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REVIEW

Death as a thread of Cultural and Religious Identity

La Muerte como Hilo Conductor de la Identidad Cultural y Religiosa

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ABSTRACT

This article approaches death from an anthropological perspective, exploring its historical evolution and its influence on diverse cultures and societies. It begins by examining how anthropology has contributed to our understanding of death, from its roots in the supernatural to contemporary approaches. Three pivotal periods in anthropological death research are identified: the twentieth-century evolutionary, the heyday of symbolic anthropology, and the current interdisciplinary era. The analysis focuses on the impact of European colonization in the New World and how anthropology emerged as a tool for documenting and understanding cultural and religious changes among indigenous populations who encountered the colonizers. In addition, it explores funerary beliefs and practices in diverse cultures, from the Incas in Argentina to contemporary native cultures in the same country. It highlights rituals and conceptions of death in different religions, including Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam and others. The article underscores the importance of appreciating the cultural diversity surrounding death in a globalized world. Despite superficial differences, death remains a universal theme that raises fundamental questions about life and transcendence. Understanding how different cultures confront and give meaning to death is essential to promote cross-cultural empathy and respect in today's society.

Keywords: Anthropology of Death; Cultural Evolution; Colonization; Funeral Rituals; Cultural Diversity.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la muerte desde una perspectiva antropológica, explorando su evolución histórica y su influencia en diversas culturas y sociedades. Comienza examinando cómo la antropología ha contribuido a nuestra comprensión de la muerte, desde sus raíces en lo sobrenatural hasta los enfoques contemporáneos. Se identifican tres períodos fundamentales en la investigación antropológica de la muerte: el evolucionista del siglo XX, el apogeo de la antropología simbólica y la era interdisciplinaria actual. El análisis se centra en el impacto de la colonización europea en el Nuevo Mundo y cómo la antropología emergió como una herramienta para documentar y comprender los cambios culturales y religiosos entre las poblaciones indígenas que se encontraron con los colonizadores. Además, explora las creencias y prácticas funerarias en diversas culturas, desde los Incas en Argentina hasta las culturas nativas contemporáneas en el mismo país. Se destacan rituales y concepciones de la muerte en diferentes religiones, incluyendo el catolicismo, el budismo, el islam y otras. El artículo subraya la importancia de apreciar la diversidad cultural en torno a la muerte en un mundo globalizado. A pesar de las diferencias superficiales, la muerte sigue siendo un tema universal que despierta preguntas fundamentales sobre la vida y la trascendencia. Comprender cómo diferentes culturas enfrentan y dan significado a la muerte es esencial para promover la empatía y el respeto intercultural en la sociedad actual.

Palabras clave: Antropología de la Muerte; Evolución Cultural; Colonización; Rituales Funerarios; Diversidad Cultural.

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INTRODUCTION

Death has been a fundamental concern for humanity since time immemorial, and its study has been approached from different perspectives.[1,2] As a discipline, anthropology has not been alien to inquiry and, from its beginnings, has explored the complex relationships between human beings, gods, and spirits in the context of death. Initially, these relationships were understood from a supernatural perspective, where the world of the living is intertwined with the afterlife.[3,4]

Understanding what human beings do in life became a way to understand the process of death and its meaning. However, the study of death in anthropology has evolved.[5] This introduction will explore how anthropology has contributed to our understanding of death, from its roots in the natural and supernatural to its contemporary approaches.

We will also analyze the influence of the evolutionary period on the anthropological study of death.[6] This inevitable companion has been a constant presence in human history. It has sparked debates from the philosophical to the dawn of civilization to our day, challenging beliefs, provoking questions, and shaping how we live our lives. In today's journey, we will explore the mystery and diversity of death, delving into the different cultures, societies, and religions that have woven their webs around this universal concept.[7]

Thus, we will unravel the threads that connect our human experiences through time, opening the door to a deeper understanding of our being and our relationship with this inevitable companion that is death.[8] Religion, in this sense, conjugates many expressions. Throughout history, various religions have shaped and shared their social representations of death, addressing crucial issues such as mourning, memory, and the enigma of what comes after death. Through this brief exploration, we will examine how different regions make this role of death a tradition, thus influencing society's perception of the end of life.[9]

DEVELOPMENT

In a context that marked the birth of a new world, the Spanish crown boldly colonized unknown lands. This process introduced radically new and, unfortunately, significantly changing forms of organization.[10]

It embraced the ruthless exploitation of the resources of aboriginal cultures. Colonization, characterized by its dark imprint, was forged in the depths of slavery and absurd domination, both politically and socially, in addition to the appropriation of priceless lands and riches, as well as emphasizing evangelization and a Castilian vocabulary, erasing part of their culture and racial outrage. This insatiable oppression, driven by uncontrollable greed, created an atmosphere of fear and terror that hovered over the indigenous civilizations. Many were forced to abandon their deep-rooted ancestral traditions. In contrast, others sought refuge in mystical rituals in a desperate attempt to protect themselves from the maelstrom of subjugation imposed by the colonizers, backed by the Spanish crown.[11]

This aspect was very influential, and its study brought new approaches and impacted how it was related. Anthropology, a discipline that seeks to understand and analyze cultural diversity, plays a fundamental role in exploring the relationship between death, society, culture, and religion.[12] In the context of European colonization in the New World, anthropology emerged as a means to understand and document both the rituals, funerary practices, and social structures of the indigenous cultures that unwittingly found themselves in the path of the European navigators.[7] This discipline provided a lens through which to examine these societies and shed light on how culture shock and the uprooting of indigenous populations profoundly impacted perceptions of the rituals surrounding death.[13] Throughout this essay, we will explore how anthropology contributed to our understanding of these issues in a crucial period of history.[14,15]

Moreover, to incorporate this, we will provide three significant periods. The first comprises evolutionary insights and theories at the end of the twentieth century.[16] The second, shorter, is from structuralism to the apogee of symbolic anthropology, as characterized by Clifford Hertz. The third period is finally framed in the 90s to the present, characterized by the inter / disciplinary age in the social and human sciences on death as an object of study and modernity as a space for reflection.[14,17]

First period

For evolutionists, death is more supernatural than real (20th century Taylor).

He argues that death is a phenomenon that explains two critical issues; on the one hand, human beings have been building religion through the veneration of the dead, and on the other hand, it has generated the idea that every individual has a soul for this is believed that when someone dies does not necessarily disappear.[18]

Freud would say that death is not a process of transference of the spirit but rather the compression of death to understand why we only think of death when it becomes visible in the first person.[19]

From these first two anthropological positions of death, the third one emerges, which names death as a functional process where it is seen as a social ritual, where it follows that the death of the individual implies configuring the personal history of who has departed, placing it in the collective memory or that it passes into oblivion.[8,20] A specific example of the ritual is the following case we present here.

European Navigators - Aboriginal Death-Submission-Death

In a context that marked the birth of a new world, the Spanish crown boldly colonized unknown lands, a process that introduced radically new and, unfortunately, significantly changing forms of organization.[21]

Amid this grim historical journey, a question persists and challenges us to reflect: Can human history's unbridled pursuit of power and wealth find any justification when measured against the loss of cultures, lives, and the essence of indigenous civilizations?[15] Moreover, ultimately, how do we reconcile ambition with humanity in a world that has often sacrificed the sacred in the name of

the mundane?

High in the Andes, where the peaks brush the skies, and the wind whispers stories of yesteryear, hides a mystery that has intrigued the world for centuries. It is the history of the Inca people; it is the history of the people, brave warriors who guarded incalculable treasures and left an indelible mark on the culture of the region we know today as Argentina, exactly, the story that we will present is located in the province of Salta. Amid this natural majesty on the shady slopes of the Llullaillanco volcano, an ancestral secret was discovered; it is part of that great story of a dark and moving period. The terror, the persecutions, the killing for ambition, carried the terror to these people, who sacrificed their most precious treasure, the lives of their children, to a cult, the gods, sought to find peace for their people, in these rites, in this culture, led to perform sacrificial rites, in 1480, during the expedition of the Inca empire to northeastern Argentina and later in 1532 when it fell under Spanish rule, ceremonies were held to the gods known as Capac Cocha or Capac Hucha. These ceremonies involved the sacrifice of children, such as the three children who were found 23 years ago, a 7-year-old boy (the boy), a 6-year-old girl known as (the lightning girl) due to a burn on her face, caused by lightning, and a 15-year-old girl, called (the maiden), Their preservation is impressive as if they were asleep, it is believed that they are more than 500 years old. Together with them, 46 objects constituted the trousseau, including human and animal figures in miniatures, utensils, food, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages and leaves of cocas.[22,23] According to the beliefs, these children did not die but were reunited with their ancestors and protected the tribes from the mountaintops. This testifies to the complexity of the human condition and the deep connections to culture, belief, and survival.

The ritual sacrifices of the Inca children, forced by their beliefs and cornered by fear, remind us of the ability of cultures to embrace death in the name of the mystical preservation of a people. This grim chapter in history urges us to question our understanding of faith, resilience, and sacrifice.[24] It leads us to reflect on the profound traces left by beliefs in human history. Throughout history, despite all the unjust oppression of natives of their land, they were forced to transfigure their cultures, beliefs, and traditions. Death was the theme of our ancestor and persists today, but those who made us reflect on it and gave their steps was the one who opened a scenario. The philosophy here briefly presents a concept.

Concept of death in philosophy

Get used to thinking that death is nothing about us. Because all good and all evil are in sensation, and death is deprivation of sensation.[25]

Inca beliefs and cultural aspect

The Incas embraced a belief in multiple gods that personified natural phenomena, such as the sun and the moon, which shone in the skies. Something curious or mystical is that before the arrival of the navigators, the sun, which shone in the skies, was darkened; according to them, this was because something good was not coming or something terrible. In their culture, although it was a very advanced civilization, it had its dark side: slavery was a reality, and prisoner labor was both for construction and war. However, their knowledge flourished in agriculture and animal husbandry.[26] Their rulers, the Incas or Sapa Incas, wielded absolute power with a formidable army and advanced technology. They were master strategists and developed various artistic expressions, from architecture music, and literature.[27]

Conception of death

For the Incas, the conception of death was an equally intriguing chapter in their history. The Incas saw death as an arduous journey to the afterlife; they believed in the existence of a world of the dead, which they had to reach through a rigorous process. Offerings played a crucial role in this journey; if they belonged to the nobility, they had to send their possessions in life, drinks, food, ornaments, and even servants to ensure a comfortable journey to the other side. Also, preserving the body after death symbolized strength and power in the afterlife, as it prevented disintegration.[28] This care for their deceased loved ones reflected their deep respect for life and death as part of their complex worldview. Even while the Incas ruled what is now Peru, in the vast region that was to become Argentina, diverse native peoples flourished in their own culture.

Cultural diversity in argentina aborigines - native peoples

From the ancient aborigines who populated these lands millennia ago to the diverse native peoples in Argentina today, an ancestral thread unites their cultures and beliefs about death.

The aborigines, with their ancestral roots, already deeply respected the earth and nature. Their connection to the cycles of life and death manifested in their spiritual beliefs and how they honored their ancestors. For them, death was a step in the continuous flow of life, where the spirits of the ancestors remained an active part of the community.[29]

As we move forward in time and come to the native peoples in Argentina today, we see a continuity in this condition with the land and spirituality. Despite differences in specific cultures and beliefs, they all share a deep respect for nature and life in all its forms; they continue to be guardians of their history and culture. The earth they walk on is sacred, and death is considered a transit to another state of existence, where ties with ancestors persist. This thread of respect for nature, life, and death has connected the aborigines of the past with the native peoples of today in Argentina, forming a cultural and spiritual fabric that is a fundamental part of the identity of this land.

Concept of death in different cultures

In Western culture, death is more complicated because it fosters the concept of clinging and not talking about death, making it

difficult for mourning to be carried out healthily. In contrast, for other cultures, the subject of death is very present, both in rituals and in life itself. It is perfectly integrated.

Mexico

The Day of the Dead originates in the indigenous roots of the native cultures of Mesoamerica, when some native Mexican peoples, among them the ancient Mexica, Mixtec, and Zapotec, commemorated the dead. Later, with the Spanish colonization, these tributes were united in Catholic religious rituals.

Archeology has helped us to know that the practice of offering and that the dead did not leave alone but with food, weapons, and riches was every day thousands of years ago in different pre-Hispanic societies. In this country, the Day of the Dead is celebrated through parades. People dress up and paint their faces as catrinas, prepare altars for the dead, visit the cemetery to eat and drink at the graves of the deceased, make decorations such as painted skulls, and prepare unique recipes such as pan de muerto (bread of the dead). In short, the departed's life is celebrated, and year after year, the memory of family and friends is remembered with joy.[30]

Indonesia

In the village of Teroja, located on the celebrated island of Indonesia, the Má nene is celebrated. It is a unique custom in which the region's inhabitants carefully exhume the bodies of their deceased loved ones. Afterward, they clean and dress the deceased in their best clothes. This ritual is an opportunity for family and friends to gather in a festivity in honor of the dead, during which they are offered food and cigarettes as a token of respect and to celebrate their lives in the hope that their souls will continue to watch over them.[31]

Western death culture

In Western culture, the subject of death is more complicated because it encourages the concept of clinging, of growing up with the idea of forever, which makes it difficult for them to carry out their mourning in a different way; in other cultures, the subject of death is so present in the rites, in life itself, that it is understood that it is part of life that is perfectly integrated, we are born, we grow up, and we die, it is normalized and accepted. In other cultures, the Day of the Dead is celebrated differently.

Andean Culture: It is a narrative. In the Andean culture, the Day of the Dead is celebrated by traditions lived for generations; they make offerings (food, fruits, drinks, flowers, etc.) according to tradition so that the dead do not leave alone but with food, weapons, and wealth. The offerings and altars of the dead are widespread, which is why the Day of the Dead is celebrated on November 1st of each year; it is understood that preparing the variety of food offered by their relatives and friends is with the purpose that the soul of the deceased does not leave sad and hungry when visiting their home and not find an offering or flowers offered by their relatives, for them it has much value and significance to perform this tradition for the same fact that it is a way to remember their deceased and that he/she will always be present among them; by not making an offering or not having an altar, it is believed that they have entirely forgotten their loved one and that the soul wanders around the world abandoned and forgotten.

Spain: Manifestations of mourning, its tradition was after this continuity of life.[32]

Rome: Burial was a sacred duty, like cremation. They believed in a life after death.

Venezuela: In their culture, the wake, burial novenario, and cremation are their belief in the rest of the soul.

Funerary rituals in oriental culture

The funerary rituals are a fundamental source of information, in which we find the reflection of certain beliefs about death and what is after it. In oriental Indian society, they are known for celebrating the most incredible funeral rituals with the existence of a life beyond death.

In the funeral rite of the Indian oriental civilization, the corpse is immersed in the waters of the Ganges surrounded by herbs for 7 days so that the flesh softens, and then the body is cremated.[33]

Egypt: The funeral rite was the expression of mummification: Embalming, the viscera were opened and removed, except the heart and kidneys; after 70 days, the corpse was washed and wrapped. They made the first Mastabas: Royal tombs with subway burial chambers. Judgment of Osiris: The myth of this God teaches death, resurrection, or rebirth in the afterlife.

The TIBET: Ardo or Book of the Dead: In the funeral ritual explaining the art of dying. The bardo for Buddhists has an intermediate state between death and resurrection, whose duration is 49 days.

CHINA: The burial: with meanings of its daily life, thus was an instrument the clothes of the deceased, its object in life, included the jade and the sculptures.

Greece: The dramatism, violence, intense crying, fainting, tearing of their clothes, moaning, and sacrifices were integrated into their culture; the deceased served as mediators between the deities and mortals.

The concept of death in different religions

All events in our daily lives usually present a certain degree of ambiguity. This ambiguity allows each person to form his or her own opinion and develop his or her particular vision of social reality.

The individual's insertion into various social categories and membership in various groups influence the individual's elaboration of social reality, generating shared visions of that reality.[34]

Social representations constitute a psychological organization, a knowledge specific to our society.

It is constituted and constituent thinking. Constituted because they are products that intervene in everyday life as preformed

structures from which reality is interpreted. Moreover, the constituent is essential because it also partly constitutes the object it represents. So, the religion that a person practices constitutes social representations; one of these representations is the phenomenon of death, which is supposed to be shared by people who profess the same religion.

Religious traditions do not soften or mitigate death; they do not annul it with their promises of survival; they assume it with the totality of its weight.

Thus, the religious do not spare men from facing death; on the contrary, facing it in all its irremediable truth is the beginning of wisdom.[35]

The experience of religions regarding death tells us about the way of orienting the citizen with the world and towards the future, and the treatment that each religion gives to this subject is directed towards mourning, memory, community, and mystery after death. For the great religions, they are always a way of mourning and remembering someone who is no longer here, who is already dead. It gives us a form of exchange between the living and the dead.

Next, we describe a representation of death in the religions practiced by more parishioners, particularly in Argentina. Jewish religion, the social representation of death, is a natural and inevitable separation between the natural and the spiritual, which occurs once the mission that God entrusted on earth has been fulfilled and, therefore, marks the end of the suffering that one has in life. Sometimes, a single life is not enough to fulfill this mission; then it is admitted that reincarnation exists and that when the determined mission is finally fulfilled, one will die and go with God.[36] For this reason, death should not cause suffering, although, in their experience, it is seen that it does.

Among the funeral rites are the washing of the body, not leaving the deceased alone until the burial, praying for the dead, fasting, covering the mirrors, not using leather shoes, placing the tombstone, watching over the deceased on the ground, among others.

In the Catholic religion, the representation of death is a natural goal for every human being, from which there is no escape.[37] It is the separation of the soul, which continues to live, from the physical body, marking the end of physical life. It is something unknown that should not be feared because it marks the passage to a higher plane where there is eternal rest; one is with God and ceases to be a burden. It is necessary to understand what resurrection is, although it is assumed that reincarnation could also exist. Although this is believed, there is a fear of death when suffering the loss of a loved one.[38]

It is believed that upon death, one is resurrected and is with God in paradise, enjoying eternal life and happiness. In a certain sense, death itself is seen as a reward because one rests from suffering on earth and obtains the longed-for peace, reuniting with loved ones and achieving forgiveness of sins.

In the rituals are found the passing of mass, there are wakes and funerals, prayers, candles are lit, and condolences are given, accompanying the grieving family.[39,40]

Evangelical religion: Death is represented as something natural and inevitable, which is not to be feared and is seen as a reward. It is a reason for joy because one becomes in the presence of God and rests from suffering. There is no belief in punishment. The rituals are: Reading the bible, praying, worshiping, chanting, waking, and burial.

Death in Buddhism: It is a transition that determines the next rebirth. They believe in reincarnation, that the mind is born again and again, only the physical vehicle is different. The funeral rites, washing the body, mourning, and abstaining from food, animals, and burial. The feast of the dead (obon) is also celebrated in July according to the old calendar or the modern one in August.[41]

Islam: Does reincarnation exist in Islam?

Unlike Hinduism or Christianity, God allows him to return to this material plane, to complete something, or to perfect what he did, but what is certain is that the same body is not taken. One sure thing is that Islam holds that everyone returns at the end of time.

Among its funeral rituals, the body is placed with the face towards Mecca, carefully washed, dried, and wrapped in white cloths. Islam reproves embalming, cremation, and even burial. The mourning lasts 4 months.

CONCLUSIONS

Death in diverse cultures, societies, and religions reveals a profound truth: Despite our differences, we share a common fear and awe of the mystery of death. Each culture and religion has developed its way of dealing with this inevitable aspect of the human experience, from elaborate rituals to complex belief systems. However, looking beyond the superficial differences, we find a common denominator: the desire to honor departed loved ones and to find meaning in the transition from life to death.

This study also reminds us that death is a universal reminder of our fragility and the ephemeral nature of life. It challenges us to consider our beliefs and values surrounding death and appreciate the richness of cultural diversity that enriches our understanding of the world.

In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding these funeral customs and beliefs about death becomes essential to foster cross-cultural empathy and respect. By recognizing the beauty and complexity of the diverse ways societies and religions deal with death, we can build bridges rather than barriers and a more understanding and tolerant world for future generations."

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