

Rituals of Grief Across Cultures

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ABSTRACT

Grief, though a universal human experience, is profoundly shaped by cultural beliefs, values, and traditions. This paper explores the diverse rituals surrounding death and mourning across global cultures, focusing on non-Western practices alongside Western, Eastern, Indigenous, African, and Latin American traditions. Through comparative analysis, it examines how rituals serve psychological, social, and spiritual purposes for the bereaved, reshaping the relationship between the living and the deceased. Special attention is given to the role of collective grief, gendered expressions of sorrow, and the interplay between diaspora and tradition. It also considers how modern disruptions, such as those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, have altered longstanding grief practices. Ultimately, this study highlights the role of rituals as both personal coping mechanisms and vital community processes that reinforce continuity, identity, and healing in the face of loss.

Keywords: Grief rituals, cultural mourning, bereavement, cross-cultural traditions, communal grieving, ancestral reverence, death rites.

INTRODUCTION

Grief is a universal experience, but societies have unique methods for coping with loss. Non-Western cultures often engage in elaborate rituals. Some create monuments to memorialize loved ones, while others observe temporary monastic ordination. Public memorial events, like Mexico's Día de los Muertos and the Chinese Ghost Festival, offer comfort during difficult times. Physical objects can serve as tangible symbols of care and remembrance. In cases of loss from violence or disaster, these items may represent those who cannot be present. Rituals can reshape relationships with the deceased, enhancing their significance through engagement. This re-presentation shifts focus from loss towards presence, affecting how grief is experienced. Family dynamics and power relations shape individual grief and memorial practices, with different family members—parents, siblings, partners—having varying interests. Collective mourning events can unify families and outsiders. Women are often more visible in expressing grief. Memorialization practices can differ significantly among families, even those living close by, while diasporic communities may celebrate the deceased and recall fond memories, often overlooking other grievances [1, 2].

The Concept of Grief

Grief is an incredibly profound mental distress that often follows any significant loss, particularly through death, and it is characterized by deep sorrow and painful regret that can profoundly alter an individual's emotional landscape. While it is indeed a universal response to loss, the way grief is expressed and experienced can be heavily influenced by various sociocultural factors unique to each individual or community. Grieving can manifest in both public and private spaces and can be seen as normative or, conversely, excessive. This variability in grieving practices may sometimes lead to confusion, particularly as the nature of grief remains mostly consistent across different cultures, despite the varied ways in which people express it. Grief typically arises from losing someone dear and cherished, but it can also result from other significant and impactful losses. These may include loss associated with employment, health, or the end of valued relationships that once provided comfort and meaning. In this broader context, grief will particularly focus on bereavement, which encompasses a wide array of emotional responses. This concept includes feelings of regret for unrealized futures and aspirations, deep remorse for wrongful actions taken or not taken, and sorrow over personal mishaps that may have led to loss. It also includes contrition for broader losses that negatively affect others, highlighting the interconnected nature of human relationships and the collective experience of grief [3, 4].

Cultural Perspectives on Grief

Grief is a universal response to loss, particularly distressing when it involves the death of a family member, especially a child, emphasizing life's fragility. It encompasses emotional, cognitive, physical, and social aspects, shaped by both the deceased and the bereaved. Bereaved children might feel anger towards the deceased, and an estimated 7% to 10% of children in the US experience the death of a parent or sibling. Although most grief studies are rooted in Western contexts, grief is universally experienced and expressed, influenced by local cultural practices. In Asian cultures, such as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese, grief is perceived as profoundly sad and traditionally displayed through specific mourning practices, like wearing special clothing. Japanese culture includes rituals that guide acceptance of death, with families often grieving intensely until memorial services facilitate social acceptance. Western acculturation may disrupt traditional grieving methods, leading to a mix of practices. This study seeks to explore grief across cultures by analyzing specific rituals following a child's death. Grief, a complex process involving various dimensions, affects children differently than adults, often surfacing later. The loss of a child presents a particularly severe crisis, resulting in a rich variety of grieving experiences [5, 6].

Rituals in Western Cultures

Rituals to commemorate the deceased may play a role in the grieving process. In Western cultures, mourning traditions surrounding the death of a family member or a close friend typically include funeral services and a burial. However, there is also a celebration of the now-deceased's life in the days or weeks surrounding the burial, usually referred to as a 'wake'. Such wake events can vary dramatically in the role ritual plays and the types of activities involved. Western cultural funerals may take place in a variety of locales, including funeral homes, places of worship, and cemeteries. It is common for the deceased's family and friends to wear formal attire to these events during the viewing hours leading up to the service, where tributes may vary in format, from personal recollections to slideshows. Typically, prints of special photographs and a guest book for those attending to sign that will be kept by the biers are created to commemorate the life of the deceased. Following the casket to the burial site is common; burial is more common than cremation in Western cultures, but cremation does occur. After the funeral, friends and family may gather at a more casual venue, where special dishes may be shared in honor of the deceased. Ranging from the somber to the vividly humorous, toasts may be made in recognition of the deceased's achievements, processing their legacy, both good and bad. Children may take part in special activities commemorating the deceased. Familial and cultural traditions uniquely shape the form that mourning rituals take in Western cultures. Consistent with much of the world, following the death of a loved one, friends and family often gather to share memories, re-establish social bonds, facilitate grieving, and help transition to a world in which the deceased is absent [7, 8].

Rituals In Eastern Cultures

Religious activities following death in Eastern cultures range from the traditional and prescribed to the personal and idiosyncratic. Though these cultures have different religions, burial grounds and services related to the death and burial of a loved one are similarly well defined. Deceased family members are interred in cemeteries, their graveside services marked by a prescribed set of ritual prayers, readings, and traditions, with the completion of burial services led by established figures such as priests or monks. Funeral homes often dominate the environment in which these rituals occur. However, this planning often disrupts the opportunity for the rituals mentioned earlier. Instead, the bereaved family members are often required to perfect the rituals, such as by indefinitely rescheduling services because of issues with the casket or tombstone. Additionally, interactions with funeral home representatives often take precedence over religious rituals, frustrating efforts to incorporate religious observance. Simple expressions of grief in the form of postcard condolences or phone calls of sympathy lack the direction and ritualism found in traditions associated with death in Eastern societies. Invitees observing the family's grief do not know how to respond and often resort to deferential silence or insincere comments wishing time would heal the grief. Grief rituals that invite participation with outward expressions lacking in depth can leave the bereaved feeling alone with their pain. Non-observance on the part of invitees may be construed as dismissiveness of the deceased or the family's grief [9, 10].

Indigenous Grief Rituals

Rituals and practices of grief surrounding death vary significantly across societies and have been examined from a biopsychosocial perspective. Experiences of mourning and bereavement differ by culture, influencing how bereaved individuals respond to loss. Current reports capture only a fraction of the cultural diversity present globally, with many countries unrepresented. Grief rituals are shaped by familial and religious beliefs. A comprehensive overview emerged from a report prepared by representatives from 14 countries and cultural groups, highlighting local practices concerning

bereavement. The influence of a country's background plays a crucial role in shaping beliefs and practices. While some aspects of grief are universally recognized, others develop locally, influenced by climatic conditions, life experiences, and historical contexts. For example, Mexican rituals are heavily affected by kinship structures, with maternal kin performing most rituals, particularly among Mexican Americans in Southern California. Following a child's death, mothers often wrestle with guilt, leading to prolonged grief. Latino children are encouraged to partake in burial rituals, balancing collectivistic and individualistic grieving norms. In Jewish Brazilian communities, the terminology used can significantly impact grieving children, potentially causing harm or influencing time perceptions in grief, as the expectations around the mourning process can differ markedly. Grief dynamics can provoke tears and feelings of despair over time [11, 12].

African Grief Rituals

According to the African conception of death, it is seen as a transition into another state of being and grades of existence. Traditional Africans believe that human beings exist in different states of being, and these levels are temporally and spatially delimited. Death implies the beginning of another form of human existence, in a spiritual dimension. Thus, it is a change or transition of being, not an end to life. Soon after the arrival of the dead body, various rituals take place in preparation for the grave. These rituals include fetching water and/or mealie meal, digging the grave, slaughtering animals, and preparing food. These rituals serve several functions, including reinforcing family and tribal alliances and proclaiming the community's status. When the dead body arrives at the grave, the community engages in prayers and chants, followed by silence. The family places a stick with green leaves on top of the grave, and other mourners may toss soil on the grave. Similar rituals take place after the burial, providing more time for communication with the living dead. In addition, interim rituals, such as washing the body with water and mealie meal, take place after the burial. The family of the deceased will remain ritually impure for a certain number of days, during which a widow wears black clothes. Her hair and nails are also clipped, and she may butcher a fowl or goat and prepare food for the mourning period. These rituals serve to cleanse the family of the dead and reconstitute them as a community. In addition, ancestor reverence becomes more prominent years after the person's death and is increasingly elaborate over time. These include returning to the grave for communication with the deceased, offering prayer, and planting new plants or trees in the path of deer or cattle. These rituals serve various functions, from reminders of the temporal limitations of life to questions and answers about the community's origins, migration, triumphs, riches, and disasters. Dressing in white and/or colorful clothing symbolizes joy in remembering the deceased and celebrating their life. Feeding the ancestors is also an essential aspect, especially on celebratory occasions such as weddings and births [13, 14].

Latin American Grief Rituals

Various cultures across Latin America have different beliefs and practices regarding funerals and mourning periods. Generally, it is believed that funerals are held too soon after death (a day, for example), as the deceased may be held by relatives in the home for longer periods. However, once rituals are begun (typically for sudden deaths) they progress quickly down to burial. After varied preparations, the burial (glorioso) is a communal affair, with participation from a variety of community members. In addition to the burial celebration itself, many areas have different rituals to be performed afterward, ranging from the simple to extravagantly expensive. People from different areas of Latin America may participate in similar formal funerals and mourning rituals, however, many differences exist in details. Latin American countries have in common respect for the dead, with beliefs about the maintenance of a relationship after death, as well as practices such as elaborate funerals, fasts, and rituals. In many cases, the funeral is the social event of the year. Access to a funeral has the cultural connotation of having a relationship with the deceased and is an important manifestation of kinship relations. Lamenting is a culturally and emotionally acceptable stress for many mourning individuals. In addition to the formal post-funeral period of mourning, over long periods individuals continue with more informal patterns of regret and kinship maintenance [15, 16].

The Role of Community in Grieving

The role of community members and the community greatly influences how grief is expressed and processed. Culture dictates individual reactions to grief, often through societal lenses. In traditional African communities, grief is communal and involves performing various cultural rituals that provide structure and meaning to mourning. These well-established rites are duties undertaken by relatives, friends, and the broader community familiar with the bereaved. The rituals hold significant meaning for those who are grieving, acting as cues that help alleviate grief in a socially supported context. Family members, including children and spouses of the deceased, play critical roles in carrying out these rites,

which have evolved over generations to mitigate grief and maintain connections between the bereaved, the deceased, and the community. Community members gather at the deceased's home shortly after death, while mourners from neighboring communities arrive the day before the burial. Defined roles within the bereaved family assist individuals, and the presence of community members at the burial signifies shared identity and solidarity among the bereaved. Their attendance not only solemnizes the occasion but also reinforces social connections and boundaries regarding mortality. This collective gathering serves as a reminder for grief, reflection, and the process of dying, potentially easing the emotional pain of grieving individuals. Being accompanied by others during this time provides culturally appropriate support and has healing effects on those mourning their loss [17, 18].

Psychological Aspects of Grief Rituals

Grief poses a significant challenge for those mourning a loss, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional mourning practices and necessitated new rituals. This text explores global grief rituals, their meanings, and their role in the grieving process. Rituals unite communities, serving as symbolic acts that individuals perform to honor the deceased. Grief, whether collective or individual, necessitates expression through these rituals—often funerals—enabling families and communities to communicate sorrow, share knowledge, and reaffirm moral values. They establish order, predictability, and emotional release, supporting the bereaved in transitioning to a new existence. The presence of ghosts during mourning signifies failed rituals and their ramifications. The pandemic disrupted typical grieving, with public illnesses and funerals being shared on social media, rendering established coping mechanisms unviable. Locked doors eliminated community, leading to chaos rather than healing. Funerals shifted to online platforms with limited attendees, transforming comforting rituals into deeper losses. Such profound grief becomes political, demanding reflection on life. Collective grief transcends personal sorrow, potentially calling for societal empathy or escalating into social disarray [19, 20].

Modern Adaptations of Grief Rituals

There are few circumstances in life that shake the fabric of our being as much as the death of a loved one. For people, this usually has a profound impact on their well-being, and the bereaved are at risk for adverse health outcomes, including high levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms, complicated grief, and an increased risk of morbidity and mortality. However, variation in mourning when there is a death of a loved one is culturally regulated. The social context of bereavement, the rituals surrounding this death, and the process of grief become the prism through which people perceive their world after the loss. Rituals following the death of a loved one serve an important function for individuals, families, and cultures in times of mourning. They also help people cope with the loss and process feelings of grief. These behaviors are said to have a healing function, promote remembrance, and are associated with fewer depressive symptoms. Rituals at death are neither purely cultural nor emotionally neutral. They will only improve the bereaved's well-being if they are congruent with the value systems and beliefs of the bereaved. Loss of family, friends, or community amidst change creates a social deficit that must be compensated (or marked) to restore psychological equilibrium. The way that this occurs, and the form that this should take, will depend upon the world view, cultural frame, and emotional nature of the grieving bereaved. For example, policies on grieving behavior dictate what is appropriate at that time; changes in grieving behavior depend upon fluctuations in values and social norms. Rituals transform bereavement into the experience of mourning. Rituals integrate bereavement into one's life story. Rituals mediate the expression of suppressed feelings of grief. Rituals restore social identities, roles, and connections [21, 22].

Interfaith Perspectives on Grief

Conventional rituals often fall short in addressing loss from sudden death, leaving grieving survivors feeling alienated and losing their identity after the death. Attempts to revert to the previous state can prolong grief and hinder the transition to mourning. Grief rituals serve as cultural identifiers, linking individuals to their social worlds while also regulating behavior and bestowing dignity upon the process. An examination of diverse cultural death rituals highlights the responses of survivors in urban areas, such as South City Catholic Christians, where traditional rituals may not be observed. Grief creates a divide between the survivor's feelings of despair and the societal expectations of propriety, making their situation unbearable. In the absence of traditional conventions, cultural adaptations emerge, including modifications of existing protocols or the creation of new rituals to meet the needs of the grieving. Understanding these customs is vital for being respectful and effective around death, and assists providers in recognizing and not disrupting the family's grieving process. Recognizing that different cultures have varied practices can comfort family members during this challenging time and encourage them to share

their customs. Providers can then guide families toward resources they may have overlooked to assist in their grief journey [23, 24].

Case Studies of Grief Rituals

Cross-cultural studies show that various grief practices facilitate the mourning process. These practices symbolize grief aspects, including loss and the acceptance of a new reality without the deceased, while also fostering cognitive, emotional, and social connections to the departed. Grief rituals provide educational opportunities for families and communities. Cultural variations exist in grief practices, including expressions of grief, community assistance, and methods to honor the deceased. Western cultures generally engage less in culturally-driven grief practices, while East Asian communities are more expressive about their grief and involved in post-death rituals. Bereaved families participate in diverse grief practices that differ in type, timing, and duration. Some families discover new practices not previously documented. Rituals may be initiated by family members or encouraged by outsiders, and national or communal rituals can aid families struggling to cope alone. The death of a loved one can lead to changes in family dynamics and parenting roles. Mourning rituals exist globally, with 103 unique rituals identified across 14 cultural groups in one study. Common themes included personifying the deceased, reminiscing about shared experiences, engaging with ritual objects, and seeking connections with the sacred. While rituals differ, mourning features may be universally consistent [25, 26].

Challenges In Grief Rituals

An increasing amount of research is focusing on the effects of rites and rituals on loss and mourning. In most traditionally defined cultures, a death is followed by funerary rituals in various forms [25]. Rituals have been previously discussed in relation to cultures, religions, and the length of their endurance. Most rituals have had common ritual elements such as wearing black clothing, moving the deceased to a grave, and hymns, prayers, and burnings. Death rituals help survivors acknowledge the death, legitimize grief, create a safe place for mourners to express emotion, and bring together family and friends for support of the bereaved. Due to the pandemic and unforeseen deaths, restrictions on these funeral rites are needed. This study broadens the understanding of some cultures regarding the funeral service and examines the impact of restrictions on the affected people by COVID-19 faced grief. According to the study, some elements of funerals had a flaw when linking it with grief symptoms. Collective and individual grief rituals, the helpfulness of rituals, and the performance of alternative rituals on prolonged grief were not at all related, especially when COVID-19 reduced loss longer than two months. These findings connect well with the conclusion that the benefit of rituals depends on the ability of bereaved individuals to shape rituals in a way that is meaningful to them. A considerable number of participants reported high levels of PG symptoms, even six months post-loss. Among those bereaved after an unexpected death and during a close relationship with the deceased, symptom levels of PG were especially high. However, the directions were not always as expected, and all correlations were small. The positive association could be due to, during the pandemic, often only close relatives were allowed to physically attend the funeral, and a close relationship is a common factor related to more intense grief. Being involved in planning the funeral was also related to higher PG symptoms, likely because involvement overlaps with being in a closer relationship with the deceased. Different aspects of the funeral were related to PG symptoms. However, the directions were not always as expected, and all correlations were small. The positive association between funeral attendance and PG symptoms could be explained by the fact that during the pandemic, often only close relatives were allowed to physically attend the funeral, and a close relationship to the deceased is a common factor related to more intense grief. Being involved in planning the funeral was also related to higher PG symptoms, likely because involvement overlaps with being in a closer relationship with the deceased. Moreover, various aspects of the funeral were related to more intense grief, including different mediums to collect memories using different social media [27, 28].

Future Directions in Grief Ritual Studies

Outside the domain of thanatology, grief practices stemming from loss have often been overlooked and undervalued. Recent studies have encouraged exploration of grief experiences across various cultural and ethnic groups worldwide. This chapter aims to raise awareness among researchers and the public about diverse cultural grief experiences, shifting the discourse to view grief as a significant relationship in loss instead of simply a process of negative emotions. Grief is complex, involving “a grief experience” (actual suffering due to loss), “a grief marker” (observable products of grief), and “grief work” (rules guiding these experiences). Both the experience and markers arise from grief work, a social construct reflecting cultural influences. Each culture creates its grief practices that then cosmopolitanize, leading to universal grief work through the sharing of local traditions in global contexts, where they may intersect with large-scale social events. This chapter aims to inspire more comprehensive international research into grief work and bereavement rituals. Areas for future exploration include: (1) understanding biofeedback during grief, (2)

examining ritualized temporal constructs in academic settings, (3) analyzing cultural differences and similarities in the memory of the deceased, (4) gathering real-time grief experiences via mobile apps, and (5) utilizing psycholinguistic analysis of bereavement narratives through in-depth reflection [29, 30].

CONCLUSION

Grief rituals are indispensable components of cultural identity, offering frameworks through which individuals and communities process the pain of loss. While the emotional core of grief is universal, the rituals that emerge around it are deeply embedded in sociocultural narratives, spiritual beliefs, and historical contexts. Whether through African ancestral rites, Latin American communal funerals, Eastern monastic practices, or Western wakes and memorials, these rituals transform private sorrow into shared meaning. They reaffirm social bonds, honor the deceased, and provide structure during emotional upheaval. Importantly, in times of disruption, such as global pandemics, these rituals prove both resilient and adaptable, underscoring their enduring psychological and social relevance. As globalization continues to reshape how we mourn, understanding and respecting diverse grief rituals remains essential for fostering empathy, supporting the bereaved, and preserving cultural heritage.

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