

## **An Anthropological Study of Death and Funeral Ceremony with focus in Gilan Province**

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**Abstract:** *A rite of passage is a ritual event that marks a person's transition from one status to another, including birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death. One of the rite of passage is funeral and its Rituals. A funeral is a ceremony for honoring, respecting, sanctifying, or remembering the life of a person who has died. Funerary customs comprise the complex of beliefs and practices used by a culture to remember the dead, from interment itself, to various monuments, prayers, and rituals undertaken in their honor. The main purpose in this paper is to investigate the aspects of funeral and its Ceremony and Rituals with the focus in Gilan Province by anthropology view. The method in this paper is quality and tools of data collection are library and field research methods have been used. It is mention in the theoretical framework the present research for its analysis of data, is based on functionalism.*

**Keywords:** *Anthropology, Death, Funeral, Ceremony, Gilan Province.*

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### **Introduction**

A ritual "is a sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and performed according to set sequence. Rituals may be prescribed by the traditions of a community, including a religious community. Rituals are characterized by formalism, traditionalism, invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance (Bell, 1997). Rituals are a feature of all known human societies. They include not only the worship rites and sacraments of organized religions, but also rites of passage, atonement and purification rites, oaths of allegiance, dedication ceremonies, marriages and funerals. The funeral ritualism a public, traditional and symbolic means of expressing our beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the death of someone loved. Rich in history and rife with symbolism, the funeral ceremony helps us acknowledge the reality of the death, gives testimony to the life of the deceased, encourages the expression of grief in a way consistent with the culture's values, provides support to mourners, allows for the embracing of faith and beliefs about life and death, and offers continuity and hope for the living. Unfortunately, our mourning-avoiding culture has to a large extent forgotten these crucial purposes of the meaningful funeral. Therefore, the task is to identify, to compile and to collect different Iranian ethnic Ceremony and Ritual to encourage and develop positive functions and cohesive effects in the community to prevent it from being forgotten.

### **Justification of Problem and Significance of Study**

When someone dies without leaving specific instructions, many people opt not to hold a funeral. Before making such a decision, however, consider the role that funerals play in the grieving process. Ultimately, the decision to hold a funeral should be up to each individual. But in some cases, an individual dies without leaving direction regarding his or her funeral preferences. In these situations, think about what he or she might have wanted. Obtain a family consensus about what funeral arrangements should be made. In making these choices consider all of your funeral options. In recent year, not having any type of service has become a trend. Although this may save the family both time and money, holding a funeral or memorial ceremony for the deceased can be an important step in the grief process.

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Recognition of the deceased is important because:

- It reinforces the reality of a loved one's death.
- It allows family and friends to acknowledge and express their loss.
- It allows loved one's to interact with the community in their new roles (e.g., widower).
- It offers a constructive environment for people to reevaluate their views on life and death.
- It offers group support by creating a common experience with those present.

It is a fact that, nowadays, these customs of the people are changing and some important elements are on the verge of being forgotten. In this research carried out in Gilan province, it was observed that behavioral aspects of folklore as funeral rite have undergone drastic changes. Some of them lost their function and some of them have been completely destroyed. The consequences and effects of these changes are quite visible in different structures of the society. Therefore, with regards to the importance of customs and their ability to transfer culture, efforts are necessary to preserve and protect the culture.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

- To Anthropological Study of Death and Funeral Ceremony's aspects.
- To study Death and Funeral Rituals in Gilan province.
- To understand and analyze of Functions Funeral Ceremony.
- To study of rite of passage and its importance.

### **Research Methodology**

The method in this paper is quality and tools of data collection are library and field research methods have been used.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Functionalism (Anthropological Theories of Ritual)**

Nineteenth century "armchair anthropologists" were concerned with the basic question of how religion originated in human history. In the twentieth century their conjectural histories were replaced with new concerns around the question of what these beliefs and practices did for societies, regardless of their origin. In this view, religion was a universal, and while its content might vary enormously, it served certain basic functions such as the provision of prescribed solutions to basic human psychological and social problems, as well as expressing the central values of a society. Bronislaw Malinowski used the concept of function to address questions of individual psychological needs; A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, in contrast, looked for the function (purpose) of the institution or custom in preserving or maintaining society as a whole. They thus disagreed about the relationship of anxiety to ritual (William and Evon 1979). Malinowski argued that ritual was a non-technical means of addressing anxiety about activities where dangerous elements were beyond technical control: "magic is to be expected and generally to be found whenever man comes to an unbridgeable gap, a hiatus in his knowledge or in his powers of practical control, and yet has to continue in his pursuit.". Radcliffe-Brown in contrast, saw ritual as an expression of common interest symbolically representing a community, and that anxiety was felt only if the ritual was not performed. George C. Homans sought to resolve these opposing theories by differentiating between "primary anxieties" felt by people who lack the techniques to secure results, and "secondary (or displaced) anxiety" felt by those who have not performed the rites meant to allay primary anxiety correctly. Homans argued that purification rituals may then be conducted to dispel secondary anxiety (Homans, 1941).

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown argued that ritual should be distinguished from technical action, viewing it as a structured event: "ritual acts differ from technical acts in having in all instances some expressive or symbolic element in them." [Edmund Leach, in contrast, saw ritual and technical action less as separate structural types of activity and more as a spectrum: "Actions fall into place on a continuous scale. At one extreme we have actions which are entirely profane, entirely functional, technique pure and simple; at the other we have actions which are entirely sacred, strictly aesthetic, and technically non-

functional. Between these two extremes we have the great majority of social actions which partake partly of the one sphere and partly of the other. From this point of view technique and ritual, profane and sacred, do not denote types of action but aspects of almost any kind of action."(Leach, 1954)

### **Rites of Passage**

A rite of passage is a ritual event that marks a person's transition from one status to another, including birth, coming-of-age, marriage, death as well as initiation into groups not tied to a formal stage of life such as a fraternity. Arnold van Gennep stated that rites of passage are marked by three stages: separation, transition and incorporation (Bell, 1997). In the first stage, the initiates are separated from their old identities through physical and symbolic means. In the transition phase, they are "betwixt and between." Victor Turner argued that this stage is marked by liminality, a condition of ambiguity or disorientation in which initiates have been stripped of their old identities, but have not yet acquired their new one. Turner states "The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous. In this stage of liminality or "anti-structure" (see below) the initiate's role ambiguity creates a sense of communities or emotional bond of community between them. This stage may be marked by ritual ordeals or ritual training. In the final stage of incorporation, the initiates are symbolically confirmed in their new identity and community (Turner, 1969).

### **Classification of Rites**

No scheme of classification of passage rites has met with general acceptance, although many names have been given to distinguishable types of rites and to elements of rites. The name purification ceremonies, for example refers to an element of ritual that is very common in rites of passage and also in other kinds of religious events. In most instances, the manifest goal of purification is to prepare the individual for communication with the supernatural, but purification in rites of passage may also be seen to have the symbolic significance of erasing an old status in preparation for a new one (see also purification rite). Other names that have been given to passage rites often overlap. Life-cycle ceremonies and crisis rites are usually synonymous terms referring to rites connected with the biological crises of life, but some modern scholars have included among crisis rites the ritual observances aimed at curing serious illnesses. Ceremonies of social transformation and of religious transformation overlap and, similarly, overlap crisis rites. Religious transformations, such as baptism and rites of ordination, always involve social transformations; social transformations such as at coming-of-age and induction into office may also bring new religious statuses, and life-cycle ceremonies similarly may or may not involve changes in religious statuses. It is nevertheless sometimes useful to distinguish the various rites by these names<sup>1</sup>.

### **Important of Rite of Passage**

When we design rite of passage experiences, we work to assure that initiates come out of the experience with a new and empowering story that helps them take responsibility for the decisions that set the course of their future. We help initiates create the story of who they are and the kind of life they want to build based within the exploration of their own personal values. We also help them find the story that connects them to their community. Through this self-exploration initiates emerge with a stronger sense of personal responsibility to all aspects of their lives – stretching all the way out to the larger world of which they are a part. In this way both the community and the initiate benefit from a rite of passage. An intentional rite of passage experience provides the space for the community to transmit its core values and confer the role responsibilities appropriate to the initiate's stage of life, thus insuring cultural continuity, a sort of knitting together of the generations.

### **Funeral**

A funeral is a ceremony for honoring, respecting, sanctifying, or remembering the life of a person who has died. Funerary customs comprise the complex of beliefs and practices used by a culture to remember the dead, from interment itself, to various monuments, prayers, and rituals undertaken in their honor. Customs vary widely both between cultures and between religious groups and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britannica.com>

denominations within cultures. Common secular motivations for funerals include mourning the deceased, celebrating their life, and offering support and sympathy to the bereaved. Additionally, funerals often have religious aspects which are intended to help the soul of the deceased reach the afterlife, resurrection or reincarnation. The funeral generally includes a ritual through which the corpse of the deceased is given up. Depending on culture and religion, these can involve either the destruction of the body (for example, by cremation or sky burial) or its preservation (for example, by mummification or interment). Differing beliefs about cleanliness and the relationship between body and soul mean that a funerary practice that is deeply sacred to one culture may be absolutely taboo in another. When a funerary ceremony is performed but the body of the deceased is not available, it is usually called a memorial service. The word funeral comes from the Latin *funus*, which had a variety of meanings, including the corpse and the funerary rites themselves. Funerary art is art produced in connection with burials, including many kinds of tombs, and objects specially made for burial with a corpse.

### **Death and Funeral**

The acceptance of death as a fact and the belief in the spirit and consequently the emergence of thought and the honoring of ancestors and elders reveal the major relation between religion and religious rituals and social traditions. It is so because the basic function of man regarding the phenomenon of death is the belief in the immortality of man which prevents his submission to death and destruction. One of the main ways of this combat is the practice of customs and rituals of mourning. Its basic function is achieved through the sanctity of the traditions. The factors that led to the emergence of the deaths accident left to the creation of certain rituals, although some are in contrary to each other, are:

1. Fear of dead body of the deceased person.
2. Afraid of ghosts and spirits of the deceased person.
3. Love and interest for the deceased person.
4. Aversion of inanimate body of the deceased person.
5. Disgust of death and to fight with it.

The society or group members are divided to the several groups to do certain formalities. Each group will be prepared for a special ceremony; one for the burial ceremony and a group for choosing a suitable place for holding religious funerals and so on. Thus, the practice of the funeral ceremony requires the establishment of a system or social organization. It is actually formed according to ancient traditions and culture simultaneously in tune with the role and status of social, economic, political and religious establishment of the deceased person. Most of the reactions of the remaining are shown as follows:

1. Strong and explosive crying.
2. Scratching the head and face.
3. Pulling the head hair.
4. Rubbing mud on the body of the mourners.
5. Unshaven or scruffy heads.
6. Irregular or ragged clothing.

These behaviors reflect the extreme emotional pain of survivors and the family members of tribes and clans which usually change after the burial ceremony. Most of the practiced ceremonies lead group's reunion to practice the religious appropriation. Their function is to remove inequalities and to lead the society towards increasing equality and social cohesion and solidarity.

### **Before and at Death**

The process of dying and the moment of death have been regarded as occasions of the gravest crisis in many religions. The dying must be especially prepared for the awful experience. In China, for example, the head of a dying person was shaved, his body was washed and his nails pared, and he was

placed in a sitting position to facilitate the exit of the soul. After the death, relatives and friends called the soul to return, possibly to make certain whether its departure from the body was definitive. Muslim custom decrees that the dying be placed facing the holy city of Mecca. In Catholic Christianity, great care is devoted to preparing for a “good death.” The dying person makes his last confession to a priest and receives absolution; then he is anointed with consecrated oil: the rite is known as “anointing of the sick” (formerly called extreme unction). According to medieval Christian belief, the last moments of life were the most critical, for demons lurked about the deathbed ready to seize the unprepared soul as it emerged with the last breath.

### **Functions Funeral Ceremony**

The link between religion and funeral ceremony and turning the ceremony to a sort of religious performance which was the source of exciting dramas in different societies provides the context for the manifestation of various social, mental and so on functions. The practice of mourning ceremonies shows the pains displayed at the funeral and the actions appeared in mourning, the emotions of those who have been deprived from one of their relatives and the tragic loss has happen for the whole family members of the community or group. The most important function of these actions is to amplify innate emotional of survivors and facing a social event as a natural reality. Thus the mourning and funeral ceremonies, religious, wailing and crying rituals and so on prepare a condition in which society and survivors of deceased can endure inflicted suffering. Religious practices, rites and rituals and the association of death and mourning ceremonies with these rituals and explaining that event as God’s holy providence can reconstruct the spiritual foundations of society who have been shaken. According to Radcliffe Brown (farbod, 2007) major functions of the customs of mourning have been recognized as follows:

1. Each of the rituals that have been practiced is an account the emotional state of mind shared by two or more people like crying which shows a sense of solidarity.
2. Implemented customs and practices are correlated with the commitment and the obligation to follow them. In other words, it is the obligations and to follow responsibilities that people should follow in the given opportunities.
3. Each of the customs and practices are defined as the regulators of the emotional life of human beings taking account of the basic rules. Thus, they have to be accepted as a reality. For example, crying is an outlet for the emotions and hugging people is to express the devotion to each other.
4. Each of the applied traditions changes and reminds more socio-emotions in the participants’ minds. For example, crying as lament is the immune response or a kind emotion at the time that solidarity that has been threatened by an interruption or a social failure.

### **Death and Funeral Ceremony and Rituals in Gilan**

Iran has 31 provinces. Gilan is one of the smallest provinces. Gilan province covers an area of 14,711 square kilometers. Gilan province is situated to the south of the Caspian Sea. To the East of Gilan is the Mazandaran Province. South of Gilan is covered by Alborz Mountain ranges. West of Gilan is covered by Talesh Mountain ranges. To the North of Gilan is the Caspian Sea. Rasht is the capital city of the province<sup>1</sup>. In Gilan Death and Funeral Ceremony and Rituals is very Remarkable and excessive in this section we briefly explained about this ceremony. The death of anyone in any position brings sadness for all around the neighborhood and a part of town or village and calls the sympathy and bereavement support of all in Gilan especially in small towns and villages. All will cooperate in the funeral and burial ceremonies. When the dead person was buried, they will accompany mourners to the house. The close relatives will stay there and others say goodbye. In some villages, they usually plant a “Cypress tree” near the head of the death’s tomb. Cypress tree is respected tree and the old Cypress trees are bound to respect and sacredness in the region. Except Cypress tree, boxwood and pomegranate trees are also planted near the grave. The grave covered by river rocks and a long thin stone on the grave vertically. In some areas, they send something to the dead body in the Graveyard

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.amar.org.ir>

usually bread and Halva. They bring and share some rice there as charity after the funeral in the evening and light up some lights where the dead body was washed for three nights. However, they are busy with arrangement and preparations to hold mourning ceremony lasts three days and prepare the end or final ceremony after the funeral everywhere in Gilan. The end or final ceremony is to be held in the mosque but held at the house at some regions end as well. Nowadays, people have to be informed about date and venue of the ceremony via posters attached on walls in cities. The final ceremony is usually to be held on the third day. At this time, acquaintances and relatives visit the mourners to express their sympathy and condolences. Relatives and close friends can stay there at night as well as and try to relief families lost a member. The ceremony will end up by elders' permission and the recitation of verses from Al-Rahman Sura (part of holy Quran). After praying, some will accompany the grieving family to their home. There, they will be served with tea and dates.

In the third day, they served some pre-invited people or all to have lunch there in fact according to the family afford. If the family cannot afford, they will confine just to the final ceremony. Holding the seventh day, the fortieth day and the annual ceremonies is also common. Among all, the fortieth day ceremony is relatively more common. These ceremonies and gatherings are held on the grave. Nowadays, the signs of mourning is wearing black clothes and refusing to participate in the wedding and happy parties. The time of mourn will vary according to proximity for each survivor. The period is usually of forty days to one year for female persons and a week to forty days for men. But, wearing black cloths has not been common and generalized in traditional societies of Gilan. In villages, they wear only a piece of black clothes or only they avoided wearing red and happy ones. The main sign of mourning was to avoid using henna and attending the wedding and happy parties in fact. Mourning men open the collar button of their shirts and avoid shaving their hair and face. After holding the final ceremony, the elders and old people have a duty to force them to take of their black clothes and to fasten their buttons and send henna for the mourning women at the end of the mourning period. They take them to the bathroom and put henna on their hands as well. Moreover, they bring henna for grieving families to let them forget about the grief on the day of Eid.

### **Epilogue**

A rite of passage is a ritual event that marks a person's transition from one status to another, including birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death Arnold van Gennep stated that rites of passage are marked by three stages: separation, transition and incorporation. A funeral is a ceremony for honoring, respecting, sanctifying, or remembering the life of a person who has died. Funerary customs comprise the complex of beliefs and practices used by a culture to remember the dead, from interment itself, to various monuments, prayers, and rituals undertaken in their honor. The process of dying and the moment of death have been regarded as occasions of the gravest crisis in many religions and places.

Death and Funeral Ceremony and Rituals in Gilan is very remarkable too and has a lot of functions but Some of them lost their function and some of them have been completely destroyed. The consequences and effects of these changes are quite visible in different structures of the society.

Therefore, with regards to the importance of customs and their ability to transfer culture, efforts are necessary to preserve and protect the culture.

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