some communities, the body is buried within the compound; in others, far enough away. The funeral rules also differ between communities. In some societies, there are some strict prescriptions on how a deceased person should be handled [33].

6. Death and funeral rituals: Identity, status and the politics

In different societies and cultures, people have different beliefs and rituals related to death. In many cultures, death rituals stand at the center of their social life. There are some cultures, where people use expensive and elaborate mortuary ritual as a way of demonstrating their status and power. Such expenses of these societies sometimes become enormous financial burden for them. In some cultures, the atmosphere of death is not always sad or somber, but may even take on a festive atmosphere so that

one may speak of “celebrations of death” [32]. In most cultures, the impact of the death is related directly to the social status of the deceased. For example, in American culture, people spend a smaller proportion of their resources on funerals, while the Berawan or the Malagary spend a lot for their death rituals.

Deaths of peoples with different age, sex and position also have different impacts on different cultures. The seminal work of the great French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1995) shows how death and mourning rituals in different cultures can help to reinforce the cohesiveness and core values of the social group [14], [17]. Walter (1994) shows how some death of the most fearful kind can draw people together’ [52]. In some cultures, death is seen as particularly disruptive when it strikes persons who are most relevant for the functional and moral activities of the social order. The dramatic sudden death of high-profile individuals (e.g., President Kennedy, Princess Diana) may temporarily recreate the solidarity of an “imagined community” of mourners who vicariously participate in traditional ceremonies via television and the Internet. In some cultures, the death of a spouse often leads to a long period of taboos and restricted activity, while the death of a stranger, slave or child goes almost unnoticed or arises no emotion, no occasion and ritual’ [29, p.76]. In regions of high mortality, the death of an infant who is not yet considered a “social person” may have no formal ritual or mourning [28]. Bereaved parents often experience their loss privately, without ceremony, what has been called “death without weeping” [46]. The simple funerals

of some hunter-gatherers, such as the Baka Pygmies of the Central African rain forest, are notable exceptions to the widespread pattern of elaborate and complex mortuary rituals [6]. Thus, a central task for both sociologists and anthropologists is to explore how death in one hand can threaten the basis of society or, on the other hand can enhance its solidarity. According to Blauner, “the impact of mortality is very much dependent on the age and social situation of those who die. The extent of the social vacuum created as a consequence of death thus depends upon how deeply the deceased has been engaged in the activities of the family and society” [51, pp.378-394]. In modern society, death is characteristically a phenomenon of the old who have retired from work, have completed parental tasks, and are living in relative isolation. Their death, therefore, does not interrupt the business of life. In primitive society, relatively more people die in the middle years, necessitating the reallocation of socially essential roles and rights in an institutionalized manner.

Different societies have different facets for collectively dealing with death: the funeral, the memorial, and the wake. In some societies, funeral is often religious in nature, where prayers are uttered and hymns are sung, and the dead body is buried or ashes entombed. The memorial is reflective, where the dead person's family, friends, and associates (may be enemies) come together to say prayers, recall experiences with the deceased, and generally speak well of the person who is gone. In some memorials, living people celebrate the life of the dead through party by getting drunk and having fun.

7. Beliefs and rituals associated with death: The case of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh

Bangladesh as a country of cultural, ethnic, religious and language diversities, has about 160 million people with more than 40 ethnic communities belonging to Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, animism and tribal believe systems. Islam is the official religion of Bangladesh and is practiced by some 88-90% percent of the country's inhabitants. The second largest religious group is the Hindu (9-12%) who belongs to different caste groups (*Brahman, Khatrya, Baishya, and Sudra*). Followed by Hindu, other religious groups are Buddhists (making up of 0.5-1%) the followers of the Theravada school of Buddhism and mostly reside in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and the Christians who makes up another 0.5-1% of Bangladesh's population and mostly belong to the Roman Catholic Church. Another prominent church is the Church of Bangladesh, a united church formed by several protestant churches. Beside these, there is a small group of Animists, who makes up to 0.1%.

The majority of the Muslim populations of this country are the *Sunni*, whilst small groups are - *Shia*, and *Ahmadiyya*. The small ethnic communities (indigenous/ adivasi/ tribal) who constitute about 1 per cent of its total population belong to different religions and comprise a very important part of the country's religious and cultural heritage. Most of these communities (ethnic minorities) live in the greater Rajshahi, Chittagong, Sylhet and Mymensingh region. A few live in some other districts of Bangladesh. In terms of

settlements/locations, ethnic communities of Bangladesh are divided broadly into two groups: one is called hilly, *pahari* or *jhumma* people (ethnic communities of the hill areas), while the other is known as ethnic communities of plains or *somotoler nri-gusthi*. The ethnic communities in the Chittagong Hills have formed their own religion, a blending of Christianity, Buddhism, *Sanatani Dharma*, and tribal² rituals.

It is important to mention that for most of the ethnic communities, nature is considered

as focus of their religious and sacred practices. The world view of the most of the ethnic communities are usually based on nature, which include the worship of forest (trees), animals, water, sun, moon and others. The traditional religion - (*Sanatani Dharma*) of many of the ethnic communities is based on this nature worship. A majority of the ethnic communities of Bangladesh have been practicing this nature worship even after converting to Hinduism, Buddhism or even Christianity.

Table 2: Beliefs, Rituals and Practices Associated with Death in Some Selected Ethnic Communities

Name of Communities	Present Religion (Past religion)	Idea about death	Main Death Ritual	Ritual related to deceased body	Main festival/ ritual
Santals	Christianity (Animism based on spirit/ Hinduism)	The deceased person will go to heaven in the afterlife	Celebrates (<i>Kutum</i>) <i>Buchi Shime</i> (chicken Festival) and chants mantra in the deceased name on the eighth day of his/her death	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Vandem</i>
Munda	Sanatan/ Converted Christian (Sarnaism: folk form of Hinduism)	Dead person needs money to cross different parts of afterlife.	Eldest son of the deceased performs <i>Ashchua</i> ritual, where he shaves off his hair and keeps distance from other people	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Kankathi</i>
Lahara	Hinduism	Cremation provides dead person with full blessing	Performs <i>Hobisha</i> for first 13 days	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Kathura</i> (after 13 days)
Bhumijo	Sanatan/	In cases of	Collects the	Cremated/	<i>Shraddoho</i>

	Hinduism	abnormal deaths, they burn the dead body	unburned body parts in a bamboo tube and buries it under a <i>Tulsi</i> tree	Buried	
Mahali	Hindu/Christian	Rituals help the spirit in finding peace.	Mix <i>Sindoor</i> and oil in pond water to see if the death was normal	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Shraddoho</i>
Bawm	Converted Christian (Animism based on spirit)	A person's spirit is reincarnated after death	Dancing, animal sacrifices and a feast called <i>Mithikat</i>	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Mithikat/ Cherlum</i>
Lushai	Converted Christian	Human spirit walks around the earth for three months	Sets the dead body in the yard and puts food in front of it	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Cherlum</i> (dance party)
Pankhua	Converted Christian (Animistic)	Believes everything has a spirit and everything is interconnected	<i>Lang-der-Kai</i> dance	Buried	<i>Parlum</i> (flower dance party)
Tripura	Hindu	Funeral has to be held at the place of death and it helps the spirit to find its original village	Sacrifices a cock and place it at the dead person's feet with some rice	Cremated	<i>Lang Der Khai</i>
Chamka	Buddhism (Animistic)	Death rituals are important to find peace in afterlife	rotates the dead body around the pyre and placing money on the body to use in the afterlife	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Bujhuri</i>
Marma	Buddhism (Animistic)	Death is of two kinds: normal and abnormal	Sprinkles holy water on the dead body and place a jar of water at deceased's head.	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Soing dance</i> (debate)
Tanchanga	Buddhism (Animistic)	Rituals are performed to	keeps the body in <i>ShamaianGhar</i> (a	Cremated	<i>Cheng-gra</i>

		break off connection with the dead person.	temporary chamber made of bamboo and cloth) for 1 or 2 days		
Mru (Matrilineal)	Buddhism (Animistic)	Everyone goes to heaven; evil spirits block their way	Matrilineal society, so maternal uncles have to identify the body before burning	Cremated	<i>Lulukuim</i>
Khasi	Christian Sangsarek	Spirits need material means in the afterlife	Sacrifices a cock for the dead person and an additional cow for women	Cremated	
Patra	Hinduism/ Islamism	Making fire on the tomb makes the dead person believe his/her house is on fire	Narrates a verse while building the coffin, take <i>Anung Buk</i> (rice) to the cemetery and make fire on the tomb	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Dhoshangk, Shraddoh</i> on the 11 th day
Manipuri/ Moitai	Hindu				<i>Shraddho/ Sorad</i> (11 th Day)
Kharia	Converted Christian (Hindu/ Shangshare k religion)	Burns deceased's body, who died from disease	Eldest son throws soil on the grave first, then everyone else follows	Cremated/ Buried	Tree Worshiping
Koch	Hindu	Ancestor's spirits welcome new spirits in the afterlife	Chants <i>Horibol</i> on their way to cemetery and performs <i>Ashoucha</i> (profanity) for 13days	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Shraddoh</i>
Garos (Matrilineal)	Converted Christian (Animism/ Sangsarek)	Believes in reincarnation and resurrection of human spirits	Performs <i>Mimankham</i>	Cremated/ Buried	<i>Mimangoyatta</i>

Source: Saifur Rashid, 2015.

Case 1: Santal (Christian/ Sanatani, approx. 200,000 in number)

When someone dies in the Santal community, the news is first given to the local boatman or *Haram*. The boatman, then, spread the news around with the help of an informer locally known as Goddeth. Upon hearing the news, important villagers come to the deceased's home and organise to notify his or her relatives.

The general custom for Santals is to burn the deceased's body. But, now a day, Santals bury the body because of the scarcity and high cost of wood. Santal's funeral ritual begins by washing the dead body and then covering it with a white sheet. Then, the relatives of the dead person soak, as much money they can afford, in oil mixed with turmeric; and they tie those with the white sheet. They believe that the deceased person will go to heaven in the afterlife and will need these things. Santals use a bamboo made platform to carry the dead body in the burial ground and throw popped rice along the way to the burial ground.

The Santals celebrate (Kutum) *Buchi Shime* (Chicken festival) and chant mantra in the deceased name on the eighth day of his/her death. This proves that Santals believe in the afterlife. At present, Santals also hold a new celebration in the deceased's name called *Vandan*. Here, the family of the dead person feed others in the name of the dead. This celebration can be held after 6 months or even after 10 years following the event of death. But, it is mandatory to be done. Otherwise, the deceased won't find peace in the afterlife.

Case 2: Bhumij (Sanatani/Nature Worship/ Hinduism, 15,000 approx. in number)

Bhumij people generally burn the dead body. According to Bhumij custom, when someone dies, they wash the dead body first. Then, they take the body to the cemetery while singing hymns together. The eldest son of the deceased touches fire on his/her face. A Brahman priest helps in performing the burning ritual. When the body is burnt, they collect the unburned body parts of the dead person and his/ her family members quickly put the body parts in a bamboo tube and bury it under a Tulsi (a sacred tree in Hindu religion) tree.

According to Bhumij custom, the unburned body parts are required to be thrown in the Ganga River. But that is not always immediately possible. So, the family members temporarily bury the remains under a Tulsi tree. Families, which will never be able to toss the remains in the Ganga River, throw the remains in any river or deposit them on the Chandranath hill in Chittagong.

The family and close relatives of the deceased person continue their mourning for 11 days. During this period, they have to stay barefooted and they can only take seat on a wooden base. They, also, have to sleep on the floor and have to eat food, prepared in their own home, which are cooked without any spices or onion or garlic. This food is known as *Habishanna*.

Although traditionally Bhumij people burn their dead, they bury dead children under the age of 6 months. Now a day, they are following the custom of burying the dead people of their community. But in cases of abnormal deaths, they still burn the body.

Case 3: Munda (Animistic/ Sanatani/ Christianity, 90,000 approx. in number)

Munda people both bury and burn their dead. But, now a day, they prefer burying the dead body because they can't afford the cost of burning the body. They call their burial grounds Samman. Immediately after the death of a person, they carry the dead body out of the house. They wash the dead body with soap and then cover it with a white cloth. Then, they lay the body on a bamboo made carrier and wrap the body with a mat. They call this process giving Thir. Afterwards, they respectfully carry the body to the burial ground. They place some coins with the dead body, as they think this will come in handy when the dead person needs to cross different ports of afterlife.

Munda people deliver food for the dead person till seven days after death. Also, the eldest son of the dead person is the first one to lay soil on the grave. He has to lay the soil from behind and needs to keep his back on the grave. Then, everyone else lays soil on the grave. Members of the deceased's family do not cook anything on that day and they are forbidden to eat anything (especially rice and water). The eldest son of the deceased has to perform a ritual called Ashchua. He has to shave off his hair and keep his distance from other people. He also has to eat Atap rice. After eight days a program, which Mundas refer to as Kankathi, is held where the deceased family feeds their neighbors and relatives. Within 1 to 3 years of a person's death, his/her family arranges a feast. On this day, they dig a hole on their yard and sacrifice a black cock upon the hole. They have to be very careful not to spill any blood outside the hole. Then, they feed that cock meat to everyone with rice. Sometime, they feed

Polau rice (scented) to the guests depending on the family's economic ability.

Case 4: Kshatriyas (A caste in Hinduism)

According to Kshatriyas, the cremation takes place within 24 hours after death. The body of the dead person has to be washed by family members and closed friends while the head of the dead body should be faced southward. A lighted oil lamp and a picture (if possible) of the deceased's favorite deity need to be kept in front of the deceased's head. Traditionally, the body is washed with water in a mixture of milk, ghee (clarified butter), yogurt and honey. Mantras should be recited during washing. After the body is cleaned properly, the big toes should be tied together, the hands should be placed palm-to-palm in a position of prayer, and the body should be shrouded in a plain white clothes.

Before cremation, "Vibuti" (ash) or "chandana" (sandalwood) is needed to be applied to the forehead of a man, and turmeric should be applied to the forehead of a woman. A mala (garland of flowers) is placed around the neck, and holy herbs should be placed in the casket. Mantras are chanted to pacify and to purify the soul. After that, "Pinda" (rice balls) are placed near the casket of the dead. Then the casket is removed for cremation. Traditionally, all Hindus except babies, children, and saints are cremated.

After the cremation, the Korta/Kormodhari (first son, husband or senior one) returns to the crematory and collects the ashes. Traditionally, the ashes should be immersed in water. The Korta has to take vegetables with meals and no meats/ fishes are allowed; which is for transforming to

regular life from mourning in a gradual process and also a sign of sacrifice for the dead soul's peace. A ritual ceremony is held on the third, fifth, seventh, or ninth day. During the time after death, the family of the deceased will stay at home and receive visitors, though mourning rituals may differ depending on the community and it occurs for 12 days. Throughout the period of mourning, the rite of "preta-karma" is performed. A plate of the food is placed in front of the deceased's photo. Afterward, the plate is taken outside to a vacant place. On the 13th day, the home is cleaned and Shraddho takes place. People have to taste Amish food (meats or fishes). Visitors are expected to bring fruits and sweets.

Case 5: Death Rituals of Ahmadiyya Muslim Community (a small sect of Muslim Community)

In Ahmadiyya community, the corpse is washed to cleanse physically, as a part of the Islamic *Sharia*. This should occur as soon as possible after death, preferably within hours. The "washers" are commonly adult members of the immediate family and of the same gender as the deceased. In the case of violent death, or accident where the deceased has suffered trauma or mutilation, morgue facilities mend the body and wrap it in a shroud to minimize fluid leakage prior to surrendering it to mourners for washing.

The corpse is wrapped in a simple plain cloth (the kafan). This is done to respect the dignity and privacy of the deceased with the family present. Men use only three pieces of cloth and women five pieces of cloth to serve as the shroud. The deceased may be kept in this state for several hours, allowing

well-wishers to pass on their respects and condolences. The Ahmadi Muslims of the community gather to offer their collective prayers for the forgiveness of the dead. This prayer has been generally termed as the Salat al-Janaja (Janaja prayer). In some circumstances, the prayer can be performed without keeping the corpse in front of the prayer hall. This is known as "Gayebana Janaja". Both male and female members of Ahmadiyya Muslim community can take part in "Janaja Prayer".

The deceased is then taken for burial (al-Dafin). The grave should be aligned perpendicular to the Qibla (i.e. Mecca). The body is placed in the grave without a casket, lying on its right side, and facing the Qibla. Grave markers should be raised only up to a maximum of 30cm (12 in) above the ground. Thus Grave markers are simple, because outwardly lavish displays are discouraged in Islam. Many times graves may even be unmarked, or marked only with a simple wreath. However, it is becoming more common for family members to erect grave monuments.

The orthodoxy expects those present to symbolically pour three handfuls of soil into the grave while reciting a Quranic verse in Arabic meaning "We created you from it, and return you into it, and from it We will raise you a second time". The corpse is then fully buried by the gravediggers, who may stamp or pat down the grave to shape. After the burial, the gathered people pay their respects to the dead, collectively pray for the forgiveness of the dead. This collective prayer is the last formal collective prayer for the dead. Unlike Sunni Muslim in Bangladesh,

Ahmadi Muslims do not perform *Chollisha* (An event for collective praying of the deceased after forty days of death). Grief at the death of a beloved person is normal, and weeping for the dead (by males or females) is perfectly acceptable in Islam. But Ahmadi Muslims discourage complaint, moaning and loud wailing for dead person.

8. Conclusion

It is implied from the above discussion that the study of the issues pertaining life and death are very much linked with various cultural, medical, religious, political, economic, and forensic anthropological approaches. To grasp the dynamics of changes in rituals and practices related to life and death, we should study and examine the complexity of such issues in different societies. In context of the present globalised society, anthropologists should go for more intensive study to explore the meaning and essence of life and death in different cultures and societies from both a classic and contemporary anthropological perspective. Undertaking more ethnographic and cross-cultural studies with narrative analysis in the Asia Pacific region will reveal more information regarding the changing perception of death and funeral practices among different religious and cultural groups.

Note

² The words “tribal” “ethnic”, “indigenous”, and “adivasi” are used as synonyms.

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