



Bereavement

How two cultures mourn their dead

Abstract

All people grieve their dead and this paper explores the differences and similarities in bereavement practices between the Tigray of Ethiopia and the Muscogee Creek Nation in the United States.

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REL3180 Death, Dying, and Beyond

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Overview

All humans mourn their dead and the Tigrayans and the members of the Muscogee Creek Nation¹ are no different. However, due to a variety of factors, their bereavement practices are significantly different. This paper will review the similarities and differences between the Tigrayans and the members of the Muscogee Creek Nation in the following areas:

- Cultural, societal, and economic factors as they relate to bereavement
- Beliefs about death
- Grief Expression
- Death Systems
- Cultural conflicts around bereavement beliefs and practices

It should be noted that it was difficult to write a comparison paper based on the provided resources as there was not consistent information provided between the articles. For instance, *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe* provided significant details about the funerary customs of the Muscogee Creek Nation, but *Discourses of Loss and Bereavement in Tigray, Ethiopia* did not provide comparable information. Similarly, *Discourses of Loss and Bereavement in Tigray, Ethiopia* provided significant information about the socioeconomic aspects of death and bereavement, but similar information was not included in *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*. As a result, in the interest of writing as complete of an analysis as possible, I have supplemented the provided sources with additional articles, which are cited in the text and a bibliography has been provided.

Culture, Societal, and Economic Factors

Death and bereavement do not occur in a vacuum as the rituals and practices surrounding death and grief are formed by cultural, societal, and economic factors, therefore it is important to review those factors before analyzing the death and bereavement practices of the Tigrayans and the Muscogee Creek Nation. The Tigray are the largest ethnic group in the northernmost regional state of Ethiopia of the same name. Of the 3.8 million people living in the region at the turn of the 21st century, 83 percent were peasants living in poverty and farming their hard and rocky soil without motorized utilities. (Nordanger, 2007). In contrast, the Muscogee Creek Nation is a self-governing Native American Tribe within the United States with a population of approximately 80,000 as of 2016, of which approximately 60,000 lived in Oklahoma, with the rest in other areas of the United States. (Wikipedia, n.d.). Although there is poverty within the Muscogee Creek Nation as there is within all Native America Tribes within the United States, the Muscogee Creek Nation has been proactive in looking for modern sources of revenue and currently owns a casino, a resort, a golf course, and other enterprises. (Muscogee Creek Nation, n.d.)

Both the Tigrayans and the Muscogee Creek Nation have seen war and displacement, but the violence and displacement suffered by the Tigrayans is more recent. As Nordanger said, "...the population of

¹ I have used Muscogee Creek Nation instead of Muscogee Creek Tribe, except in article citations, because that is how they refer to themselves.

Tigray has suffered from almost continuous recurrence of war and bloodshed.” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 175). Along with wars has come displacement with more than 300,000 Tigrayans displaced internally within Ethiopia and another 40,000 deported from Ethiopia. The Muscogee Creek Nation has also suffered from wars and displacement, but not within recent memory. The Muscogee Creek Nation originally lived in Alabama and Georgia, but were forcibly resettled by the United States Government to Oklahoma in the 1830s. The most recent armed conflict the Muscogee Creek Nation has seen on U.S. soil was the Civil War of the 1860s when some members of the Tribe sided with the Confederacy and others with the Union. Although the Muscogee Creek Nation has not been involved in armed conflicts on their soil since the 1860s, they have been involved in conflict with the United States Government to fight for their right to self-determination and the right to worship according to their own traditions. In the 1970s, the Muscogee Creek Nation elected their first Principal Chief without presidential approval and during the 1970s and 1980s there were several court rulings that upheld the Muscogee Creek Nation’s right to self-determination. (Muscogee Creek Nation, n.d.)

Both the Tigray and Muscogee Creek cultures are Christian to varying degrees and both are influenced by other practices. Approximately 95 percent of the Tigray population are members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is a branch of Eastern or Oriental Orthodox Christianity, however spiritual practices have been heavily influenced by Islam, indigenous spiritual practices, and Judaic influences such as fasting, dietary, and circumcision practices (Nordanger, 2007). The priest in Tigray villages is typically someone from the peasantry whose only formal spiritual education is deacon training. These priests combine their spiritual duties with “rather normal family and farming lives.” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 181). Priests in Tigray do not receive any payment from the church, but depend on payment, sometimes in the form of bread and livestock, from their parishioners. These priests often hold other positions of authority within the village in addition to their pastoral duties (Nordanger, 2007, p. 181).

While the Tigray were introduced to Christianity as early as the fourth century (Nordanger, 2007, p. 181), the Muscogee Creek Nation did not come in contact with missionaries until 1735. (Hall, n.d.). Traditionally Creek life was centered around the Ceremonial Grounds, which are “traditional Creek structures providing government, spiritual expression, and ritual.” (Walker & Balk, Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe, 2007). As Christianity became more prevalent, Churches were often built near the ceremonial grounds and were used for Christian rituals and ceremonies. (Walker & Balk, Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe, 2007). Although traditional Muscogee Creek spirituality persisted throughout their history, it wasn’t until 1978 when the Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed that Native Americans regained legal right to their own spiritual practices, which according to the Oklahoma Historical Society, “motivated many tribes to reinstate traditional sacred rites and ceremonies and also to present public events expressing Native community identity” (American Indians, n.d.). Today some members of the Muscogee Creek Nation are Christian, some attend Ceremonial Grounds, and some attend both. There are significant splits in beliefs among these groups as church members believe that some of the traditional beliefs defy Christianity, and members of the ceremonial grounds “perceive that the church is trying to ‘westernize’ the tribe and remove its ‘traditional’ practice,’ thus robbing the tribe of its cultural identity” (Walker & Balk, Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe, 2007, p. 639). Other individuals see the similarities between church and ceremonial ground practices.

Beliefs about Death

How a society mourns their dead is often dependent upon their views of death and the Tigray believe that each individual has a soul and that after death, individuals will be judged and sent to either heaven or hell. Additionally, most Tigray people believe that God recognizes how well a person's death is commemorated at their Teskar celebrations. As Nordanger says, "Most people think that a generous Teskar celebration increases the deceased person's chance of being let into Heaven on the Last Day" (Nordanger, 2007, p. 182). Tigrayan's also believe that priests have the ability to intercede on behalf of the deceased and that the more generous the family is, the more likely priests are to intercede with God. Nordanger said, "And through Fithat, God will be reminded of and gain respect for the deceased person and his or her family" (Nordanger, 2007, p. 182). Although people believed that the more gifts they provided to the church, the better chances their deceased would have of getting into heaven, some high-ranking clergy members criticized the practice as it gave the impression that gaining access to heaven was easier for wealthy people (Nordanger, 2007, p. 183). Although, based on the reading, the Tigray did not fear their own death, they did in some ways fear the death of a loved one because of the economic and social implications, which will be discussed in more depth below.

While beliefs about death were mostly homogenous among the Tigray, that was not the case among the Creek where there were some beliefs shared among most individuals of the Creek Nation and other beliefs that differed depending on whether an individual identified as Christian or as a member of the Ceremonial Grounds. Most Creek believed that death is not something to be feared, but is part of the natural cycle of life and death. As Walker said, "The importance Creeks placed on the belief in Nature's balance permeates the meanings associated with death—that it is cyclical, impermanent, and in perfect balance with life" (Walker A. C., *Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2008, p. 134). The Creek also believe that in death they will be reunited with their loved ones (Walker A. C., *Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2008, p. 135). Members of the Creek Nation who identified as Christian primarily followed Christian doctrine and believed that after death, individuals were judged and either went to heaven or hell. Individuals who identified as Ceremonial Ground members believed that when an individual died they did not go to heaven or hell, but to another plane of existence that exists in parallel to the land of the living. (Walker & Thompson, 2009, pp. 135-136)

Grief Expression

"Grief is defined as the emotional reaction to a loss," according to the Mini Lecture on Bereavement (Visscher, Bereavement Mini Lecture). Although the emotional response to grief may be the same for both the Tigray and members of the Muscogee Creek Nation, there are significant differences in the level and expressions of grief. For the Tigray, grief is complicated by the fact that emotional and financial security are deeply intertwined and the loss of an individual means not only the loss of companionship, but could also mean the loss of financial stability and socioeconomic status. Nordanger quoted a research assistant who stated, "For our society, people depend very much on each other. Every person in a household is needed for survival. If one member of the household dies, it is a tragedy for all. Because of this, our sorrow is immense" (Nordanger, 2007, p. 177). The Tigray society is an agricultural one and every member of the household has specific chores they are assigned, such as

fetching water and firewood, sowing the fields, and feeding the livestock. As Nordanger said, “When the father or a grown-up son dies, the ecology of the household is disturbed. If there is no one left to steer the oxen for plowing or threshing, or if there is a significant decline in income from supplementary activities, farming cannot be kept up” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 178) In addition, to the economic factors, the Tigray society has a significant wealth ranking system and, per Nordanger, “Being poor makes you more vulnerable to being talked to in insulting ways and, for women, to being exposed to sexual and other forms of harassment” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 179)

Despite the fact that grief in the Tigray culture has both emotional and significant socioeconomic impacts, the prevailing attitudes among the respondents to the survey is that “grieving and crying have no value since ‘it can’t bring back what is lost’” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 183). People are even told that excessive grieving and crying will have physical implications such as weak knees and blindness, which will lead to the inability to work, which will lead to additional economic duress. Priests even advise individuals that excessive grief will “provoke God and make the griever lose God’s trust” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 184). Despite this socially sanctioned view of grief, individuals understand that grief is part of the normal cycle of loss and there is a one-week to twelve-day period where family members, neighbors, and other loved ones are expected to wail and mourn to get their grief out. However, after this period, most outward expressions of grief are expected to end, except for the person’s widow or bereaved mother who are expected to grieve for a year or more.

Unlike the Tigray, the Muscogee Creek Nation does not appear to be as financially dependent upon one another and there does not appear to be the same wealth-stratification as in the Tigray and, based on the readings, it appeared that extended family members were more able to help out when a family member died than was possible for the Tigray. This means that when a loved one dies there is less fear about socioeconomic issues among the Creek than there are among the Tigray. As Walker said, “Also, with many family members contributing support and completing tasks that the deceased person would normally complete, adjusting to the loss may be more tolerable and grieving more controllable than without those family members” (Walker A. C., *Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2008, p. 131). Grieving among the Muscogee Creek Nation occurs at both an individual and a family level. Walker said this about individual grief, “A dominant theme among the participants was that they preferred to be alone during times of grief expression, particularly when highly emotional” (Walker A. C., *Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2008, p. 128). While individuals did like to be alone to feel sad and to cry, coming together to support their family members through their grief was also important. This shared grief tended to focus on laughing and sharing fond memories of the deceased. Just as in all families, sometimes people avoided talking about the deceased until the grief was less raw. (Walker A. C., *Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2008).

One understanding of grief that both the Muscogee Creek Nation and the Tigray share is that prolonged grief may require an intervention by a religious or medical expert. As Nordanger said about the Tigray, “However, when expressions of sorrow exceed cultural norms over time or in intensity, and if the griever is ‘unable to accept any advice’ from family and friends, this will be perceived as a sign of sorrow that is ‘out of control’” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 187). When this occurs, the person’s family or friends will call in an orthodox priest to host an intervention. Similarly, if a member of the Muscogee Creek Nation is thought to have excessive grief, a micco, or medicine man, would be called to intervene. Walker says

“An emotional sickness, such as depression, which is often triggered by grief from a loss, can also be remedied through an Indian medicinal treatment” (Walker A. C., *Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2008, p. 129).

Death Systems

I’ve chosen to use the Elements of a Death System framework that was outlined in the Death Systems mini lecture (Visscher, *Death Systems Mini Lecture*) to analyze the death practices of the Tigray and the Muscogee Creek Nation. I should note before providing this analysis, that it was difficult to find details regarding the funeral and burial practices of the Tigray. The assigned article, *Discourses of Loss and Bereavement in Tigray, Ethiopia*, provided some information, but it was not as thorough in outlining the death practices as the article about the Muscogee Creek Nation was. I did search for peer reviewed articles in the WMU library, but was unable to find anything that provided more detail about death practices among the Tigray. As a result, I utilized non-peer reviewed articles off of the Internet to supplement the information provided in the assigned article.

People

The deceased loved ones, including immediate and extended family, are an important part of the death rituals for both the Tigray and the Muscogee Creek Nation Members. For the Tigray during the time of house mourning, which typically lasts for a week to twelve days, family members and even neighbors mourn by crying, screaming, and wailing. Family members also express their grief by tearing their hair, knocking heavy objects against their chests, and other acts of self-harm (Nordanger, 2007, p. 186). Family members of a deceased Muscogee Creek Nation member also grieve together, but their grieving takes the form of sharing fond memories and laughing about the deceased (Walker & Balk, *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2007). Neighbors and extended family members play an important role in mourning in both the Tigray and Muscogee Creek bereavement rituals as in both cultures, neighbors and friends bring food to feed the bereaved and their guests. Within the Tigray culture, the priest plays an important role in the funeral ceremony by saying prayers for the deceased. Although it was not clear from the articles on Muscogee Creek Nation culture, there was an article on Muscogee Creek Nation Baptists that indicated that a preacher presided over the funeral and the graveside service for members of the Muscogee Creek Nation that were Baptists (Fife, 2007). There was also no available literature as to who presided over the burial of a Ceremonial Grounds Member.

Places

The initial mourning place for both the Tigray and the Muscogee Creek Nation people who are Ceremonial Ground Members is the home. For the Tigray, there is a house-mourning period where family members grieve their beloved dead before having a funeral (Nordanger, 2007, p. 186). For Ceremonial Ground Members, the person is often laid out at home and a wake is held at the house the night before the funeral (Walker & Balk, *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2007). Both the Tigrayans and the members of the Muscogee Creek Nation bury their dead in a cemetery. For the Tigrayans, the cemetery may be one that contains members of the deceased family or may be a place of their choosing. (Seyoum, n.d.). Muscogee Creek Nation members who are members of a church are

typically buried in a church cemetery. No information was available as to where Muscogee Creek Nation members who were not Christians were buried.

Times

There were very specific times laid out for bereavement activities within both the Tigray and Muscogee Creek Nation cultures. The Tigray practice a period of house-mourning that lasts for up to twelve days after a person has died. As noted above, during this period family members and even neighbors cry and mourn their dead. The Tigray also believe in the first year after a person has died, there should be seven *Teskars* held to commemorate the dead. These *Teskars* occur during religious and seasonal festivals. Most Tigray families cannot afford to celebrate all of these *Teskars* with an elaborate feast, but do celebrate the most important of these which is believed to happen 40 days after death for a male and 80 days after death for a female. The last significant time period noted for the Tigray culture was a one year or more period of bereavement for the widow or bereaved mother (Nordanger, 2007). For members of Muscogee Creek Nation, the first four days after a person has died are significant as they believe that the person's spirit remains on earth for the first four days and revisits his/her life. When a Ceremonial Ground Member dies, their extended family cannot dance until the first moon after the four-day mourning period and, depending on the rules of their Ceremonial Ground, immediate family members must wait up to a year. (Walker & Balk, *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2007)

Symbols

The Tigray and members of the Muscogee Creek Nation both use symbolism to honor the deceased. Tigrayans host large commemoration feasts called *Teskar's* to commemorate their dead. They are often encouraged by their priests to go beyond their financial means in providing for their guests at the *Teskars* as a way of gaining favor for their loved ones (Nordanger, 2007, p. 645). The Muscogee Creek Nation also honors their dead through symbolism, but based on the reading it did not appear that they incurred debt to do so. Muscogee Creek Nation members honored their dead by never leaving the body alone during the four days before burial as a way to keep the spirit of the deceased company. They also hosted a wake, which could last all night, the night before the burial with speakers talking about the deceased. Before the casket was closed, family members and friends put food and other favorite items in the casket so they would have them on their journey. As a sign of respect, friends of the deceased hand dug the grave the morning of the funeral. At the burial, family and friends would perform a symbolic farewell handshake by throwing a handful of dirt on the casket and, in most instances, family and friends stayed until the casket was covered with dirt. The last symbolic gesture noted in the article was building a small house over the grave. This practice began when the U.S. Government no longer allowed Muscogee Creek Nation members to bury their dead in mounds or under their own homes (Walker & Balk, *Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe*, 2007).

One area of symbolism that there did not seem to be a direct correlation for between the Tigray and the Muscogee Creek Nation was mourning customs. A widow or deceased mother in the Tigray culture is expected to "express her love and respect for the deceased by ignoring culture symbols of beauty" for a year or more after the death of their loved one (Nordanger, 2007, p. 186). This includes giving up

plaiting their hair and putting butter in it, coloring their palms and feet. They also often sleep on the floor and give up changing clothes and wear a thin white shawl called a metzela with the colored lining up when they are in public (Nordanger, 2007, p. 186).

Cultural Conflict

There was significant culture conflict in both the Tigray and Muscogee Creek Nation cultures, but the conflict in the Tigray culture had the potential to be more damaging as it had economic impacts. As Nordanger says, “Most people think that a generous Teskar celebration increases the deceased person’s chance of being let into Heaven on The Last Day. This relates to people’s importance of Fithat: the more people are present at Teskar and the more their goodwill is secured through good treatment, the more Fithat will be carried out during the celebration and later. And through Fithat, God will be reminded of and gain respect for the deceased person and his or her family” (Nordanger, 2007, p. 182). Priests heavily promote this idea and often pressure families to spend more than they can afford to host expensive commemoration feasts. The issue is complicated by the fact that priests do not receive a salary from the church, but rely on gifts and donations from members of the church. An additional incentive for church members to provide for the priest is that priests often also have the authority to include or exclude households from development programs (Nordanger, 2007, p. 181).

The conflict in the Muscogee Creek Nation culture is, in contrast, purely ideologic as Muscogee Creek Nation members who belong to the Christian Church believe that the traditional rituals are wrong and “defy Christianity,” while members of the Ceremonial Grounds believe that Christians are “trying to ‘westernize’ the tribe and remove its ‘traditional’ practices” (Walker & Balk, Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe, 2007). Although many of the practices between the Christians and Ceremonial Ground members were similar, there were differences around death beliefs as Christians typically believed that the dead went to either heaven or hell, while Ceremonial Ground members believed that the deceased continued their journey on another plane of existence (Walker & Thompson, 2009, p. 136)

Summary

Death, our own or that of those we love, is a part of the human experience, but how we experience death is dependent upon our culture and the death systems that each culture develops. As illustrated above, there are significant differences in how death is experienced by the Tigray and members of the Muscogee Creek Nation. One conclusion, I would draw from this research is that there are significant outside factors that influence the death rituals in both of these cultures. For instance, the Tigray’s culture’s attitude toward death is heavily influenced by their location in a drought stricken and war torn land that means the death of a family member has not only significant emotional impacts, but also financial impacts. In contrast, the Muscogee Creek Nation sits within a large, developed, and fairly peaceful nation and has access to multiple income streams and is not solely reliant on subsistence farming, which means that there may be little financial impact if a family member dies. Additionally, while the cultural conflict felt by the Tigray around priests pressuring them to host expensive celebrations has both a financial and emotional impact, the division between Christians and Ceremonial Ground members is primarily ideological and does not have a financial impact. One similarity that does

stand out in the readings is that the Tigray and Christian Muscogee Creek Nation members both share a belief in Jesus, God, and the afterlife that is not shared by Ceremonial Ground Members. Despite these differences, the bottom line is that we are all human and we all mourn our dead and take care to honor their memory.

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