

PRACTICES OF CEREMONIAL RITUALS RELATED TO DEATH IN SRI LANKA: ANCIENT TIMES UP TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Intake 37-BSc in Strategic Studies and International Relations

Abstract

Death is the only certainty in an uncertain world equally applicable for all living things irrespective of their orientation in the world. Mankind has no exception when dealing with this natural occurrence despite the reluctance to accept it. The notion of funeral offerings in terms of burial and non-burial has been interlinked since the prehistoric era as a way to respect the lives of the fallen and with expectations to achieve a better rebirth. Death is often interlinked with death rituals accustomed to the cultures of the perished. Practice of ceremonial rituals on death dates back to the period of Neanderthal and has undergone changes gradually to become sophisticated over the time. Ancient Sri Lankan sources depict ancient funeral practices of the state and with time, the rituals on death adapted a culture-centric approach. The Coronavirus Pandemic which affected the entire world strongly demonstrated the uncertainty of life as millions of people perished after battling with the invisible enemy in the technologically and medically advanced twenty first century. The pandemic left an uncertainty regarding the funeral proceeding of the victims of Covid-19. Sri Lanka as a country in which different ethnicities follow their own ethnical funeral proceedings in particular, had to face certain challenges regarding the conduct of funeral rites of Covid related deaths. Thus, the research expects to highlight the salient changes in ceremonial rites practiced since the ancient times in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) up to present, a comparison between the funeral rituals of the four major ethnicities in the state while portraying the pandemics impact on performing funeral rites. The pandemic has depicted the commonality of death across cultures, as all the Covid-related deaths were cremated or buried without having the usual funeral proceedings. The research is conducted using both primary and secondary data available.

Key words: Ceremonial Rites, Ancient times, Pandemic, Ethnicities

INTRODUCTION

Death is a universal human experience as it marks the end of a person's existence in the world. Since the ancient times, the primitive mind reacted to the notion of death in different ways. Deaths caused due to natural causes were understood according to the level of knowledge possessed by the ancient man, but unnatural deaths caused fear and considerable reservation among them. The belief in life after death and the inception of future existence as more of a continuation of the very existence were sufficient to make the primitive man to take funeral proceedings and ceremonial rites in a serious manner. With the ideology of reincarnation, mankind considered that the last thought possessed by the dying person and the funeral rituals that followed the

death, will be decisive in the process of ensuring a better life in the next world. The funeral offering was either burial or non-burial and the process was based on cultural background.

Evidence of ancient pre-historic man's funeral rituals has been recovered from grave excavations. Despite the oldest evidence relating to the prehistoric period in Europe, it is safe to acknowledge that beliefs regarding death must be old as humanity itself. The ancestors of *Homo sapiens* showed a significant improvement in giving more importance to death rituals with time and it is evident in the practices of Palaeolithic man and the Neanderthal man in Europe. Palaeolithic man might not have had the consensus on the belief of life after death as they left their dead behind without burial. Yet Neanderthal man in Europe became the first to bury the dead. The skeletons discovered from excavations were tightly pleated together, knees to chin (Wijesekara, 1962, p.226). The reason for this peculiar structure is yet unknown.

The burials since ancient times differed according to the dead person's status in the social hierarchy. Social stratification paved the way for the ordinary man to be buried in ditches, sometimes without any burial ceremony, while chiefs and their families were buried in long barrows. Different positions were used to bury the dead and food, pottery and ornaments were usually found at the excavation sites of ancient graveyards. It is plausible to believe that the ancient man believed that death was not the ultimate end and the artefacts buried with the dead will be helpful in their afterlife. They believed the spirits lived in a separate world and if conciliate with the needed rites it would help the living (Sellman as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p.226). The practice of burial rites reached new heights during the ancient Egyptian civilization in which the kings and queens were buried in tombs. King Tutankhamen's tomb is one of the spectacular pieces of evidence which demonstrate the strong belief accepted by the man regarding the afterlife of the perished.

With the advancement of human civilizations, society was divided between different ethnicities and each ethnicity consisted of a unique culture with significant traditional values attributed to them. These cultures followed their own traditional practices when performing funeral rites. Unlike the Egyptians, Indus Civilization did not appear to have taken afterlife seriously as no signs of cemeteries belonging to that phase of history have been discovered so far. It is possible to consider that the dead might have been cremated; ashes thrown and the remaining deposited in jars (Mackay as cited by Wijesekara, N.D, p.228). Vedic only used cremation and only buried children under the age of two. According to the Vedic culture, hair and nails of the dead are cut off and the body is anointed and clothed with new garment as they believed it can affect the afterlife of the deceased. Men borne the dead body and took it to crematorium which is placed on the funeral pyres usually amidst three burning fires. If a Kshastrian dies, his bow is placed in his hands. According to them, funeral offerings were given on every full moon day to ensure a better after life.

Ramayana depicts three main methods of disposal of the deceased, namely cremation, exposure and burial. Among all the methods, burial was the main tradition practiced by both non-Aryans and Yakkhas. Ramayana provides a detailed description regarding cremation of the Epic period. It depicts that when it comes to kings and

royalty, preservation of the body is essential and they have used sesamum oil to preserve the body for a few days (Wijesekara, 1962, p.230)

The religious beliefs of different cultures played a prominent role in terms of funeral ceremonies. Sri Lanka as a nation which shelters a variety of religions acknowledges and respects the cultural identity of each religion and possesses a history shaped by generations of interaction and conflict of cultures reflecting the transitions associated with funeral ceremonies with the influence of Aryans, Indian invasion and colonial empires.

DEATH RITUALS IN ANCIENT CEYLON

Before the Aryan migration Sri Lanka was inhabited by Nagas, Yakkhas and Rakshasas yet no historical records on their burial rituals were discovered by archaeologist during excavations. In Ramayana, it states that Ravana was cremated according to Aryan rites. Yet it is controversial as it is very unnatural for Yakkhas or non-Aryans to perform Aryan rites as it was not a general practice at that time. The Aryan and Vedda were the prominent cultures that gave satisfactory evidence on the death rituals and beliefs of ancient Ceylon.

The Vedda religious beliefs which were built on the concept of death, considered the deceased ancestors are living in a different world and can affect the living decedent's life directly or indirectly. Thus, it was crucial for them to perform the necessary death rituals. In Vedda religion it was customary to abandon the place the death has occurred, and the body was usually covered with leaves. Unlike the Aryans, the body was not washed or garlanded and was covered with branches, leaves and sometimes stones. The cave would carry the status of abandonment till twelve years pass after the death. The dead body will be carried by brothers of the deceased and will be buried in an around four feet depth grave. Bodies will be wrapped in a cloth and bows, and arrows will be buried with the dead. The ancient man believed that the spirits of the dead can haunt the living, thus they always buried the dead far from chena which is at least a *hoo*⁷ distance from the settlement (Seligamann as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p.224). One might be certain that the beliefs that existed prior to the Vijayan settlements might not make a drastic difference with comparison to the practices of Ceylon and India as the Veddas symbolised the primitive culture at that time. King Pandukabhaya was the first ruler in Sri Lanka to execute a proper town planning system and cemeteries were an essential component of town planning. Historical records depict he has employed one hundred and fifty *Chandals* to bury the dead and an equal number of workers to conduct maintenance of the cemetery (Mahavamsa Ch. X as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., P.234). Social stratification was accepted when performing burial rituals as special areas were demarcated for different people (Mahavamsa Ch. X as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p.234). The less fortunate families buried their dead in the forests while the well to do families cremated their dead in the respective cemeteries.

⁷ A distance which a sound of a human scream can be clearly heard.

Sri Lankan society is composed of different ethnicities since its earliest times, yet the rituals proposed by the Buddhist ways of teaching was followed by many since the 3rd Century BCE due to the fact that majority of the local population were Buddhist.

During the 2nd century B.C., the cremation of the royals reached great heights as they wished to be cremated according to the Buddhist practices. Buddhists believe that the last thoughts before the moment of death affects the next life of the dying, thus the dying person is reminded of his/her admirable actions. King Duttagamini was also reminded of his meritorious deeds before his death followed by the preaching of the doctrine. The literature sources of ancient Ceylon portraits limited number of records regarding death rituals and most of them depict rituals based on Buddhist.

During the medieval period two rites were performed at the death bed. Firstly, as the dying person was on the death bed, almsgiving was done by the son. This is known as the *jivabaththa* (Saddharmaratnavaliya as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p. 237). The other rite was to remind the dying person about his good deed in order to provide him some positive psychological impact (Saddharmaratnavaliya and Pujavaliya as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p.237). It was also a custom if the father is dying, he would entrust the responsibilities of the household to the eldest son (Saddharmalankara as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p.237). Crying over the death body always took place after the death and medieval society men and women untied their hair and spread them on their backs while crying (Pujavaliya as cited by Wijesekara, N.D, p.237). On the day of the funereal, drummers were used to convey the message to the neighbourhood (Saddharmalankara as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p.237). The monks played a significant role during the funeral ceremonies to perform the ritual of almsgiving (Saddharmalankara as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., p. 237). In the 12th century a cloth was used to cover the face of the dead. Cremation was the prominent method of disposal while burial was also in practice. Burial places were situated maintaining a reasonable distance from the habitations and monks were cremated in a grand manner similar to the royals (Saddharmaratnavaliya as cited by Wijesekara, N.D., pp.237). Use of coffins for burial was not present at that time.

The Kandyan kingdom gave rise to certain changes in the funeral proceedings as a result of the influence of the colonial influence. By the time of independence in 1948, four major religions were influential in Sri Lanka, namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. These ethnicities conducted and practiced their own funeral rituals in accordance with the values of their respective religions.

THE CULTURAL IDENTITIES OF FUNERAL RITUALS

As a country which practices co-existence among different ethnicities, Sri Lanka has experienced different aspects of diverse cultural identities existing in harmony. An occasion of a death reflects the diverse ethnic differences among the diverse cultures. This section will draw a comparison between the funeral practices of each main ethnic and religious population in the country to understand the differences between their practices on death rituals. The four major ethnical identities existing in the contemporary Sri Lankan society are mainly Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The necessity of a funeral to take place as mentioned before is

psychologically an opportunity for the relatives of the deceased to express and share their grief and sorrow and come into the state of accepting the death and uncertainty of life. Despite Sri Lankan community adhere to separate funeral rituals due to their religion; there are some traditional customs which are followed irrespective of the religion.

Buddhist practice of reciting *pirith*⁸ to the dying person is usually performed by the members of the family along with a monk. In Catholicism it is the parish priest that blesses the dying one. Hindus believe the dying should be surrounded by their closest family members as they chant *mantras*⁹ expecting his soul to be at peace. The Muslims recite prayers with the intention of helping the dying person to confront death peacefully (Rathnayake, 2019). When a Muslim is approaching death, closest family members should be present at the situation and they encourage the dying person to say *shahada*¹⁰, in the belief that the deceased soul would enter heaven. Once death occurs the people present at the site should close the eyes of the perished and should cover the body with a white sheet. Universally Muslims prepare “dua” (supplication) with the aspirations that Allah would forgive the sins of the deceased (Everplans, 2021).

In an event of a sudden death, the relatives of the deceased need some time to psychologically prepare themselves to accept the death. Therefore, the custom of allowing the relatives to view the dead body and pay their final respect became a commonly accepted ritual among many religions. The body of the dead is usually kept for two-three days at a funeral parlour or the house of the deceased for viewing and both Buddhists and Christians abide by this. Many who knew the deceased person generally attend the funeral and it provides a chance for the relatives to share their grief and accept the misfortunate event. It is also said that food should not be cooked at the perished person’s house and at a time of a funeral the neighbours provide food for the attendees for the funeral. Hindus generally allow the viewing of the body before cremation and the body is usually laid in a simple and inexpensive cast (Everplans, 2021). Unlike Christians and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Muslims do not keep the body of the deceased person at a funeral parlour or at the deceased person’s house as they bury the body as soon as possible after the death. Local Islamic community organisations are consulted to make the necessary arrangements regarding the death (Rathnayake,2019).

If the death takes place in a Buddhist household, the body is laid with the head positioned facing towards the West. They believe West symbolises the direction of “yama”, the chief of the evil and believe Yama decides the merits and the demerits of the perished based on his deeds in life on Earth. Buddhist households also over-turn the family photographs to prevent any possibility of any close relative becoming possessed by the spirit of the dead. Most of the funeral rituals and beliefs associated with them share a religious twist as well as customary practices with a touch of mythical attributions (Rathnasinghe, n.d).

⁸ *Pirith* has derived to Sinhala form the word *paritta* in Pali. The meaning is protection. According to Buddhists chanting or reciting *Pirith* protects one from all evil.

⁹ Vedic stanzas

¹⁰ Meaning testimony

Cremation was introduced to India by the Aryan nomads in 2nd millennium BC and at present Buddhists, Hindus and sometimes Christians choose to cremate the dead (Rathnasinghe, n.d). Cremation is prohibited for Muslims under the Islamic law known as the “Sharia law”. All the religions allow organ donations, as it is considered as a noble deed. Yet performing autopsies is prohibited under Islam. As they expect to bury the death as soon as possible, Muslims are against embalming as well (Everplans, 2021). The body is prepared for the burial according to each religion’s own customs. First the body is washed and shrouded and usually it is the close family members or the funeral home that does this. Muslims wash the body trice or an odd number of times while Hindus wash the body in a mixture of milk, yogurt and ghee.

According to Muslims, the body will be taken to the mosque for the funeral prayers and unlike Buddhists, Hindus or Christians the body will not be viewed before the funeral. Muslims will recite funeral prayers outside the mosque, and they will chant it facing the direction of Mecca. Once the prayers are over, the body will be taken to the cemetery and same as Hindus usually only men attend the burial, sometimes women also attend it. The grave of a Muslim should be perpendicular to the *qiblah* - the direction of the *Kaaba* (the sacred building at Mecca), to which Muslims turn at prayers and once the body is buried a layer of wood or stones are used to avoid soil meeting the body immediately. Hindus and Buddhists generally use the method of cremation. Each person present at the burial will place three handfuls of soil into the grave; the closest family will do it first. A small monument will be placed to identify the site of burial (Everplans, 2021).

Once the funeral is over, Buddhists offer “dana” (almsgiving) to Buddhist monks in remembrance of the deceased on the seventh day and on the third month of the death. An almsgiving will also be given at the end of one year since the death as well. Buddhists believe such offerings will guarantee a better after life for and a recantation for the perished one (Rathnasinghe, n.d). Hindus observe a memorial event “shradda” after a year passed since the death, which pays homage to the demised.

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON PERFORMING CEREMONIAL RITUALS RELATED TO DEATH

It was in the year 2020 that the world realised the necessity to accept and deal with the natural phenomenon of death as the entire world collapsed in front of the novel Coronavirus, which brought death to millions of people in the world. With each passing day the number of covid-19 patients increased in drastic numbers and community spread was beyond the grasps of concealment in some countries. The world both economically and politically faced countless consequences as the pandemic unfolded, marking magnificent numbers of total deaths in front of many states. Due to the highly contagious nature of this pathogen, many countries across the world wanted to ensure the disposal of Covid related deaths would be done in a secure manner. The pandemic did not only limit the free movement of the community but also brought up a crisis of faith in the final journey of humans.

As the majority of the population in the world preferred burial rather than cremation, the protocols used by certain counties to cremate the dead was challenged by many families of the deceased. The World Health Organization (WHO) also did not prohibit

burial as a method of disposal of Covid related deaths and issued detailed instructions regarding the protocols of burial. Yet states like the People's Republic of China, India and Sri Lanka were more adamant on imposing only cremation due to the nature of the virus (Dutta, 2020). It is scientifically proven that novel coronavirus can transmit from one person to another by droplets. This denotes that body fluid is essential for the virus to transmit to a new individual. Burial usually takes around 7-10 days in the decomposition of the body while the body retains fluid for three-four days (Dutta, 2020). Thus, it is safe to acknowledge that the virus can transmit during the preparations for the process of burial. Also, if the grave is shallow over three-four feet it can also increase the chances of transmission. Thus, theoretically it is safe to cremate rather than burying the dead (Dutta, 2020).

Considering all the safety protocols, the government of Sri Lanka made cremation mandatory if the deceased is a covid-19 patient. Though there was an upheaval against it from Christians as well, it was the Muslims that were against the idea as according to their religion cremation is prohibited. Taking all facts in to consideration it is obvious that the government took this step to avoid repercussions in the future, yet it was discredited in the international arena as many framed that action as a violation of human rights of ethnic minorities in the country (Dutta, 2020). Death is genuinely a situation in which the families of the deceased want to perform their final rituals in the best way as the religious beliefs depicts it as the only way to ensure a better afterlife for the deceased. Muslims believe the righteous deeds performed by a person will yield entry to heaven and believes that it is usually decided on the Day of Judgement, also known as the Last Day, when the world comes to an end. They believe till the Last day, dead will remain in their tombs and the ones who did good will experience the feelings of peace while the rest will feel the horror of hell. This is a strong belief shared by the Muslim community and thus resulting in their reluctance for cremation of the dead (Rathnayake, 2019).

On 5th of March 2021, the Sri Lankan government lifted the rule of compulsory cremation after imposing it for almost a year (The new Indian Express, 2021). The policy of compulsory cremation ended as a result of lobbying of the Muslim and Christian minorities in Sri Lanka and international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International (Aljazeera, 2021). The government designated a burial site at Iranathivu islet situated in Northeastern region to bury two Covid-19 deceased patients on the 5th of March, 2021 (The new Indian Express, 2021). Yet the community in that area opposed the idea due the fear of social contamination, making the government to search for possible alternative sites. Two local councils in the Eastern province came forward to provide a burial site and finally the two bodies were buried at the Ottamavadi in Baticaloa district (The New Indian Express, 2021). Despite the fact that some political parties in the country and non-governmental organisations framed the act of compulsory cremation policy as a racist act, the government was only making sure that the water table of the country would not be endangered due to burial of Covid-19 related deaths.

The pandemic has clearly prevented many to execute the funeral proceedings as planned and due to travel and social gathering restrictions imposed within Sri Lanka, funerals were held with the limited participation of the closest family members. If a

Covid-19 related death occurred, the family would not get the opportunity to view the deceased or to keep the death at home for viewing as general customs and have to cremate the body as the earliest time.

Death rituals and beliefs which were created and designed as a way to accept the death and release the grief of the close relations for the demised person has become obstructed with the pandemic. The final moments of a Covid-related patient would be very different to the general practices as they will not have any close family member to comfort them. The pandemic has obviously made a massive impact on psychological wellbeing of the close relations of the perished as well as the dying person himself, denoting the worthy life lesson of uncertainty and vulnerability of life.

CONCLUSION

Death as a fundamental attribute of all living things has evolved to be an important occasion for humans to pay their last respect to the perished. From abandoning the dead in caves to cremation and burial, the rituals regarding dead has evolved with time. Funeral rites started to be more professional and were practiced according to the teachings of each religion with the expectations of ensuring a better after life for the dead. While both Buddhists and Hindus used cremation as the method of disposal, Muslims only accepted burial according to their laws. The Covid-19 pandemic situation created a crisis to the performance of funeral rites to all the religion, especially to Muslims as the government of Sri Lanka imposed compulsory cremation to the Covid related deaths to avoid consequences of burial. Despite burial being accepted later on, the world framed the Sri Lankan government as racist and viewed the action of compulsory cremation as a violation of minorities' rites. The situation would have been controlled without reaching the international sphere if the government approached the community and reasoned out the facts behind the decision in an understanding manner as death in the contemporary society is attached to many responsibilities and rituals to ensure the afterlife of the deceased.

Thus the research depicts that the pandemic has created the necessity to ensure that the covid-19 related deaths should be safely disposed and the community should adhere to the safety protocols irrespective of the ethnic beliefs. The governments also should engage more with the general public and ensure that all the decisions made by the ruling party is not to discriminate against any ethnic community but to safeguard the society. The present pandemic will last longer than predicted, making it essential to follow safety protocols when dealing with both dead and living, irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic differences and age. Death is universal and so is the pandemic, making it crucial to take decisions based on facts rather than sentiments.

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