FUNERARY CUSTOMS

Funerary customs have been observed mostly unchanged through the ages by the inhabitants of the Nile Valley, especially in rural areas. Nonetheless, the middle and upper classes of the population have curtailed excessive demonstrations of affliction and have also eliminated some rituals that have become incompatible with modern life, especially in the cities.

When someone is near death, the family and friends gather to keep vigil around the dying person. A priest is called to dispense the last rites. When a death occurs in the morning, burial takes place that afternoon; otherwise, the body lies in state at home overnight. The body is bathed and perfumed. The preference is to clothe women in white linen; men are dressed either in their everyday apparel or in special formal apparel. People who have made the pilgrimage to the Holy Land sometimes keep for burial those clothes worn when they bathed in the Jordan River in commemoration of Christ’s baptism by John the Baptist. The body is then put in a wooden casket surrounded by flowers. Two-floor candles burn at the head and feet.

The news of death is conveyed through newspapers and other news media. In rural areas news can be conveyed orally. In villages a woman leading five others, all wearing black, wanders through the area; the six call out the name of the deceased in their wailing.

Black dress and headcovers are the customary apparel of female mourners. Unshaved members of the family receive men who come to pay condolences in the home or in an outside tent erected especially for the occasion. Inside the women gather around the casket. Before entering the room, some mourners wail and utter special shrieks called suwat and then take a seat or sit on cushioned floors, depending upon local customs. But no greeting or talking is allowed in the presence of the dead. Neither coffee nor cigarettes, which are required after the burial, are offered at
The ancient customs are still practiced in the rural areas, such as the wailing, the rhythmic beating of cheeks with one’s hands, and the dyeing of face and hands with indigo. The hiring of professional mourners using drums and chanting eulogies in praise of the dead is still to be found. These demonstrations of emotion, which are considered an honor due to the deceased, reach their height when the deceased is about to be taken from the home. Members of the clergy (the greater the number the higher the status of the deceased), dressed in mourning garb, recite the absolution prayers. In rural areas, a procession led by the clergy, followed by the men, and finally by the women, follows the casket, which is carried on men’s shoulders, on a cart, or in a hearse. In city funerals, however, women until recently were not allowed to leave the house to attend the church service or the burial.

The lavishness of a funeral depends on the social status of the individual to be buried and of his family. The hearse used to be pulled by a trace of horses, and the greater their number the more affluent the individual they carried. A band of musicians playing funerary marches and men carrying huge arrangements of flowers were put at the head of the procession, followed by young orphan girls dressed in white, especially when the deceased was a benefactor of their orphanage (a custom now discontinued). Footmen, dressed in white bouffant pants and shirts, ran by the side of the hearse. Then came the deacon holding the processional cross, followed by the church dignitaries. The pallbearers followed. Relatives, friends, and mourners came last. The procession was generally made on foot to the church, but after the service different means of transportation were used to reach the cemeteries. These paraphernalia have now been replaced by motorized transportation to the church and the cemetery.

Family and friends converge after the burial at the home of the deceased to break the fast that has been observed since the death. The food is
generally provided by family, friends, and neighbors, a custom especially observed in the rural areas.

For the first three days, people call on the family of the deceased—the women in the morning and the men at night. Now, however, with women working and other demands of modern life, the newspaper announcement of the death indicates that condolences are restricted to the church service. Still, an important religious service must take place in the house of the deceased on the third day. In memory of Christ’s resurrection, this ceremony is called “the release of the soul.” In popular beliefs, the soul roams in the house until a priest performs the ceremony of release. He arrives the third day around noon, accompanied by a deacon. He enters the room of the defunct and recites certain prayers while incensing a basin of water in which a bunch of parsley or other green plant is soaking. He then uses the bunch of parsley to sprinkle the bed on which the deceased died and everyone present in the room.

Other commemorations are less and less observed for the once customary seventh day (when Christ appeared to the Apostles) and for the fifteenth day (when Thomas was also present). The fortieth day commemorating the **Ascension of Christ** was strictly observed with an afternoon church service until it was recently banned by Patriarch SHENOUDA III. In popular beliefs, it was the day when the archangel Michael weighed the good and the bad deeds of the deceased, a substitute for purgatory, which does not exist in Coptic beliefs.

Mourning periods are long and rigorously observed. Abstaining from festivities lasts at least for one year. The visits to the cemeteries are made on the fortieth day and on the eve of Christmas, on Easter, on Ascension Day, and on the Coptic New Year. Offerings for the soul of the deceased are given to the needy who **gather** on these occasions in the cemeteries. These consist of bread, sweets, and fruits. In villages, the custom is to lay palm fronds or lemon tree **branches** on the tombs and to sprinkle the tombs with water, which is believed to quench the thirst of
the dead.

All these customs have striking similarities with some customs practiced in ancient times as far back as the Old Kingdom in ancient Egypt, such as the judgment of the dead by weighing their hearts, the offering of bread loaves, the libation of freshwater, the burning of incense, the sacrifice on tombs of beasts to be later distributed to the poor, the use of palm fronds, the presence of professional mourners, and the use of indigo (blue was the color for mourning in antiquity). Through the centuries these customs have been handed down from generation to generation while those who practice them remain hardly aware of their origin.

[See also: Burial Rites; Mourning in Early Christian Times.]

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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