

Diversity in Dying: Funerary Rituals Across Cultures and the Social Utility of Death¹

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Abstract

Death is biologically universal, but the social work of death is culturally organized. This narrative review examines funerary rituals as collective responses to mortality, drawing on classical anthropological theory and contemporary scholarship on grief, ritual, and continuing bonds. Rather than treating funerary practices as fixed reflections of belief, the review argues that mortuary rituals repeatedly perform four interconnected functions: marking separation and liminality; reclassifying the dead and reorganizing social relationships; transforming grief through memory, meaning, and continuing bonds; and restoring collective order after the disruption created by death. Comparative cases from European Neandertal archaeology, ancient Egypt, and contemporary Toraja communities illustrate how radically different practices can address related social problems without implying that all cultures share the same beliefs or ritual meanings. The paper proposes a cross-cultural framework for understanding funerary ritual as a form of social repair: death changes biological status immediately, whereas ritual helps communities negotiate the slower transformation of identity, relationship, and belonging.

Keywords: *funerary rituals; mortuary practices; grief; liminality; rites of passage; continuing bonds; cultural anthropology; death rituals*

Introduction

Human beings die everywhere; they do not bury, burn, expose, preserve, remember, or mourn the dead in the same way. This divergence is not an incidental feature of culture. Funerary rituals sit at the intersection of cosmology, kinship, emotion, identity, material practice, and social order. They determine what is done with a body, but they also determine what becomes possible for the living after a death: who gathers, who mourns, who speaks for the deceased, how relationships are reclassified, which memories are preserved, and how a community marks the boundary between the world of the living and whatever it imagines beyond it.

Anthropological theories of ritual have long treated death as a paradigmatic transition. Van Gennep (1960) conceptualized rites of passage through separation, a liminal interval, and incorporation. Turner (1969) later developed liminality as a state in which ordinary social classifications are suspended or reorganized. Durkheim (1995) emphasized the collective dimensions of mourning and ritual, while Hertz (1960) showed that mortuary practice can involve a social process extending beyond the moment of biological death. Douglas (1966) further demonstrated how ideas of pollution and purity can express and maintain social classifications. Together, these perspectives suggest that funerary ritual is not simply a response to a corpse; it is a structured response to a disruption in a social world.

More recent interdisciplinary work complicates any single-function account. Ethnographic research shows that grief is shaped by cultural norms, the manner of death, and culturally sanctioned relationships between living and

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dead (Hallam et al., 2020). Psychological research on continuing bonds similarly demonstrates that bereaved people may maintain internal, symbolic, spiritual, or relational connections with the deceased, with effects that can be comforting, distressing, or mixed (Field et al., 2005; Hewson et al., 2024; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). These perspectives invite a synthesis in which funerary rituals are understood not merely as expressions of belief but as cultural technologies for managing transitions in identity, relationship, memory, and social membership.

Aim and Research Question

The aim of this narrative review is to examine how funerary rituals across culturally diverse settings organize the transition produced by death and to identify recurrent social and psychological functions without treating cultural variation as superficial difference.

The guiding research question is: How do funerary rituals across culturally diverse societies function to negotiate separation, social reclassification, grief and continuing bonds, and the reorganization of collective life after death?

Approach to the Literature

This article is a narrative, comparative review rather than a systematic review or original ethnographic study. It synthesizes classical anthropological works on ritual and mortuary practice with peer-reviewed research on contemporary grief and continuing bonds and selected ethnographic or archaeological case studies. Sources were included when they directly addressed funerary practice, rites of passage, liminality, social order, cultural grief, continuing relationships with the dead, or the interpretation of specific mortuary traditions. Contemporary sources were used to place classical theory in dialogue with current empirical and ethnographic scholarship. The review is interpretive: the cases are illustrative rather than statistically representative, and cross-cultural similarities are treated as analytical patterns rather than proof of a universal psychological mechanism.

Theoretical Framework

Funerary Ritual as a Rite of Passage

Van Gennep's (1960) formulation remains a useful starting point because death is simultaneously a biological event and a social transition. The deceased is separated from the category of the living; the liminal period is marked by uncertainty, ritual activity, and altered relationships; and incorporation involves establishing a new social status for the dead and a reorganized status for survivors. The framework is analytically valuable precisely because the stages need not look alike across cultures. The content of the ritual varies, while the problem of transition remains.

Turner (1969) sharpened this perspective by emphasizing liminality and *communitas*. During liminal periods, ordinary hierarchies and classifications can be temporarily unsettled, creating distinctive forms of collective experience. In funerary settings, this helps explain why people gather, perform repeated actions, exchange food and resources, narrate the life of the deceased, or temporarily suspend ordinary routines: ritual can create a temporary social field in which a disrupted community becomes capable of reorganizing itself.

Death, Collective Order, and Social Repair

Durkheim's (1995) analysis of mourning and piacular rites places collective emotion within the maintenance of the social group. Death removes a person, but it also disturbs roles, obligations, kinship arrangements, and shared symbolic categories. Hertz (1960) similarly treated mortuary practice as a process rather than a single act. His analysis of intermediary and final phases demonstrates that the social handling of the dead can unfold over time, allowing relationships to be transformed rather than simply terminated.

From this perspective, funerary ritual can be understood as a form of social repair. The ritual does not reverse the loss. Instead, it creates socially legible ways to reorganize what the loss has changed. A spouse becomes a widow

or widower; a child becomes a mourner; a family assumes new responsibilities; an ancestor is assigned a new place in the symbolic order. The ritual makes these transformations visible, collective, and therefore more manageable.

Pollution, Purity, and Boundary-Making

Douglas (1966) provides a further lens for understanding why death so often generates rules about bodily contact, contamination, cleansing, spatial separation, and ritual timing. From this perspective, pollution is not reducible to hygiene. What is considered dangerous, impure, or out of place expresses a system of classification. Funerary prohibitions can therefore be understood as ways of managing a category that has become ambiguous: the corpse is materially present but socially transformed, no longer an ordinary person yet not necessarily understood as simply absent.

Meaning, Memory, and Continuing Bonds

The anthropological literature is increasingly compatible with psychological research emphasizing continuing relationships with the dead. Field et al. (2005) reviewed attachment-based accounts of continuing bonds, while Stroebe and Schut (2005) cautioned against assuming that healthy bereavement always requires severing the relationship. More recent evidence suggests that continuing bonds can support meaning reconstruction and relational identity, although their effects vary and can include both comfort and distress (Hewson et al., 2024). Hallam et al. (2020) similarly show how cultural norms shape what forms of remembering, forgetting, emotional expression, and ongoing relationship are socially available to mourners.

This perspective is particularly important for interpreting funerary ritual across cultures. Practices that appear to outsiders as evidence that a culture 'cannot let go' may instead represent a culturally organized transformation of the relationship. Conversely, rituals that emphasize immediate separation may not indicate emotional absence but a culturally preferred way of establishing the new status of the dead and the living. The analytic task is therefore not to rank rituals according to an assumed universal model of grief, but to understand what relational work each ritual makes possible.

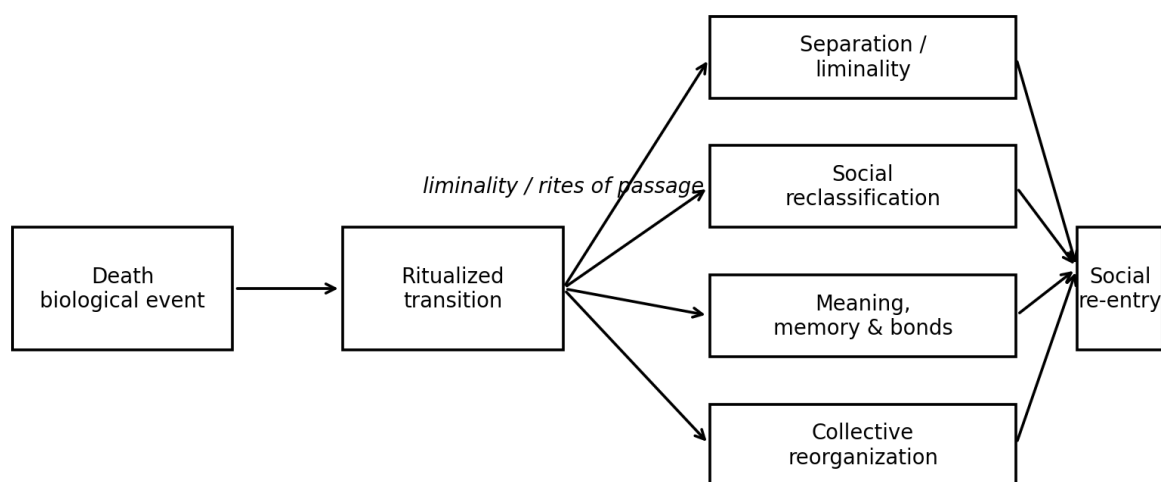


Figure 1

A cross-cultural framework for the social functions of funerary ritual.

Note. The model is an analytic synthesis proposed in this review. The functions overlap and do not imply that every ritual serves every function in the same manner.

Comparative Analysis

1. Separation and Liminality

Funerary practice begins with a problem of classification: the body remains, but the person has changed status. Van Gennep's separation–liminality–incorporation sequence offers a language for this problem, while Hertz demonstrates that mortuary treatment can unfold across an intermediary period before final incorporation. Contemporary anthropological work on Toraja funerals illustrates why this distinction matters. In Toraja communities, funerary practice has been shaped by indigenous traditions, Christianity, state institutions, migration, and tourism, producing ongoing changes in how funerals are organized and interpreted (Adams, 1993; Budiman, 2013). The ritual is therefore not a fossilized cultural survival; it is a site where social change is negotiated.

The same caution is necessary when discussing deep prehistory. Evidence from La Chapelle-aux-Saints has been interpreted as supporting intentional Neandertal burial (Rendu et al., 2014), but the interpretation remains contested, with later archaeological critique arguing that the evidence does not unequivocally establish deliberate ritual burial (Dibble et al., 2015). The disagreement itself is instructive: inferring symbolic meaning from material treatment of the dead requires careful separation of what the archaeological record demonstrates from what researchers infer about cognition and ritual.

2. Reclassifying the Dead and Reorganizing the Living

Funerary rituals do more than dispose of remains. They relocate the deceased within a social and cosmological system. Metcalf and Huntington (1991) show the extraordinary diversity of mortuary forms while emphasizing the social significance of how communities conceptualize the dead. Davies (1997) similarly examines funerary rites as practices through which societies articulate death, identity, afterlife, and the continuing value of life.

In Toraja contexts, this reclassification can be unusually visible. Contemporary ethnographic work shows that funerals are entangled with kinship, social status, religious change, and competing interpretations of what counts as tradition (Adams, 1993; Budiman, 2013; Tsintjilonis, 2000). The point is not that Toraja practice represents a universal model, but that it makes an analytic principle especially visible: ritual can preserve social relations precisely by changing the status of the dead within those relations.

3. Materiality, Purity, and the Management of the Body

The treatment of the body reveals how mortuary practice organizes boundaries between person and corpse, purity and pollution, presence and absence. Douglas's (1966) analysis cautions against interpreting ritual rules through a purely medical lens. What appears to be a rule about contamination can also encode social distinctions, anxieties about boundaries, and the effort to restore order after a category has been destabilized.

Ancient Egyptian mortuary practice offers a vivid example of material and symbolic elaboration. The 'opening of the mouth' was a central funerary ceremony associated with restoring or activating the deceased's capacities; modern anatomical analysis also distinguishes ceremonial practice from the physical procedures performed during mummification (Seiler & Rühli, 2015). The significance of the practice lies not only in the physical treatment of a body but in the cultural effort to render the dead capable of occupying a meaningful postmortem status.

4. Grief, Memory, and Continuing Bonds

Funerary rituals also create socially sanctioned forms of remembering. Eulogies, communal meals, visiting graves, repeated ceremonies, ancestral observances, and commemorative practices can transform a relationship to the deceased rather than simply ending it. The contemporary literature on continuing bonds supports this interpretation. Hewson et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 79 studies, identified themes involving comfort and distress, relational identity, uncertainty and spirituality, and noted links between continuing bonds and meaning reconstruction. These findings complicate older assumptions that successful grief requires detachment.

The implication for cross-cultural interpretation is significant. A ritual may appear highly elaborate because it is doing psychological work that other societies allocate to private memory or individualized mourning. Conversely, a ritual that is brief or materially restrained may still carry substantial social meaning. Hallam et al. (2020) argue that ethnographic approaches are essential precisely because grief is shaped by culturally available ways of expressing emotion, remembering, and relating to the dead.

5. Collective Reorganization and Social Continuity

The social function of ritual becomes especially visible when death threatens continuity. Durkheim's emphasis on collective ritual, Turner's account of *communitas*, and Davies's analysis of mortuary rhetoric converge on the idea that funerals are occasions in which communities reassert their capacity to continue. The dead person may be absent, but the gathering of kin, the distribution of responsibilities, the public recognition of status changes, and the repetition of inherited forms communicate that collective life persists.

This does not mean that funerary ritual is always harmonious. Mortuary ceremonies can display inequality, contest identity, reinforce gender and status hierarchies, and become arenas of political or cultural change. Toraja scholarship is particularly useful here because it shows that funerals may be transformed by migration, Christianity, bureaucracy, tourism, and changing expectations of prestige (Adams, 1993; Budiman, 2013). Ritual continuity therefore does not necessarily mean social stasis.

Discussion

Across the literature reviewed, funerary rituals differ dramatically in materials, beliefs, timing, and emotional expression, yet they repeatedly confront a related social problem: death produces a mismatch between biological change and social meaning. A body may be materially present while the person is absent; a spouse may remain physically present while a relational role has changed; a community may retain its members while its structure has been disrupted. Ritual gives form to these mismatches.

The central contribution of this review is therefore to conceptualize funerary ritual as social repair rather than as a single cultural response to grief. The four functions proposed here—separation and liminality, social reclassification, meaning and continuing bonds, and collective reorganization—should not be understood as universal stages or as mutually exclusive categories. They are overlapping analytic dimensions through which different societies address different aspects of the same existential disruption.

This framework also helps avoid two common interpretive errors. The first is cultural reductionism: assuming that a ritual is simply a symbolic expression of a religious belief. Ritual can simultaneously express belief, regulate emotion, distribute social obligations, and transform identity. The second is psychological universalism: assuming that all mourners require the same form of closure. Contemporary grief scholarship suggests that continuing bonds may be adaptive, maladaptive, or mixed depending on context (Hewson et al., 2024; Stroebe & Schut, 2005). Cultural ritual provides the social conditions under which particular forms of remembering or letting go become intelligible.

A second implication concerns comparison itself. Cross-cultural comparison should not flatten differences into a claim that 'all funerals do the same thing.' The value of comparison lies in tracing how different ritual systems solve related problems through different symbolic and social resources. The Toraja case demonstrates how funerary practice changes under religious and political transformation. Ancient Egyptian material demonstrates how the body can become the focus of elaborate technologies of postmortem identity. Neandertal burial debates demonstrate the evidentiary limits of reconstructing symbolic practice from archaeological remains. These cases make comparison productive precisely because they resist simple equivalence.

A final implication concerns contemporary bereavement care. Mental-health and social-support systems increasingly operate across culturally diverse populations. The literature reviewed here suggests that effective

bereavement support should not assume that private coping is universally preferable to communal ritual, or that continuing bonds necessarily indicate pathological nonacceptance. Practitioners should ask what rituals mean to mourners, which relationships the rituals sustain or transform, and what social roles are being renegotiated after the death. Cultural competence in bereavement is therefore not simply knowledge of customs; it is the capacity to understand the social functions those customs perform.

Limitations

This review has several limitations. It is narrative rather than systematic, so the literature was selected for conceptual and cross-cultural relevance rather than through a preregistered comprehensive search. The cases are illustrative and cannot represent the full diversity of mortuary practices. Some classical anthropological interpretations were developed within intellectual traditions that have since been criticized for evolutionary or comparative assumptions; they are therefore used here as theoretical resources rather than as final explanations of contemporary cultures. Finally, archaeological and ethnographic evidence cannot always support the same level of inference, and claims about symbolic meaning must be matched carefully to the evidence available.

Conclusion

Funerary rituals do not merely accompany death. They help societies decide what death means, what the dead become, what the living become in response, and how relationships can persist or change after loss. A cross-cultural understanding of mortuary ritual is strongest when it resists the temptation to search for one universal ceremony or one universal psychology of grief. What can be compared is not identical belief but recurring social work: marking separation, navigating liminality, reorganizing status, sustaining or transforming bonds, and restoring continuity after rupture. Death may be universal; the cultural labor of making death socially livable is not.

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