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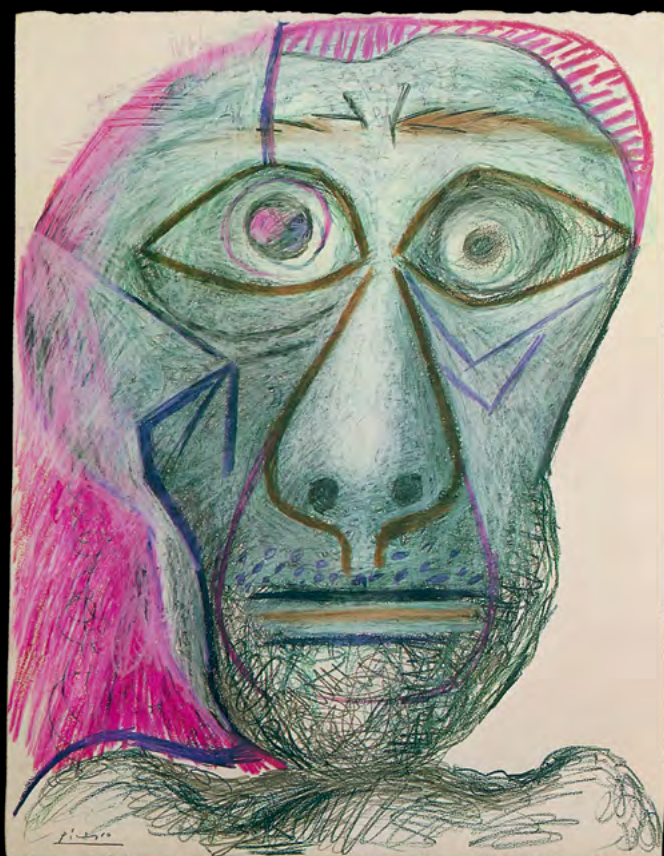
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ANTHROPOLOGY AND DARK TOURISM

In his 1972 essay 'How Others Die', cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian suggests that the discipline of anthropology has often focused on the 'ceremonial of death' because it most clearly registers cultural difference. From the beginning of this discipline, which was inextricably linked to the origins of empire, the systematic recording of other cultures' funeral rites has been at the core of distinctions between cultures. Fabian observes that 'fascination with the curious, the violent, and the exotic seems to be the arena assigned to the use of anthropological studies of the dead.' Travel writing and early anthropology in the nineteenth century always showed a particular interest in funerary practices 'that appear irrational, over-ritualised and picturesque.'

MODERNISM AND EXOTICISM

In the nineteenth century, the accounts of travellers and missionaries began to be systematized into the discipline of anthropology. It is no coincidence that this knowledge arrived with the major phase of European empire-building. We might now read late-Victorian accounts of death and burial from the armchair anthropologists Edward Tylor or J. G. Frazer with a sense that we have moved beyond such rigidly hierarchical, racist ways of thinking. The arrival of a more openly comparative anthropology, in which researchers left the archive and entered 'the field' in order to understand very different cultures on their own terms is often allied with the rise of radical Modernism and its rejection of nineteenth-century moral hierarchies. Yet Modernists, too, had their 'exotic dead'.

In the early twentieth century, the French Surrealist Georges Bataille cultivated an overt obsession with rituals that involved sacrifice and death. He pored over accounts of Aztec sacrifice and the death and memorial practices of Indigenous people in North America. In the 1920s, he set up a secret society in France with the ultimate hope of one day enacting a human sacrifice. 'Sacrifice restores to

opposite: Pablo Picasso, *Self-Portrait Facing Death*, made in the artist's final year, 1972.

the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane,' he wrote. Bataille's fascination was expressed in a mode typical of his peers, including Picasso and his fellow Modernist artists, for whom the 'primitive' – including death rites – offered a riposte to the perceived constraints of 'civilization'.

In 1931 one of Bataille's fellow dissidents, the poet Michel Leiris, joined an anthropological mission through the African continent, the Mission Dakar-Djibouti. His diaries of the mission's fieldwork detail his engagement with practices of ancestor worship among the Dogon people and spirit possession in Abyssinia, but also his queasy complicity with French colonialism, including the looting of sacred sites. His record of the mission was published as *Phantom Africa* – a title that makes evident his fascination with projecting an exoticized African Other.

One of Leiris's associates, the American author William Seabrook, shared his sensational fascination with death cultures in his interwar travel books and journalism. Seabrook notoriously travelled to West Africa in an attempt to join a cult in their ritual of eating human flesh, but was later forced to admit that he could only do so on his return to France, where he bribed someone at the Paris Morgue to take home an arm from an unclaimed body. The anecdote neatly inverts the idea of civilized centre and savage margin: the cannibals are in Paris, not West Africa. Seabrook also travelled to Haiti, where he wrote up a sensationalized account of Haitian Vodou ('voodoo') for his 1929 book, *The Magic Island*, which recounted tales of dead men 'working in cane fields'. Seabrook's book helped introduce the term 'zombie' to American popular culture through his account of voodoo priests raising the recently dead from their graves.

Early twentieth-century Modernists set themselves up as a radical break from the rigid morality and racial hierarchies of the nineteenth century. It is true that there were significant advances in understanding cultural difference, and new models of encounter. Yet there remain many continuities into the present day, in the fascination with the death rituals of those we place as other to ourselves. These have been in place from the very beginnings of the travel, trade and settlement that developed into colonialism.

THE HURON-WENDAT OSSUARIES, ONTARIO

When French traders pushed into the North American continent in the 1600s – in what would become Ontario in Canada – Jesuit missionaries were not far behind. The earnest Catholic priests, eager for souls to save, established a mission called Sainte Marie, one of the first white settlements of 'New France'. The missionaries encountered a confederacy of Indigenous communities they called



the Huron (a pejorative term for ‘unkempt’ or ‘boar-like’). The five nations of Wendat people were a matrilineal society supported by subsistence farming, their power in the region built on trading beaver furs. Their burial practices and bone pits were documented extensively by the Jesuits.

Wendat people who died in their fortified villages were buried outside the palisades in graves after three days, having been watched over in a vigil held by the women, who prepared the body by wrapping it in bark.

Then, about every ten years, when the fields were exhausted of nutrients for crops and the Wendat needed to move elsewhere, villages came together for a lavish Festival of the Dead. In preparation, the dead were disinterred then defleshed, cleaned, collected and enfolded in ornate wrappings that were then hung in hierarchy on wooden scaffolds above a large pit. In 1636, the Jesuit Père La Jeune recorded a ceremony, at which the bones were treated ‘with a care and affection that cannot be described’. Each family, he wrote, ‘feels afresh the grief they had the day of the funeral’: an emotional tie the priest recognized, and that appeared to transcend cultural difference. Feasts and ceremonies continued for several days, with the hosting village and visiting leaders offering presents to one another in an escalating spiral of gifting.



above: Skull of St Jean de Brébeuf. The Jesuit was killed in 1649 during his mission to convert the native population of New France, now Canada. The relic is held at Martyrs' Shrine, Ontario.

opposite: 'Huron ancestral feast of the dead', illustration from Jesuit Joseph-François Lafitau's *Fête des morts chez les Hurons-Wendats: Moeurs des sauvages américains*, 1724.

At the end of several days, the bones were taken down from the scaffold and buried in a communal ossuary, with grave goods including tomahawks, beads, clothing and layers of beaver furs. This second burial marked the departure of a portion of the spirits of the dead to a village in the west, beyond the setting sun, and reconfirmed the social and political alliances of the living through the mingling of bones. It also released the living to move to new ground. The Festival often took over a year to prepare and consumed vast resources.

Père Jean de Brébeuf was another Jesuit priest who attended and recorded a Feast of the Dead in the 1630s. In 1649, the Jesuit mission at Sainte Marie was attacked and Brébeuf was killed along with other priests. Nearly 300 years later, a Catholic Shrine Church was built at Sainte Marie to honour the first Christian settlement, and Brébeuf was sanctified by the Catholic Church. In the later nineteenth century his accounts, along with others, were collected in the multivolume collection *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. His skull is one of the holy relics now on display at the church, next to a historical reconstruction of the mission.

By 1651, the Wendat confederacy had been destroyed and dispersed by the encroachment of Iroquois people into Wendat territory, in wars that have been understood as both trade and mourning wars.

below: Horst Ehricht, reburial of the bones at Tabor Hill with Onandaga Chief David Thomas presiding. The caption read 'Thomas, 71 and blind, is the only Indian alive who knows the ritual by heart', *Life* magazine, published 1956.

opposite: Depictions of 'sky burial' at Gongkar Choede Monastery in Tibet, sixteenth century.



Mourning wars were large-scale attacks with the purpose of avenging or replacing members of the Iroquoian community lost to fighting and to the diseases introduced by white settlers. The surviving Wendat migrated to areas outside Quebec and further away, into the American West.

The 'ossuary burial' ritual of the Wendat was considered an example of 'potlatch', a Chinookan word borrowed into the English language to refer to a range of significant practices, including many around death and burial. Potlatch rituals were marked by what the anthropologist Marcel Mauss in *The Gift* (1925) called 'the purely sumptuous destruction of accumulated wealth', an economy that seemed to invert European ideas of exchange, value and scarcity. European Christians and capitalist traders alike tended to regard the practice as immoral. Sir John MacDonald, the first Prime Minister of the

newly formed Dominion of Canada, was involved in drafting laws to suppress potlatch practices in the 1880s, calling it a 'useless and degrading custom'. Prosecutions began in Canada in 1919, although the law was revoked in 1951.

The bone pits of the Wendat, over 200 of which have been listed as important burial sites in Ontario, were persistently raided as part of a secondary trade in the sale of human remains and grave goods to museums and private collections. Laws against this trade and policies on the repatriation of remains have since come into operation, but the survival of these sacred places remains fragile. In 2016, it was revealed that the construction of a new commuter rail line in downtown Barrie, approved by the Ontario government, had ploughed through a known burial site under a rail yard.

The history of the displaced Wendat also left a trail of cemeteries in America. In the nineteenth century, a surviving part of the Wendat confederacy known as the Wyandot were repeatedly displaced westward in the hope of finding land and peace. In 1843, they were displaced from Ohio to Kansas City, where they fell victim to a smallpox epidemic. Many Wyandot people were buried at the Huron Indian Cemetery in Kansas City. Now renamed the Wyandot National Burial Ground and given recognition on the American National Register of Historic Places, it was for many years under constant threat of erasure by redevelopment in the city. Finally, in 1990, the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act was passed into American law, which protects burial sites and makes it a legal

requirement for museums and archives to return ancestral remains still in ‘scientific’ collections. Despite this, it was only in late 2023 and early 2024 that major museums such as the American Museum of Natural History and the Smithsonian finally pledged to remove human remains from public display. Repatriation of Native American remains continues to be a fraught and incomplete process. No wonder the American Gothic continues to be haunted by the trope of the unquiet Indian Burial Ground.

AT DRIGUNG MONASTERY

Tibet was for a long time almost entirely closed to European travellers, and colonial fantasies about the region were amplified in early twentieth-century travel writing, in particular James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon* (1933). Cultural fascination with Tibet has focused particularly on its death practices, which are associated with the particular strand of Buddhism that developed in the mountains over centuries. The Tibetan Buddhist philosophy of death is outlined in the legendary *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

The practice of *bya gtor*, literally ‘alms for the birds’, is most associated with the Buddhist monasteries of Tibet, but is also practised in Nepal and parts of China. In the high mountains, where there is no earth to bury the dead, there are several key sites where bodies are taken to ritual grounds in the open air, cleaved into sections with machetes, and then fed to the vultures that cluster around the sites. In 2023, Catherine Jigme, a tourist guide for Tibet Vista, writes ‘not one visitor in five hundred is privileged to witness the ceremony





that I'm about to see' of her time at Drigung Monastery, the most auspicious of these sites. She records that at the decisive part of the ceremony, 'the only sound is tearing flesh and chittering.' After this rapid defleshing, the vultures are chased away and the remaining bones are further crushed down with hammers. The vultures return and complete the process of disposal.

It is a solemn religious ritual but also a joyous one, enacted to free the spirit into the sky from its now useless and abandoned flesh, prayers having guided the spirit through the *bardo* (the space of transition between reincarnated lives) for weeks before the final ceremony. This way of handling the dead has been called 'sky burial' or 'celestial burial' in translation.

The rise in tourism to spectate at these rituals has resulted in periodic attempts to restrict access to the sites since the 1980s, in part to limit the practice, although it has also been claimed that restriction helps preserve the tradition from the pressures of modernization. The Chinese state has been concerned to control the apparent popularity of the ritual with its own tourists as much as visitors from abroad.

There is a deepened engagement and understanding of death and memorial cultures among many anthropologists and travel writers working today, but the concurrent rise of the phenomenon of dark tourism (a term coined in the 1990s) names a growing trend in travel that is explicit about seeking out the most 'exotic' death and burial rituals around the world. Dark tourism suggests that there is a continued investment in and fascination with death practices that mean that we cannot position cruder ethical engagements in earlier, less informed ages.

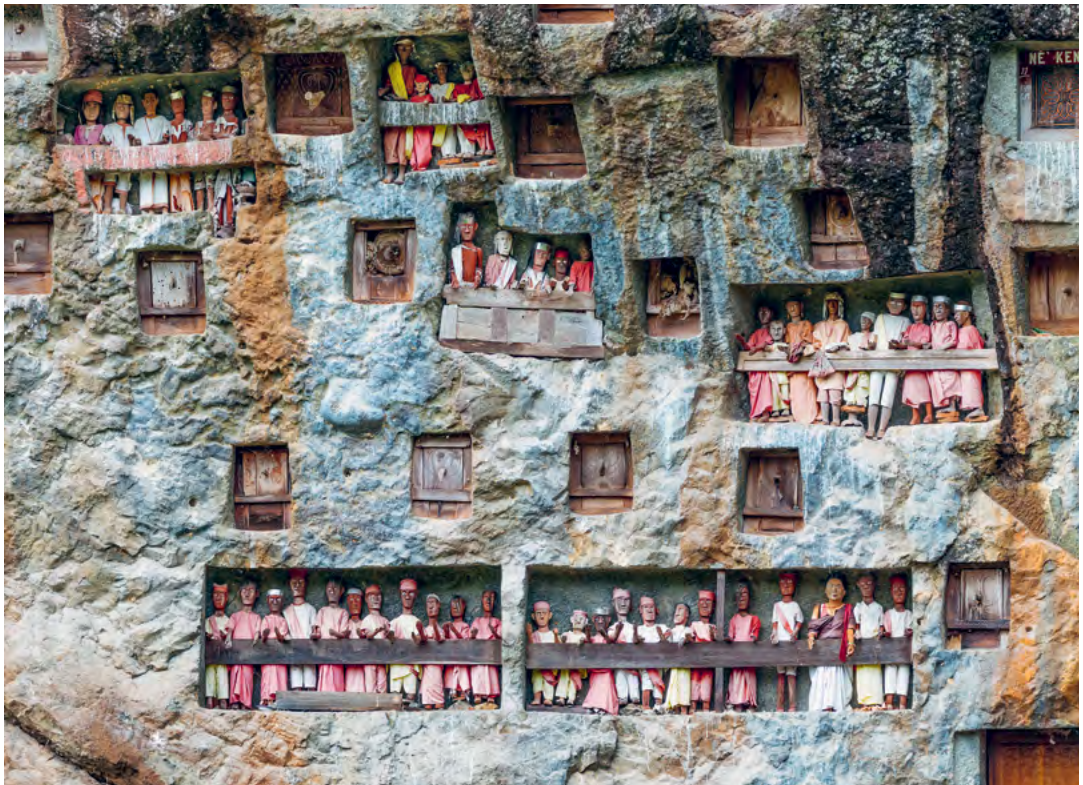
above: A 'sky burial' at Drigung Til Monastery in Tibet, one of the main ritual sites.

opposite: Effigies of the dead on the Torajan cliff at the Lemo burial complex, South Sulawesi, Indonesia.

TORAJAN BURIAL, SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA

One focus of the dark tourism industry has been a number of burial sites in the mountains of South Sulawesi, Indonesia: the cliff cemeteries of the Tana Toraja region. As the website for *Atlas Obscura*, an American magazine and travel company, explains, 'the funeral rites of Toraja are some of the most elaborate in the world.' Dotted across the cliff-faces are wooden doors, entries to vaults where coffins are placed. Balconies are carved out of the limestone cliffs and lined with *tau tau*, brightly dressed effigies with appliquéd eyes that stand in for the dead, who peer down on the village and rice fields laid out below. Every few years, the graves are opened and tidied and the *tau tau* spruced up.

'Torajaland' was strategically chosen by the Indonesian government as a carefully packaged off-the-beaten-track experience for the 'authentic' traveller in the early 1970s, when the state wanted to expand its tourist trade. In 1972, *National Geographic* ran a documentary film of the funeral of a nobleman. It, and the accompanying illustrated piece, raised the international profile of Torajan funerary practices significantly; today, the 'Visit Toraja' website promises a 'jaw-dropping' and 'intense' experience. One American tourist cited by the anthropologist Toby Volkman called the whole thing 'really stone age'. In Rantepao, little *tau tau* effigies made for tourists can be purchased. Many of the original hardwood decorated





above: Manene ritual in the Lokomata Stone Graveyard, Toraja, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Family members clean the graves and change the clothes of their relatives to honour their spirits during the ritual, which is held every three years.

effigies on the cliff itself are now fakes; the originals were moved into more accessible positions for tourists to photograph and subsequently stolen, some even ending up in art galleries in New York.

Thousands of members of the Torajan diaspora travel from across the world back to South Sulawesi to attend funerals, which begin with the sacrifice of buffalo and pigs. These are gifted at immense and escalating cost by family members and guests (the higher the status, the more sacrifices are made). Some meat is handed out or sometimes auctioned off to relatives and guests, while some is understood to be carried by the dead into the afterlife to sustain them and mark out their status among the ancestors. The expense associated with this burial ritual has continued to rise even after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, its cultural and spiritual value far outstripping any narrow economic calculation.

The public rituals of sacrifice are only a small part of a longer post-mortem process that can take up to a year. Before this final funeral ceremony, which lasts over several days, the Torajan dead are often kept at home. The bodies are injected with preservatives to prevent decay and rest in a temporary coffin; previously, they were ‘smoked’ with pine or aromatic leaves. They are considered only ‘sick’ at this stage, and are served with food and drink at every meal along with the rest of the family (the traditional religion of the Torajans, *pa’kandean nene*, can be translated as ‘feeding the ancestors’). ‘Torajans literally live with the dead, and there seemed to be “no life without the dead,”’ the Dutch anthropologist Edwin de Jong observed during a fieldwork stay with a Torajan family that was heavily involved in arranging and overseeing mortuary practices.

After the final ceremony and interment of the bodies, subsequent rituals ensure that the spirit of the dead travels westwards to Puya, the

afterlife. This journey itself is still only one stage of a process that conducts the spirit through several levels of transformation, until it might reach the status of ancestor.

For many years, the colonial occupiers of the island, the Dutch, who consolidated their occupation in 1906, sought to suppress these burial practices. They tried to make a distinction between custom, which was acceptable, and religious practice, which was not. The distinction never worked, because the two are of course inextricable. In the 1910s the Dutch Reform Missionary Church made a further attempt to Christianize the Torajan region and thus outlaw these religious rituals. Yet they are now valued as authentic expressions of Indonesian multicultural diversity, with the most significant funerals attended by government officials from Jakarta.

There is a certain melancholia about the recording of Torajan culture among the anthropologists that document these ceremonies and their changing nature. Roxanna Waterson, who returned to the same area for over twenty years from the late 1970s, tracks a rapid transformation of the region by aggressive modernization, outmigration, and the continued Christianizing of the population. Village life and mortuary culture have been significantly altered by the very tourists seeking a taste of the 'authentic'. This now partly includes the diaspora of Torajans who return to the region to participate in their own cultural practices.

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The treatment of the dead has commonly been used throughout human history as a way to measure cultural difference. What most diverges from assumed funerary norms becomes othered. In colonial eras, practices marked as 'primitive' or 'savage' can be used to justify settlement and the suppression of local customs. Even very minor differences in burial practice seem to produce a *frisson*, a shiver somewhere between attraction and repulsion. Within Christianity, for instance, Protestants have been suspicious (but also perhaps secretly admiring) of Catholic death practices – including the culture of ossuary-display of bones and the veneration of bodily holy relics. The American custom of embalming and displaying the body at funerals clearly appalled the English aristocrat Jessica Mitford, who wrote *The American Way of Death*, a satirical exposé of what she disdained as a cynical industry, in 1963. It is too easy to suggest that contemporary cosmopolitanism and the democratizing of global travel have made humans more liberal and tolerant: the emergence of death tourism shows that there is still an impetus to exoticize how 'others' die.