Cremation and the 'ethical' handling of ashes

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Abstract. Several new alternatives to traditional burial have emerged through the years, including the communal cinerary urn option which involves the cremation of the deceased and the burial of their ashes in a shared burial, often located in a dedicated site, such as a memorial garden or a cemetery. Understanding the motivations and ethical considerations, that guide people's burial choices can offer valuable insights for both practitioners and those who are faced with making decisions regarding their own burial, or that of their loved ones. This study aims to examine funeral rites and the concept of the communal cinerary urn exploring, through interviews conducted with family members of people who have chosen this option, the personal, cultural, economic, and spiritual motivations that led them to opt for this form of burial, while also analysing the ethical concerns and emotions associated with this choice, including feelings of loss, respect, and remembrance.

Keywords: grief, rituals, cremation, incineration, communal cinerary urns, burial practices, corpse, bioethics, memory

Introduction

The relationship between the living and the dead has always been characterised by ambivalent feelings and emotions related, on the one hand, to the terror of death, of the unravelling of the flesh, of the unknowable, and, on the other, to the need to preserve both a memory of the departed person and the shared experiences involving them (1, 2).

The overriding purpose of all funeral rites, regardless of the culture in which they exist, is to definitively remove the dead from the community by placing them in a 'separate' world, in a distinct space among the elements of nature, so that a transition from organic to inorganic chemistry can take place and sanction the person's complete estrangement from the living (3).

In most Mediterranean civilisations it is customary to cover corpses with earth and group the burials within a defined space, to represent a distance, another dimension, another territory.

Indeed, for the funeral rite to perform this liberating function of separation, it must be a collective rite, involving the dead person's entire community. In this regard, the anthropologist Robert Hertz points out how the practices associated with death have more of a social, rather than individual, character, aimed at stemming that state of crisis that a death creates, not only within the family group, but on all social balances, in relation to the feeling of emptiness deriving from the relevance the deceased had in the community's social life (4).

Remo Bodei too, in his essay "Limits" recalls that "all civilisations, religions and worldviews have elaborated strategies and rituals to remove, exorcise or attribute some significance to death" (5).

Between 1932 and 1933, the anthropologist Frazer (author of "The Golden Branch") gave a series of lectures in Cambridge on the subject of 'Fear of the Dead in Primitive Religions', later published as a volume with the same title (6, 7). There he relates an extensive collection of funeral rites belonging to many

different cultures to show the widespread presence of a sense of fear, sometimes outright terror, towards the spirit of the dead. He also emphasises the role, and social function, of funeral rites in keeping the souls of the dead at bay, separating them from the living, and defining clear boundaries between the living and the dead: "In general, the feeling of primitive man [...] towards the spirits of the dead is very different from ours, in that it is dominated, on the whole, more by fear than by affection. We think of our departed loved ones with anguish and affectionate regret and conceive no greater happiness than that of being reunited forever in a better world, in the afterlife. For the savage, the matter is quite different. If, on the one hand, it would be foolish and vain to deny that he also sincerely mourns the death of his relatives and friends, on the other hand, he is generally convinced that their spirits undergo a great change after death, which, on the whole, worsens their character and temperament, making them susceptible, irritable and choleric, easily offended by the slightest pretext, and willing to bring their discontent upon the living, afflicting them with misfortunes of all kinds" (7).

Alongside the need to symbolically exorcise the fear of following the fate of the deads, or the one that they may drag us down with them (of which the stories of zombies, ghosts, and revenants are examples), the community ritual also performs the function of lessening the detachment, distance, and lack of communication with the 'other' dimension, that separates us from our loved one. The collective performance of various gestures (such as: prayer, singing, collective weeping, the tearing one's clothes, wearing the colours of mourning, and mutilation) has the function of maintaining some emotional continuity with the deceased, mitigating the trauma of the loss, and helping to soothe the pain and sense of loss (4).

Already in 1907, in an article devoted to the collective representation of death, Robert Herz had described the practice of the double burial, that is: the presence, in many traditional societies, of two distinct funeral ritual moments, distanced in time. A first temporary burial, which does not definitively separate the deceased from the community in which they lived, and a second ritual moment, usually a couple of years later, after the body has decomposed and only its bones re-

main, which marks their definitive parting (8).

In attempting to understand this practice one can reflect on the idea that cultural death, unlike biological death, cannot be accomplished in a single instant, but must be diluted in time and become more of a progressive condition than a single event.

Both the theme of ambivalence and that of the intrinsic social nature of mourning are reprised and explored by the philosopher Ernesto De Martino in his text "Death and Ritual Mourning" (9). This book, as is well known, begins with a study of the archaic forms of mourning rituals in the rural Mezzogiorno of the 1950s, to more generally investigate the way in which culture deals with death. De Martino also interprets the attraction-fear ambivalence, that characterises the processes of managing mourning, as a condition that cannot be overcome individually, but requires collective rites and a community that shares the grief and responsibility of coping with the unspeakable, the unthinkable, as well as the objective of bringing the survivors back to social life, to the everyday, favouring their adaptation and survival (9).

Despite referring to traditional societies (from the Dayaks of Borneo mentioned by Hertz, to De Martino's poor Lucanian farmers) the observations of these anthropologists seem equally applicable to contemporary societies, which have, now like never before, understood the importance of rituality. In fact, far from belonging only to ancient or primitive societies, the ritual dimension represents an ineradicable aspect of human sociality, as the recent epidemic crisis has sadly highlighted. The impossibility of using the usual rites of mourning has, in fact, represented one of the most destabilising aspects of COVID deaths 19 (10-12).

Admittedly, the processes of individualisation and secularisation have made mourning a somewhat more private and introspective experience, less tied to the matter and formality of the ritual, as, for example, can be seen in the display of the body whose manipulation is nowadays entrusted to 'neutral' specialists who, far from the gaze of the closest circle of loved ones, intervene in the final care of the person gaining an intimacy that used to belong to the relatives. But the dimensions of holding back and letting go, and the centrality of the corpse remain the crucial features

of our way of imagining death, as well as of contemporary funeral rites, which are represented by a set of structured and codified practical actions organised around the corpse and aimed at stemming and overcoming, through the construction of a shared ceremoniality, the very anguish of death.

As the American anthropologist Beth Conklin (2018: 105) argues, the corpse is a peculiar form of person-thing, which retains the characteristics of the living person, at least as long as the funeral rites last, but at the same time is an 'inalienable object' as well, which 'belongs' to its family circle and represents for it a very powerful marker of social identity (13).

These considerations are even more significant in specific situations, for instance when death occurs after a fairly long period of coma or unconsciousness.

In this instance the body has already lost its agency, has gone through a phase of liminality, and the ambiguity of detachment has had more time to resolve itself. Another borderline situation is that of a missing body, which can occur in the case of accidents, terrorist attacks or in the case of migrant shipwrecks. Here the absence of remains breaks the unity of body and person, mourning loses its material reference and is forced to seek the support of a constitutive materiality, that of images or objects that can 'stand for' the deceased.

Yet another situation is that of bodies recovered but not identified. In those cases, there is a body, but the social 'person' inscribed in it is missing, as in the case of migrants who drowned in the Mediterranean. Giorgia Mirto's research shows how, even in the absence (or non-existence) of established norms regulating the management of the migrant's mourning, local communities, drawing on their own ancient traditions, make the migrant part of their history. In many Sicilian cemeteries, the burials of unidentified migrants are, in fact, the object of informal practices of piety and worship by local women. It is not the abstract idea of death, nor the ethical weight of the dramatic fate of these drowned people, but the material presence of the bodies and graves that calls for the work of mourning, beyond all parental and community ties (14).

Cremation in the historical and moral tradition

Alongside those practices aimed at safekeeping and preserving corpses, different ones oriented towards the rapid dissolution of the body of the deceased, such as incineration, have always existed through European history, sometimes within the same socio-cultural framework.

In Italian customs cremation became established as far back as Etruscan times, for reasons of both hygiene and better use of space, since it made it possible to speed up the decomposition of the body, and because it favoured a deeper appreciation of the spiritual part of man through the rapid elimination of their material remains by means of a symbol as strong as that of fire (15, 16).

Still in Roman times, this practice had fuelled anti-religious and anti-Christian propaganda campaigns, so much so that pagans used to burn the bodies of martyrs to mock their beliefs in resurrection. In the 1700s, the illuminists also used cremation to express their atheism and their instances of rebellion against the ecclesiastical institution. For these reasons, and despite the fact that incineration had been allowed by the Christian religion in emergencies such as plagues or wars, this form of burial was banned by the Holy Office in 1886 and remained so until 1963, when, once the danger of heresy and the risk of improper use of this method against the faith had passed, the Pope authorised the faithful to choose the funeral rites they deemed most appropriate.

Incineration has therefore become, in the eyes of the Church as well, a burial method that respects the person as much as interment does, and in no way represents an obstacle to the resurrection of the bodies announced in the Sacred Texts (17, 18).

In the Code of Canon Law (canon 1176) we read: "the Church strongly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be preserved; however, it does not prohibit cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons contrary to Catholic doctrine". Nevertheless, there persists on the part of the Christian religion a preferential orientation for interment, affirmed again recently, August 2016, with the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith "Ad resurgendum cum Christo", which

reaffirmed that burial should be considered "the most suitable form for expressing faith and hope in bodily resurrection" (19). According to exegetical doctrine, interment, with its symbols, tombs, and epitaphs has a specific evocative function as well, one that hinders those movements, typical of today's societies, which promote a denial of death and the transience of earthly life.

The Church, however, does not recognise the possibility for the faithful to disperse the ashes of a relative "in the air, on earth, or in water or in any other way", nor to convert them into "commemorative mementos" such as pieces of jewellery or other objects, nor to keep them in the home.

Behind these indications lies the fear that an animistic religiosity will assert itself, leading to death being conceived as a cosmic and impersonal fusion, far removed from the principles of Christian anthropology.

The ashes must therefore be placed in a sacred place, so that they are protected from superstitious practices and the lack of respect, or carelessness, that could occur due to the succession of generations (20). According to the Church, in fact, attitudes and rituals involving erroneous conceptions of death, understood as the definitive annulment of the person (nihilist conception), or as the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or with the universe (pantheist conception), or as a stage in the process of reincarnation, or as the definitive liberation from the 'prison' of the body" (naturalist conception) must be opposed (19).

Attitudes towards cremation, however, vary considerably among different religions.

Buddhism deals with death as an integral part of the life cycle, and considers cremation and the scattering of ashes as a respectful way of treating the body since it expresses a renunciation of any form of attachment to materiality, which constitutes man's primary focus in order for him to have access to a more positive reincarnation. According to Buddhism, in fact, the body is only a temporary form that the soul abandons after death. The scattering of ashes in meaningful natural places, such as rivers, lakes or oceans, represents the soul's return to nature and fusion with the infinite cycle of life. The choice to bury the ashes in sacred grounds, such as temples or

monasteries, on the other hand, reflects the desire to maintain a spiritual bond with the community and its sacred figures.

In the Hindu religion cremation is considered an important practice that has deep roots too. According to Hindu beliefs, the physical body is only a temporary shell of the eternal soul (Atman) that reincarnates into a new body after death. Cremation thus, hastens the process of separation between body and soul, allowing the soul to set out on its path after death more quickly.

The practice of cremation and ash scattering has social and ecological implications as well. In India, for instance, numerous cremation facilities have been built along sacred rivers, although population growth has led to some criticism regarding the pollution of rivers in relation to ashes and ritual offerings (21, 22).

In traditional Judaism, cremation is generally considered unacceptable. According to Jewish law, the human body is considered sacred and must be buried whole to honour divine creation. Cremation, therefore, is generally seen as a violation of this principle (23, 24). However, in recent years, this mode of burial has also become a viable option for the Jewish community as well.

The position of Muslims on cremation and the scattering of ashes is similarly one of opposition. Muslims believe in the resurrection of bodies, and their recomposition for the final judgement. As cremation physically destroys the body it is, thus, considered a violation of the tenets of the faith and an act denoting a lack of devotion and insufficient respect for the deceased (25).

Therefore, most Muslims avoid cremation as a funerary option.

However, it is important to emphasise that Islam is a composite religion and that both opinions, and interpretations of religious teachings can vary greatly between different communities.

Some argue that exceptional circumstances, such as a lack of land for burial or the need to transfer the remains to a foreign country, could justify the option of cremation. However, these exceptions are still debated and not universally accepted.

Communal cinerary urns

It is widely accepted that human ashes are not only a physical and biological entity, but are closely connected to the person to whom the body belonged in life and whose existence, history, and values they represent (26).

The continuity criterion between the living human body and the corpse, or (in any case) its ashes, requires therefore considering, as guiding criteria for any procedure inherent to its preservation and management, the dignity of, and respect for, the body of the person whose remains are a direct reference to and, also, for the people who harbour feelings of affection for the deceased.

In Italy, the law (Article 80, paragraph 6 of Presidential Decree 285/1990) also stipulates that each cemetery must have a communal cinerary urn for the collection, and perpetual and indistinct preservation, of the ashes from the cremation of those who have chosen this form of dispersal or for those situations in which family members have not made other arrangements.

Understood as the return, or dissolution, of the individual into the universal, or the undifferentiated, death has been a recurrent theme of philosophical reflection since antiquity. Indeed, Anaximander believed that all things, including man, developed and then dissolved, returning to the primordial principle from which they originated. Empedocles too held the view that birth and death were but phases in a continual aggregation and disintegration of the elements.

At the moment of death, in these conceptions, individuality thus merges with nature.

For these reasons, many people opt for a solution involving the deposition of their ashes in a communal cinerary urn.

Through open interviews conducted with 15 families of deceased people placed in the communal burial of the monumental cemetery of Genoa (a city in northern Italy), we attempted to identify the possible different reasons behind such choice.

We report, by way of explanation, the stories considered most significant for the purposes of this work.

The interview with the son of Dr Edoardo Guglielmino, a doctor from the old city centre of Genoa, a health enthusiast, but also a trade unionist, a public man who took care of the city, the common folk, who participated and gave a voice to the local community, confirms some hypotheses about his adherence to this practice.

Dr Guglielmino practised his profession in the slums of the city. In one of his books, he describes these places as "those crossroads of filth…where a suffering humanity reveals its most tragic face…stories of thieves and prostitutes…of ingenious little swindlers, and misguided minors…squalid stories…a bunch of men who, if forced by necessity, would bamboozle their own mothers, but who love their neighbours as themselves, as was shown when Iris, so beautiful that the marines had to wait in a queue, fell ill…" (27).

At his death, the family implemented his funeral wishes by opting, as he requested, for cremation and burial in the communal cinerary urn.

When we spoke with one of his sons about the reasons that may have led him to this decision, it emerged that he was driven by a deep desire for community, solidarity, and sharing that had guided his entire life as a father, a doctor, and a politician.

At various points in Dr. Guglielmino's stories, published by Socrem of Genoa in 2003, one can find evidence of this sense of belonging, to the other and to the community, of this permeability of individual boundaries that, while allowing for privacy, also let one share deep nuclei of their personality.

"I wonder what blood runs in my veins. I had my tests this morning. Blood of my blood, what a big word. Yet I feel your fears, your sadnesses, even your little fantasies are mine".

"…One does not love only the beautiful, the pleasant. I love an ugly dog, the ugliness of moisture on poor people's windows, the ugliness of an old man, the ugliness of the sea".

Iris discovers on the old man's face the hint of a smile.

'Something amuses you,' he asked?

"Irony? Humour"

"You know," replied the old man, "when you do irony you laugh at someone, when you do humour you laugh with someone".

The communal cinerary urn offers, thus, the possibility of satisfying a person's desire to be part of a

community even after their death, to continue to testify to their ideological and political positions on the side of the last.

It is, in fact, worth remembering that, according to current regulations, the ashes of those who: have no one to provide for their burial, are alone, or do not have sufficient financial resources are placed in the communal cinerary urn as well.

Economic motivations could, in fact, also influence the reasoning behind this choice. Cremation, followed by the deposit of ashes in a communal cinerary urn, may be more economically advantageous than traditional burial, as it requires less spending on the plot, grave maintenance, and funeral expenses in general, while making the people involved more 'equal'.

Another reason behind this choice might relate to social mobility, which increasingly imposes geographical mobility on those struggling to find employment. Depositing ashes in a common cinerary urn could, thus, allow family members to move or relocate without having to abandon the burial places of their loved ones to neglect.

Mrs. A.S. was a divorced woman with an only daughter, due to Alzheimer's syndrome she suffered a progressive deterioration of her cognitive functions. When she died, after years of institutionalisation, her daughter arranged for her cremation and the pouring of her ashes into the communal cinerary urn. This funeral wish had not been expressed directly by the mother, but by her ex-husband while still alive.

The daughter remarks that she had subscribed to this decision of her father as well, without, however, fully understanding its meaning.

The practice of placing one's ashes in the communal cinerary urn encouraged her to reflect on the meaning of memory and cultural heritage.

The loss of the identity that characterised one's life course could, in fact, be another motivation that drives people to a collective burial. A desire for oblivion, a right to oblivion, or the expression of the relatives' need to forget, banish, memories that are, for some reason, painful. Certainly, from an ethical point of view, one should question the right of the surviving family, or of the state, to strip a person, even a deceased one, of their identity, where there has been no clear

and unequivocal pronouncement on their part on the matter.

In Japan as well, the theme of identity loss returns in funeral practices, namely: in the custom of giving the deceased a new name (or kaimyo), which is different from the name the person had in life. This name is given by the priest and serves to prevent the person from being disturbed every time their name is pronounced in memory (28).

Mr P.D. was the sole survivor of a serious motorway accident in which fifteen people died, including his wife and two minor daughters. The collision between the bus, in which the family was travelling, and another vehicle carrying fuel started a fire that charred the bodies of the travellers who were unable to get to safety in time.

In reporting the choice of the common cinerary urn, Mr. P.D.'s brother recalls the sense of guilt that had plagued his relative throughout his life. He reports that his brother had lived his entire life secluded, withdrawn, never considering the possibility of rebuilding a family.

He was a dull man, with no plans and no dreams. A man who would have committed suicide if he had not held firm principles regarding the respect for, and preservation of, life.

In his brother's opinion, Mr P.D. chose cremation and communal burial to reunite with the fate of his wife and children, in the hope of finding them in that no man's land where the fire had swept them away, against his every wish.

Individuals who survive severe traumatic, such as those mentioned above, may come to experience a particular sense of guilt related to their status as survivors.

Two main reasons for this guilt have been identified in the literature: the feeling of benefiting from a privileged situation at the expense of others (29), and the perception of not having done enough to prevent a catastrophe and its consequences (30) against the background of a deep-rooted and erroneous belief in a just world (31).

This particular sense of guilt, in some ways similar to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, can lead the individual to isolation and, in extreme cases, suicide.

The first studies on this subject date back to the

years after World War II, when survivors of Nazi Lagers began to express intense psychological distress related to their condition as survivors. They reported an ongoing, and overwhelming, sense of shame that was elicited when confronted with their lived history. As Tzvetan Todorov writes, everything was invaded by a feeling of suspiciousness, a fear of having supplanted one's neighbour and living in his place as if: "everyone could be his brother's Cain ... and there was no longer any barrier between evil and oneself"(32).

The choice of a communal cinerary urn may thus be motivated by a feeling of shame at having survived a tragic event that involved the death of others, or at not having been able to give a dignified burial to a loved one, a theme that has come to the forefront again because of the recent pandemic. The moral duty of burial has been illustrated several times in classical texts, for example: in Homer's Iliad, when the writer recounts how King Priam begged Achilles to return the body of his son, who had fallen in battle, to him so that he could mourn and honour him together with his family. Or when Sophocles recounts the exploits of Antigone who, brought before her uncle (King Creon) on the charge of having given burial to her dead brother against the king's wishes, reminds him that not even a ruler can object to a funeral rite, a right granted to all men by the will of the Gods.

Conclusions

The rituals associated with burial reveal very profound existential, religious and political choices, which demand respect and attention, regardless of the person's state of illness or consciousness or of his or her economic or living conditions.

The choice of a communal cinerary urn is especially explicative of the different sensitivities underlying the very same funeral rite, and involves many different conceptions of death, memory, and personal and social commitment. It therefore requires a preliminary and careful ethical consideration to support the acknowledgement of the principle of self-determination with regard to one's own remains.

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