

Moving Corpses

In this work I would like to explore ways in which are various cultures dealing with death and dead bodies. Inspiration for this topic was chapter Moving Corpses published in book *The Emotions: A Cultural Reader*. I would like to focus on contrast between Euro-American tradition of seeing corpse as something that is needed to be treated with care, respect and strictly by certain institutes and on certain places, and traditions of some native tribes across the world, which funeral practices are different in many ways.

Before I start to describe differences between western rites of burial and death customs in the rest of the world I would like to focus on things that all cultures have in common. Dealing with death carries some universal features, that are nicely decried in *Les rites de passage* by Arnold Van Gennep. Gennep writes about different stages of mourning and different approaches to death and dead bodies. Regardless of culture, death is a great change which shows us our own mortality. It is passage from subject to object, as Svašek said, it is crucial shift in community life. It always influence certain group, whether it is family, friends, people from the same community, village or city, or even whole nation. That's why every death demands a ritual, some sort of closure.

First of all, there is a question of dead body. Whether it is something precious that connect us with the death person and needs to be handle with care and respect or it is something dangerous, unclean that could infest surrounding environment and send vengeful spirit of dead person to follow dead's relatives harm them. Svašek gives us five interesting examples of different situations in which this problem was dealt with. Every culture has its own death taboo, institutions that are allowed to “process” the dead body, rituals of burial and mourning. However these features change greatly from culture to culture, which shows us their relativity. What is taboo in one society is normal or even demanded in other. There can be great difference between clinical death and social death. There are some culture (e.g. Inuits) that simply proclaim somebody dead, even trough the person is still breathing and, for example, in case of Merina people of Madagascar, the person, who was proclaimed dead can under certain circumstances come back from “being dead.” Let's start with exploring our own culture.

Western death rituals, taboos and customs

In two examples given by Svašek we learned that using dead bodies or part of dead bodies in ways of art caused public outrage. The arguments against this “processing” of dead humans were that it is amoral, When we look at this matter trough eyes of historian, we could be surprised by this attitude, considering that using body remains, especially bones for aesthetic creations and decorations has a long history, at least in European society. For example, we could find an equivalent in history for “human earnings” namely relic business which bloomed in medieval.

Kings, high church officials and rich nobles used to carry pieces of bones (or small bones like phalanx bone etc.) One could think that only thing that can be done with a dead body is to bury it or burn it and store it on proper place. However it is not so strict.. Since cremations started to be popular (or easily accessible) after World War I., the question “What to do with the ashes of the dead person?” arised. Many western countries have laws about where it is permitted to scatter the ashes. As Davies is cited in *The Eclipse of The Eternity*: “Cremation has opened a possibility that never existed before in allowing the physical symbol of identity, the ashes, to be in private hands... This is the final expression of a culture of privacy and individualism”¹ So, law or not, you are the one who holds a jar with your dead grandma and it is up to you what you do with it- metaphorically speaking. Apart traditional scattering it is possible to “process” ashes in modern, sometimes even humor, way. My favourite was “hourglass” urn – a sandglass that used ashes of deceased instead of sand. It came in single version and double version for spouses. If hourglass are too modest for you you might consider firing the ashes into outer space, making a firework of it or transform it into a diamond.² I listed this examples as a comparison to controversies described in Savšek's text.

I will stick to controversy that was arised by exhibition *Body Worlds* for a little while. The main argument against this show was that it “dehumanized the human body as scientific object”³ Many critics argued that it fails to deliver both aesthetic and anatomic benefits to the onlookers. In my opinion the author – Gunther von Hagen – received so much criticism, because he was lacking certain authority or institution that would support him. The anatomist didn't accept his work, because von Hagen was an artist and artists didn't accept it because he was using organic human material in a way it was clear that the material used on this exhibition was once a part of living, breathing human body. Tony Writer describes how this authority to handle human remains moved from institution of the family, to the church and finally to the state.⁴ This bring me to idea, what would public say if would von Hagen used human ashes, or human ashes of his family members? As described above, today on can do almost anything with the human ashes, so why not art? The reason why I think it could be accepted by public eye is that a rights to handle the human ashes belong to the individual person, a family member usually. However, the situation with a corpse is different. In this case certain official authority is here to deal with a dead body. This is govern not only by custom but also by law.

Other societies

When the church in western world lost it's right to process dead bodies, it also led to

¹ WALTER, Tony. *The eclipse of eternity: a sociology of the afterlife*. p.112

² Mental Floss. GREEN, Amanda. [online]. [cit. 2014-12-16]. Dostupné z: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/51905/10-amazing-things-your-ashes-can-do-after-you-die>

³ WULFF, Helena. *The emotions: a cultural reader*

⁴ WALTER, Tony. *The eclipse of eternity: a sociology of the afterlife*. P 95 - 115

weakening of medieval idea of dead rising on day of the last judgement. It started with cremation, which destroyed the body and continued with possibility of organ donation. People stopped see body as something that could maybe walk again and be useful for immortal soul and started to see body as something that can be disposable.⁵ This along side other phenomenons as rationalisation led to weakening of connection between body and soul in western minds. However in rest of the world especially in native nations this idea is still strong (although sometimes in quite different form) and it forms funeral rites and mourning customs.

Let's start with an example of ethnicity that doesn't believe in soul at all. I'm talking about British Travellers – an gypsy ethnicity living in Britain that has a curious way how to see death. Altrought they have rich burial rite with many supernatural features their opinion on posthumous life is simple: there isn't any. People just die. Period. However they don't take burial lightly. It is important to keep every tradition, because otherwise an vengeful spirit – *mulo*- could appear and start to haunt family of the deceased person. For us the key point in this is that the body in no longer see as a representation of the dead person, nor it should be preserved in case a soul would like to come back. The body is something unclean, that infest it's surrounding environment. It needs to be handle with care and respect, but just because otherwise something bad could happen to the relatives and whole community.⁶

Another example of seeing dead human body as something that is purely object are burial customs of Dayak people of Borneo. However it applies only on small children that haven't hit sixth year before their death. Dayak people believe that one become a human after he or she turns six. Therefore, small children are not conciser human and they are buried in special way. Their bodies are hang in tree top so the soul could leave immature body and could be recycled in another baby.⁷

In foreword I also mentioned *social death*. This phenomena is also strange for us westerns at least in this certain meaning. Inuit, for example, have to deal with cruel and unforgiving nature. They must put all their energy to survival so their society developed very practical approach to death. If it is necessary and it's clear that family isn't able to keep alive a baby without endangering other they simply leave it behind. Although it is taboo to do the same thing with old and weak people, the elder members of the family sometimes decide to die in social way and they wander off in the wilds. Their family conciser them dead, they arrange a burial, even trough the gone person can live even a months before he or she pass away.

Similar situation is happening on the other side of the world. Merina people living on Madagascar believe that everybody can decide when is his or her time to die. When the person feels sick or too old, they simply announce that they will be soon gone. His or her family, relatives and

⁵ WALTER, Tony. *The eclipse of eternity: a sociology of the afterlife*. P 110 - 115

⁶ OKELY, Judith. *The traveller-gypsies*. P114 - 130

⁷ http://www.bagus-discovery.com/map/map_dayak_kalimantan02.html

friend come to say good bye, the funeral is held and after that, the person is seen as dead. Interesting thing here is that if the dead person gets better they could be capable get back to the community and back to the realm of living.

Conclusion: The way how to look at human corpse is mostly conditioned by culture. Although (as Murphi says) "Death is subject of rituals across whole world and there is no society that would simply throw away human body like some piece of decomposing cell mass,"⁸ The point from which is an object "body" seen as a subject "person" varies across cultures. In some societies is human a human since he or she is born (or even conceived) till it is buried. Sometimes the person must get trough rituals of adulthood or some other kind or test. Individuals are finding help in institutions that deal with burial related business. In some countries it is family, in some church and in some official authorities. Every society adopted certain taboos, customs and rituals to deal with the most difficult idea of humans life: it's own finiteness.

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⁸ MURPHY, Robert Francis. *Úvod do kulturní a sociální antropologie: příbuzenství, národnostní příslušnost, rituál*. p. 190

ISBN 05-212-8870-3.