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## Ashes Ethereal: Cremation in the Americas

**JAY MILLER**

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The ultimate inevitability for most Americans is death, but for the Native peoples of both these continents, death is not a single event but a prolonged process with stages between the living now and the deading after.

On December 12, 1997, I was standing in the chill of the Northwest, freezing from the toes up while waiting to help as needed with an annual “burning for the dead” in preparation for an evening candlelight service in the local smokehouse (Native church) at which everyone in attendance could light a candle in the name of a deceased relative, friend, or loved one. Regardless of religion—Catholic, Pentecostal, Indian Shaker, or traditional—participation was community-wide.

This sacrificial burning required a rectangle about five-by-fifteen feet composed of crushed papers, kindling, and logs. Upon this table, or pyre, plates of varied food were to be placed individually as the name of the person for whom it was intended was loudly called out. In addition to familiar groceries purchased from any store, plates also held Native foods and personal favorites.

Inevitably, after an early afternoon of preparations spaced among long waits, the arrival of the officiating ritualists from Canada called for a renewed flurry of activity. All cedar logs had to be replaced with split alder brought from their home across the border. From the moment of their arrival, these ritualists took charge of the situation by organizing us into an effective work force to do their bidding.

Using special words (dicta, enchantments) inherited only in certain families, both ritualists prepared the blank table before it received thirty plates set in rows. Then more enchantments were recited to fix all the settings before

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flames were lit. The paper plates burned smoothly and efficiently across the table, which was taken as a good omen. Near the end, certain people were called forward and quietly instructed by the ritualists about specific issues they felt had been expressed by the diners, and everyone was reminded that, via such burnings, those beyond are still with us and able to “discipline” now as they did in the past. Later that night at the candlelight, these female ritualists repeated the same message to the whole gathering.

As I helped pour drinks into cups to go with the plates, I keenly anticipated the fire that would soon be lit, knowing that its heat would come as a welcome relief from the chill of the day. If it had been raining, conditions would have been warmer, but instead it was clear and cold. In either instance, the fire would provide warmth and shelter.

That December day I was well prepared to muse on the meaning of fire, heat, and the dead, leading directly, of course, to a consideration of cremation.

Weeks before this burning, I finished teaching linguistics to Tsimshian speakers in northern Canada, and sporadically received commentary on my book-length study published that July.<sup>1</sup> In keeping with their nobility and dignity, my Tsimshian students, friends, and family have not yet found damning fault with the book, but rather quietly comment on what details were left out, clearly reminding me that they will always know more about their own culture, wherein light, as in fire, is a key metaphor.

Among my greatest oversights, we all agree, is a failure to emphasize that to this day, after a funeral and burial, Tsimshian burn clothing and food on behalf of the deceased. Before the arrival of William Duncan as successful missionary for low church Anglicanism, moreover, Tsimshians cremated their high-ranking dead in a complicated process that might involve removing and burying the heart and filling the chest cavity with cedar bark to aid combustion.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, prehistorians looking at the five-thousand-year continuum in Prince Rupert Harbor have been denying any archaeological evidence for cremation, regarding it as only an ethnographic tradition, probably introduced from Athabaskans. Unless the ashes were kept together or placed in some kind of urn, there is unlikely to be any permanent evidence, especially since historic cremations took place in a locale away from town. Sometimes ashes were redeposited inside cedar poles or boxes, themselves subject to decay in that damp climate. Indeed, the only lingering evidence for cremation might be stone monuments or memorials, though much less elaborate than the tombs built for cremated Hittite kings.<sup>3</sup>

Instead, modern Tsimshian provide indirect evidence for the lingering importance of cremation because such incineration of offerings bridges the past and the present, calling for an examination of wider contexts. Was this burning a memento, a survival, a holdover from ancestral cremation? Probably. Yet, more importantly, we must ask, Why cremate in the first place? What are its correlations? What are some cultural explanations? As Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf have documented, Robert Hertz expostulated that “the fate of the body is a model for the fate of the soul. As the corpse is formless and repulsive during the intermediary period, so the soul of the

dead person is homeless and the object of dread.”<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, only a few justifications of cremation have been published, phrased within tribal literature, particularly the epics of genesis, creation, reform, or finishing off, near the modern Arizona-California border among the Cahuilla and Maricopa, both considered in this article.

Certainly, cremation is ancient in the Americas, particularly in present Washington State, where, before Kennewick Man, there was Marmes Man from the Palus, a cover term for at least nine ancient humans, including five from a cremation pit in the range of 10,000 years old.<sup>5</sup> Further, about 7,000 years ago (8500–6000 BP), an Eden-Scottsbluff cremation was left at the Renier Site in northeastern Wisconsin.<sup>6</sup> At the archaic mound site of Poverty Point, only cremation is suggested,<sup>7</sup> while it is well represented elsewhere during the Archaic Period and after.<sup>8</sup>

### CREMATION

In her survey of death customs, Effie Bendann<sup>9</sup> found eight “motives” linking fire and death and six involving cremation, which can be combined into eight examples to prevent the return of the dead, purify the pollution caused by death, protect the body from wild beasts, prevent sorcery, secure warmth and comfort in the future world, produce an ethereal body, hasten dissolution, and light the way to the afterworld.

In addition, my own review of the ethnography indicates that burning also provides a finality to tainted, dangerous, or explosive events, much as the local villagers assemble with torches to attack Frankenstein’s castle in an all-too-familiar movie scene.

In a classic case, regarded by all as most bizarre because it was so totally out of character, fire closed an incident among the Western Apache. A married young man raped a divorced woman of his father’s clan and killed her when she would not let go. As word spread, his mother announced that gifts would be collected to pay the mourning clan and the girl’s family. Everyone, even boys, gave clothes, weapons, baskets, blankets, and horses. Lastly, his mother took off and added her own clothes to the pile, proclaiming that all these goods were to save all her other children and family members. The murderer, however, she gave up to his fate if anyone could find him. Then the girl’s survivors set fire to this huge pile, taking away only the four horses. Shortly after, one of her relatives shot the murderer in the back of the head while he was eating in another camp.<sup>10</sup>

In an interesting twist, Kashaya Pomo<sup>11</sup> cremated not only to protect the body from wild animals but also to prevent the body from becoming a wild animal itself because “if the dead are not burned they will become grizzly bears. . . . Hence cremation is an act of religion, of redemption, of salvation, which it were a heinous impiety to the dead to pretermit.”<sup>12</sup>

Today, in the Hispanic Southwest, Catholic mestizos recognize a certain appeal of cremation. For example, near the end of *Bless Me, Ultima*, the New Mexican classic, during a mock cremation exorcism, this ancient woman curer agrees that burning is a good way to return to the earth, avoiding the confines of a damp casket as “the spirit soars immediately into the wind of the llano and the ashes blend quickly into the earth.”<sup>13</sup>

## DEADING

Within the overall context of Native American death ceremonies, moreover, it is vital to recall that a series of intricate processes and rites marked the progressive stages of disassociation for the corpse and its physical and spiritual components.

Among the Delaware, rituals functioned as time-releasers to mark stages in the deconstruction of a body "into increasingly more resistant parts: starting with the loss of breath; proceeding to clear fluids, blood, flesh, hair, and nails; and finishing with the skeleton" from cartilage to the long bones and the skull.<sup>14</sup> Each stage also released spiritual components, such as a soul localized in the breath, blood, or bone. To ease messy biological realities, the body itself was equated with the chrysalis (cocoon), or more recently with a mere suitcase, from which a beautiful butterfly emerges.

The Tillamook of coastal Oregon believed in a Babyland on the other side. The template for each eventual human lived there in fetus form with others, including spouses, until he or she was reborn to human parents. In the womb, the other attributes and aspects of such a life were brought together and combined until the last of them, probably breath, was provided at birth.

In standard Native American belief, the mother provided the flesh and blood, the father the bone, and the creator the spark of life. In contrast, Northern Cheyenne say the father provides the blood, the mother the substance, and the creator the blessing spark of life-giving breath, which a newborn uses to inhale consciousness at birth, along with the potential to speak and a tragic self-awareness of personal loneliness.<sup>15</sup> Over the next twelve years, a child lost spirituality in favor of biology, learning to balance four internal tensions, two humane and good with two bestial and bad. Successful integration led to effective parenting and careers. Later, as a grandparent, life began to unravel, with spirituality increasing as an elder moved ever closer to the Milky Way, the path to the beautiful afterworld of the Creator. At death, the fetal blessing from the Creator, previously diffused through the body, concentrated in the bones until these disintegrated and the vitality finally reunited with the Creator. At the death, however, any Cheyenne guilty of murder, suicide, incest, or promiscuity was cremated and its ghost sent along the short fork of the Milky Way also to vanish into oblivion.

In the Northeast, if a Huron drowned or froze to death, that body was taken to the town cemetery and placed between a fire and trench so it could be cut up. The flesh and entrails were cremated, but the bones were buried to appease angry spirits of the sky or water.<sup>16</sup> Here, cremation was a partial solution, also used for violent deaths and executed witches, to keep disruptive ghosts out of the common ossuary formed every decade at a Feast for the Dead called the Kettle.

Throughout the Southeast, tribes hastened the deconstruction process of disincarnation by dismemberment, with long-finger-nailed specialists called Buzzards picking the bones clean before they were reburied in specially made and measured baskets.<sup>17</sup> These procedures occurred along the length of the Mississippi River, although at Aztalan in Wisconsin such Mississippian mortuary processing was mistaken for cannibalism.

## MARICOPA

Among Yuman-speaking tribes of the Southwest, Maricopa<sup>18</sup> required cremation for all who entered their afterworld; otherwise he or she smelled bad.<sup>19</sup> Should a Maricopa happen to be buried, his or her ghost stayed only on the north side of a "deadline," wandering around carrying their coffin box on their head, sometimes putting it down to sit on. Twins and the deformed, who had a separate town, were reborn to visit the living for a time. An adult could be reborn up to four times, ending the last existence as a bit of charcoal lying in the desert.

Maricopa recognized that for each person four spiritual aspects transformed at death into a soul that goes to the afterworld, a ghost that becomes a whirlwind, a heart that becomes a horned owl, and a pulse that becomes a screech owl. The crucial importance of the heart is indicated by a belief that it is the last part of a body to burn.

The pyre was strongly made by first setting a big post into the ground until it stood a yard tall. Four logs were laid down to abut it to the west, with a smaller post set on the outside to hold these four in place. Logs were then piled up to a height of three feet, even with the top of the big post. Dry arrowweed was stuffed as kindling between the layers.

The corpse was removed from the house with four halts, the last resting on the ground beside the south side of the pyre. During each pause, a speaker orated. Finally, a man climbed onto the north side of the pyre, the corpse was handed up, and he briefly placed it prone with head to the east, before turning it onto its right side to face north. Its feet were unwrapped from the shroud and wedged between logs, left one to the north and right to the south, to anchor the body before it was covered by gifts of clothing and blankets. While the fire burned, an old man with a long pole kept the body hidden under burning wood. Everyone present fasted, hearing orations at the half way and end of the cremation. If a dead man had been a musician, his favorite songs were sung throughout his burning.

Afterward, four holes, two on the north and two on the south, were dug and the ashes divided among them. The fire tender first divided the remains from south to north, then west to east. While the ethnography is otherwise silent, these four deposits probably relate to the four souls.

The deceased's home and all possessions were burned or buried. After mourning for four days, family and officials returned to routine tasks. If the deceased were exceptional, a mourning ceremony (Cry) was held a few days later. Unlike neighboring tribes, it was not annual and did not involve effigies, only reenactments of great moments (battles, songs, orations) from that life.

## CALIFORNIA

The best regional overview of ethnographic cremation practices remains Alfred Kroeber's 1925 monumental *Handbook of the Indians of California*, still preferable to the quick-fix 1978 *California Handbook*,<sup>20</sup> though the *California Handbook* does provide the most current tribal ethnonyms and its index

includes a useful entry for “recreation” under death practices of Lake Miwok and Pomo.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout California, the usual reason for cremation or partial cremation was ease in transporting back home someone who had died at some distance that “All California Indians have strong sentiments on this point; old people will express satisfaction at the prospect of being buried adjacent to the house in which they were born.”<sup>22</sup> Tohono O’Odham (Papago) of southern Arizona add that cremating a body killed in battle also prevented its use in sorcery by enemies.<sup>23</sup>

In northeastern California, Modoc cremated all their dead at spots associated with a patriline,<sup>24</sup> with everyone but shamans attending. Possessions and beads were placed on the pyre, but these goods, along with any slaves intended for immolation, could be appropriated by anyone present with due compensation.<sup>25</sup> Mourners and others sat during the burning, apparently to avoid interfering with the rising smoke. Later, the house was burned if the deceased was a child or a spouse to residents because of a “desire to eliminate any reminder of the dead person, and thus to ease mourning.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Pomo**

In central California, “The Pomo were opposed to burial because they believed that the ghost of the dead person would continue to haunt the spot,”<sup>27</sup> so they cremated—along with beads, robes, and baskets—on a pyre set in a trench, with the body face down, head to the south, allowing the spirit to more easily lift itself to journey to the afterworld.<sup>28</sup> For Pomo, the essence of a person—variously called breath, soul, or knowledge—was contained in the heart (*kam*).<sup>29</sup> During the burning, mourners were so distraught in grief that family friends kept a tally of all gifts and offerings, such as beads, so these kin could later give proper thanks.<sup>30</sup> The close male relative who used a long pole to expose the body to maximum flames became polluted for a few years afterward and was forbidden meat, hunting, and gambling to emphasize this too-close association with human meat and the seriousness of the duty.<sup>31</sup> The next day, a father or other close male gathered up the remains, put them in a basket, buried it nearby, and then obliterated any further evidence of the pyre.<sup>32</sup> All possessions were burned so as not to attract the ghost with the potential of harming the living, even inadvertently.<sup>33</sup> Mourning continued for a year, with women visiting the deceased’s favorite haunts to sing and sprinkle acorn meal (*pinole*).

A year later at a rite called Lonewis, the remains were dug up and reburied along with donated gifts, a version of the famous Californian Cry shared with the Maidu.<sup>34</sup> Even after the Pomo began burying, they still burned offerings on the grave for the dead a year or so later.<sup>35</sup>

### **Maidu**

While other Maidu buried their dead, the hill (Konkow) and southern (Nisinan) provinces cremated. The Hill Maidu mourning anniversary was the

northernmost example of the Cry celebrated throughout the lower half of Native California in the fall to resupply the distinguished dead.<sup>36</sup>

For each Cry, a round brush fence was set up on the community's burning ground, open to the west and sometimes also the east. A director led the whole rite, but the functional sponsors were bereaved families who had given payment to the director in return for a special necklace to mark their own mourning. The patterned sequence of beads, by colors and counts, in this loop was specific to that ground. After use in five Crys, a necklace was redeemed by return payment from the director, who then cremated it. Interestingly, a poor family could participate in this ceremony by receiving payment instead of giving it, highlighting the prestige that came from generosity across the Americas.

When a ground was ready for an observance, its director sent out to guests strings of knots, one untied each day so all visitors arrived on the same day. The first night, family mourners came to the old enclosure around sundown to keen and sprinkle acorn meal. The second day, the enclosure was repaired and poles up to twenty feet long prepared to hold offerings that had been amassed for a year or more.<sup>37</sup> A widow had probably spent the past year making many baskets to be burned. By evening, each mourning family had a dozen poles filled from top to bottom to set up as pairs across the fire at the north and south. Bulky items were placed around their bases.

For the noteworthy deceased, effigies were made of stuffed and decorated wildcat skins arranged to look like standing humans, staked near the entrance, and "fed" during the night. Each such effigy was literally called a "spirit within" because the ghost of that person actually resided in it during the Cry.

As an old man lit the central fire, bargaining began to rescue offerings in return for an exchange, barter, or purchase. Such rescue must be understood in the same way as the gifts given to guests at a memorial potlatch, where it is clear that, for hosts, *others* are both their guests and their dead, each substituting for the other but with the living bodies the more obvious.

When negotiations quieted, the director spoke about the intent, purpose, and procedure of the Cry, as Kroeber said,<sup>38</sup> "carefully instructing the people in what they perfectly well know how to do" in upholding high moral standards. For the rest of the night, in distinct groupings composed of mourning families, everyone wailed, keened, and sang. Their speakers periodically expressed pity and concern for these ancestral dead and placed bits of food into the fire to "feed" them.

At dawn, the tall poles were stripped and everything piled on the fire while the elders mournfully keened for their loved ones. Effigies were "walked" to the fire to enter the blaze. Mourners continuously exhaled forceful breaths, presumably to blow away harm. At first light, emotional intensity peaked and old women had to be retrained from throwing themselves onto the pyre. Everyone was totally exhausted with grief, prostrated from their lamentations.

In the morning, after the fire died down and everyone rested, the director urged all to eat, gamble, and have fun for a day or more to end their gathering on a happy note. Throughout Southern California, this Cry overlapped with the *toloache datura* cult, and in the Sierra Nevadas with *Kuksu*.



### **Luiseno**

Among the so-called Mission Indians, the Luiseno of San Juan Capistrano had hereditary officials in charge of all cremations. Like other Luisenos, the Juaneño shared a Polynesian-like epic of creation from the primordial union of sky and earth, culminating in the appearance of Wiyot, whose fearful powers led to his being poisoned and then cremated to protect his body from desecration. All this to no avail, however, since Coyote rushed into the flaming pyre, grabbed a bit of his flesh, and ate it.<sup>39</sup>

To this day, the consumption of a bit of cooked flesh by a loved one remains an aspect of Southern California cremations,<sup>40</sup> recalling customs the breadth of the Americas—from South America, where cremated remains are turned into a drink because it is “better to be inside a warm friend than inside the cold earth,” to the Northwest where the Hamatsa of the Kwakwaka’wakw and the Xgyet of the Tsimshian are metaphors for chiefly consumption of the possessions of their followers to enhance the prestige of their noble house by giving generously to others, both living and dead. Incidentally, the name of the patron of this consumption (consumer) cult among the Kwakiutlans has finally been carefully translated to indicate an increasing perfection into the human state because “you are what you eat.”<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, in Southern California, at a later time, in consequence to Coyote’s cannibal act, Chungishnish, the founder of the *datura* jimsonweed *toloache* cult, appeared to finish the world by changing the first people into present species, spirits, or sacra before making modern humans from earth and giving them cultures, laws, and the ceremonial enclosure (*wankech*).

### **Kamia**

Kamia of the Imperial Valley trace their culture to a hermaphrodite with two sons who moved south along the Colorado River into this valley, where most Kamia ancestors fled from them in terror because of their frightful appearance. One brave woman, however, stayed and married one son, producing twins who provided corn and bean seeds, bows, arrows, war clubs passed out by patrilineages, and death ceremonies.<sup>42</sup>

As death approached, a person’s soul could be seen leaving his or her body, going south of Black Butte (Wiespa) in lower California, where it glided on the wind waiting to rejoin with a twin spirit, which arose from the body at the moment of death, but lingered nearby for four days, visiting everywhere that person lived.

As the body cremated, this spirit returned to gather the burnt clothes, rub charcoal on its eyes to enhance them, and go south, where it was escorted by deceased relatives and rejoined the soul to reconstitute that person, who lived, died, and was cremated four times. After each death the shape of the “body” changed until after the fourth death it became a black beetle or other insect that returned to the Kamia country. “If heart did not burn, it was buried in the pit with the ashes, to enliven and emerge as a young owl that later grew up.”<sup>43</sup>

## Yokuts

In a declaration that resonates with Native understanding of this and all cremation, Yoimut, a woman who was the last of the Chunut Yokuts who lived on the northeastern shore of Lake Tulare remembered that her mother

. . . saved her money for a year and had bought a good suit of clothes at Mr. Sweet's store in Visalia. She paid sixteen dollars for it. She had a good hat, shoes, socks, and underwear.

Mother stuffed the clothes with tules and fastened them together so they looked like a man. She painted the face. Then she got out the fine baskets she had made to burn, and all father's things she had saved. Then she was ready for the Lonewis.

By daylight everything was burned up and only a few people were singing and crying around their own fires. They kept that up all day.

My mother worked hard to get the money to buy the clothes to burn in the fire for my father. She washed for the Blankenships and for Mrs. "Fish" Rice. But you white people do the same thing. You save money and dress dead people in good clothes. You spend lots of money for coffin.

Then you bury your father, mother, maybe your wife. You put everything in ground and all decay. We *burn* good clothes and they *do not* decay. They go to Tih-pik-nits' Pahn [great bird in charge in the hereafter + land] so our dead person always had good clothes to wear.<sup>44</sup>

## ḤINGITS (TLINGITS)

Such insight and background now allows us to return to the Northwest, particularly the matrilineal north of the Tsimshian, Haida, and Ḥingit who once cremated virtually all their honored dead.

Among Ḥingits, a person is believed to be composed of layers outward from a vitalizing "mind" located in the heart at the center of the body, then to bones, flesh, and outer skin, along with spirits or souls. The most ideal of persons was said to be dry, hard, and heavy—a humane and moral member of the nobility who dispensed cultural expertise in return for labor and help from others.

The great (if tragic) irony of a successful Ḥingit life, however, was that a noble reached his or her apex just after death, particularly after cremation when they fully attained ideal attributes by being transmogrified into "heat, light, smoke, charcoal, and ashes"<sup>45</sup> as fire consumed one life in order to rekindle another.<sup>46</sup>

When a Ḥingit body reclined on the pyre, the soul spirit more easily arose to travel in stages from the cemetery,<sup>47</sup> into the forest, and up a mountainside where it entered the second land of the dead to take up residence in its ancestral house. According to an explicit statement, those who were cremated had the virtue of staying near the fire,<sup>48</sup> warmed and ready to receive offerings

sent by the living through mortal fires.<sup>49</sup> “In the house of the spirits the essences of the food, clothing, and other objects burned by the living descended through the smokehole upon the spirits sitting around this ancestral fireplace.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the Hlingit root *gaan* gets compounded into words meaning burn, cremate, and shine.<sup>51</sup> “Located in the center of the house, which itself was the center of the human-occupied space, the fire was firmly associated with humanity and social life and was opposed to the peripheral domains of the rain-soaked forest and the sea.”<sup>52</sup>

The bodies of shamans and battle-slain warriors were not cremated. Shamans instead were encased and left on some lonely rocky point to become the object of questing for shamanic power, especially by a nephew (sister’s son). Warriors killed in battle went into the sky to join the Northern Lights, where their life was spartan but well attended by slaves and slain enemies.<sup>53</sup>

A year later, with the awkward body replaced by a monumental pole or other great artwork, a mortuary potlatch was held to install a successor to the name, persona, and position of the deceased, confirming the continuity of society and its eternal character as yet another person was given to a name so that, as Gitksan say, only the skin changes. Yet such transfer also involves an element of personal will since one Gitksan grandmother who felt neglected by her family threatened to be reincarnated outside of her matriline and, when really piqued, into some undeserving Anglo baby.<sup>54</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

All told, cremation cannot be understood apart from the reverence for fire throughout the Americas and the world. Whether or not a society cremates, all recognize fire as a portal between dimensions and existences. William Beynon, Tsimshian Wolf chief, collected a marvelous account of two friendly shamans, one on the coast and the other upriver, who sent each other gifts from a home fire through the other’s smokehole. Thus, shellfish put in the fire on the coast fell from the interior smokehole, as chokecherries did in reverse.<sup>55</sup> As Mohave and Pomo noted, fire also improves smell, with cooking preferred to putrefaction.

Via this fire portal, the dead are supplied with their possessions, houses, foods, and warmth at the time of the funeral and periodically thereafter. The late Wick Miller once told me how startled he was at a Gosiute funeral, which promised to be done the old way, when the deceased’s house trailer suddenly burst into flames to mark his passing, presumably updating residence styles in their afterworld.

As Native California makes clear, cremation can be an expedient for transporting human remains back home when that is a priority, as Homer explained in the *Iliad*:

after Achilles’s stand-in (Patroclus) was killed by Hector, his shade came to Achilles in a dream to plead for cremation since hordes of battle dead kept him from crossing the river Styx into Hades. After explaining that burning would quickly send him through the Gates of

Hades, he predicted Achilles own death, asked that their ashes be buried together within the same gold urn, and then vanished in a wisp of smoke.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, when deciding upon cremation, convenience is not as important a reason as protection of the body, relief of the bereaved, or quick release (clean break) of the innermost essence of a person. One explanation for Viking ship cremation is that the soul is a ray of the sun that must be returned at death to its source, with both fire and ships speeding the process.<sup>57</sup> Sometimes cremation has prestige, as among Tsimshian, Hittites, and ancient Germans, according to Tacitus, where famous men were cremated using special woods in the pyre.

Throughout northern Europe, burial followed a long period of cremation, as the sky god replaced the earth goddess.<sup>58</sup> "Cremation, appearing in the north as early as the Stone Age, two thousand years before Christ, becoming supreme in the Early Bronze Age and running through the Celtic Iron Age, is bound up with the belief that the soul is freed from the body with the help of fire, and flies to a distant land of the dead, where it is re-born."<sup>59</sup> At one Danish mound, wings of jackdaws and crows were added to the pyre to assist this flight.

In addition to this predominant means of burial, Celtic religion made three modes of offerings to their trinity of Teutates by bloodletting, of Esus by hanging from trees, and of Taranis by burning.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, final disposal of a loved one must be distinguished from sacrifice to a deity.

Among California Mission tribes, burning the body protected it by removing a temptation to use it for bad intentions such as cannibalism or sorcery, although some violations of this taboo have led to compensations like the arrival of Chungishnish.

Among Pomo, removing the body, possessions, and house of the deceased served to take away reminders of this loss for the living, and, more importantly, keep any ghosts from being lured back to retrieve a favored item or person.

In a few cases, cremation was a way of making sure someone dangerous or repellant was really dead, but even that was not always certain. For example, in the 1840s Crees killed a Blackfoot warrior named Low Horn by driving an elk antler into his ear, since his powers turned away all bullets. Then, to be sure he was dead, they burned his body, but an ember exploded to produce a grizzly bear that attacked the Crees, who fled as lightning bolts killed several others. Low Horn later reincarnated into a boy who became a famous shaman who died in 1899.<sup>61</sup>

Ultimately, however, cremation was a shortcut to transmutation into another reality, freeing up intangibles like spirits, names, and honors to be reclaimed by heirs, as among the Lingit and Tsimshian. This quick release explains the concern with easing the passage, with consideration given to the placement of the body, on the side for Maricopa, face down for Pomo, or reclining for Lingit, so that souls can more easily arise and go forth. Such a quickening, the quick of the dead, also hastened their re-creation in the

beyond in some form.<sup>62</sup> In instances of a Babyland, the outer form seems to reconstitute as a fetal template, ready to recombine with other elements to become a newborn. The soul, shade, shadow, and/or ghost resides in some land of the dead, sometimes a series of them, until, in the ultimate tragedy for Native peoples, it no longer has anyone among the living who remember it at all and thus it passes into oblivion or perhaps fuses with the Creator as a greater cosmic awareness. Throughout the Americas, memory is the ultimate binder holding together the past, present, future, and eternal.

As expressed in phrases like "flame of life" and "spark of intelligence," fire enlightens, binds, and renews. "Like the burning of fields in preparation for planting, or to encourage the return of game and other edible plants, burning corpses and their possessions emphasized the regenerative power of fire."<sup>63</sup>

Crow of Montana explicitly say that the all pervasive power in the universe, which they call *maxpe*, appears as a white, wispy vapor, seen as clouds, smoke, cold breath, foggy mists, frosty earth, and more. Indeed, when set ablaze, tobacco, like a cremated corpse, changed into its essential soul-power form, as did words and prayers on chilly mornings.<sup>64</sup>

Thus death, funeral, burial, cremation, reburial, re-cremation, and timed memorials all serve to mark these passages in deading in the same way that namings, marriages, birthdays, and anniversaries mark such stages in living.

I want to end with some speculations about gaps in the ethnography, both distributional and emotional. First, since cremation shortcuts an elaborate series of ongoing deconstructions by cooking down the body, someone somewhere sometime should have a belief, probably esoteric, that the flames of the pyre provided the means to a higher existence, a new form of "enlightenment." Certainly among Pueblos, membership in various communal cults and priesthoods is still phrased in terms of metaphors of cooking so that noninitiates are "raw" while initiates are "cooked" and officials are "well done, ripe, ready, and finished." Throughout the Americas, standard belief held that spirits owned the land, the dead held it as permanent residents, and the living used it. Thus, graves and cremation pits served as deeds of claim.

Second, looking at distributions of mortuary practices shows them to be obviously discontinuous. In the prehistoric Southwest, for example, neighboring traditions used alternate procedures. Thus, the Hohokam of southern Arizona cremated but the Anasazi to the north interred. Then the situation was even more complicated when, after about 1200 AD, Hohokam instead buried, suggesting to me that the cremation tradition of present southern Arizona and California gave way to intercultural hostilities such that Yumans centered on the lower Colorado River kept cremation as they moved eastward, while Pimans entrenched along the Gila and Sonoran desert by shifting to inhumation. Yet for the earlier Hohokam, Emil Haury astutely mused,

Unexplained are the meanings of caches and the mass destruction of cultural goods, in both of which fire played an obvious part. These customs appear to be connected in some way to cremation as such. But I strongly suspect that the relationships of many activities derive from

fire as a revered and sacred agent, essential in death, in making sacrifices, and in ritual.”<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, throughout Native California, adjacent nations used alternate means with their dead. This patterning suggests that despite all its internal consistency as strong cultural beliefs, cremation or burial also provided a primary means of national identity. Therefore, any and all such practices need to be put into a regional context with the understanding that people will often adhere to something just because their neighbors do not.

Third, all sources imply that ashes have a unity of their own, with the integrity of each individual indicated by the separate treatment of his/her ashes, though the Mohave divided them fourfold. Yet the care that was taken to conceal these ashes suggests that there was a concern to protect them from use in sorcery against the family. This potential for divisive use seems to be the closest Native America came to the commodification of cremated remains so prevalent in modern America, where divorced parents divide up the ashes of their dead child, or, in Seattle, old Hoofers have packets of their ashes taken to many favorite scenic spots.

Cremation initially stuck me as both an anonymous and amorphous way of dealing with the dead, but my review has proven to me otherwise. By taking a loved one from flesh to ashes, mourners make the greatest manifestation of their regard. Natives who attend Anglo burials are often shocked when the family walks away from the grave with the coffin still resting above it. All Native funerals I have ever attended end with the family lowering the coffin and filling in the grave, often with separate lines of men or of women tossing handfuls into the grave to soften the later impact of loaded shovelfuls.

Cremation is definitive and quick. When a British Columbia trapper cut off his thumb axing through a tree knot, he saved both until he could invite friends to the burning of both because “Any bastardly chunk that can trick me out of a thumb has got a cremation coming to it.”<sup>66</sup>

With cremation, the passage from intact body to manageable ashes takes several hours of constant attention, but the results are both comparatively quick and lasting. Always, personal articulations by those involved stress not the convenient outcome but the ongoing careful concern with freshness evidenced by these mourners toward their lost relative.<sup>67</sup>

In Japan, where cremation is the rule, friends assure me that their final act of picking out the remains of a parent at a crematorium was among the most intimate and psychologically satisfying releases in their entire grieving process. In contrast to the mechanized cremation of Japan, Hindu India continues a practice both ancient and full, integrated within a closed universe wherein “nothing new can be produced except by destroying, or transforming something else.”<sup>68</sup> Benares has two *ghats* (cremation grounds) because this city is sacred to Shiva, who promised final liberating salvation to all who die there. The oldest *ghat* marks the place where Lord Visnu sat for 50,000 years “performing the austerities (*tapas*) by which he created the world” and where the corpse of the cosmos itself will ignite at the end of time. “By entering the pyre here the deceased—as it were—refuels the fires of creation at the

very spot where creation began.”<sup>69</sup> Death is counted not from the loss of breath, but from the moment a kinsman cracks the skull to allow its combustion within the pyre. Then the corpse rises as smoke from pyre turns into clouds, rain, and vegetables to be eaten and transformed into semen to repeat the process. Only small children, lepers, violent or sudden death casualties, and smallpox victims were not cremated, but instead immersed in the Ganges River, though an effigy of each was later burned. Only ascetics have no contacts with cremation at all. For Hindus, “Cremation is cosmogony; and an individual death is assimilated to the process of cosmic regeneration.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus, from situated local knowledge within Native America, we move globally toward the human condition, where anthropology still has the most to say in terms of cultural integrity, ethnic diversity, and cross-cultural understanding, especially when it gives full heed to the Native voice in its cultural context.

### NOTES

1. Jay Miller, *Tsimshian Culture: A Light Through the Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
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5. Ruth Kirk, *The Oldest Man in America: An Adventure in Archaeology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 93.
6. Ronald Mason and Carol Irwin, “An Eden-Scottsbluff Burial in Northeastern Wisconsin,” *American Antiquity* 26:1 (1960): 43–57.
7. James A. Ford and Clarence Webb, “Poverty Point, a Late Archaic Site in Louisiana,” *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 46:1 (1956): 1–136, 35.
8. Jane Buikstra and Lynne Goldstein, *The Perrins Ledge Crematory* in Reports of Investigations 28 (Springfield: Illinois State Museum, 1973); Dena Ferran Dincauze, “Cremation Cemeteries in Eastern Massachusetts,” papers of Harvard University’s Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology 59:1 (1968); Richard Gould, “Aboriginal California Burial and Cremation Practices,” Reports of the University of California Archaeological Survey 60 (1968): 149–168; Robert Neuman, *An Introduction to Louisiana Archaeology* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984); John O’Shea, “Social Configurations and the Archaeological Study of Mortuary Practices: A Case Study,” in *The Archaeology of Death*, eds. Robert Chapman, Ian Kinnes, Klavs Randsborg (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 39–52; Maurice Robbins, *Wapanucket: An Archaeological Report* (Attleboro, MA: Trustees of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society, 1980); John Walthall, *Prehistoric Indians of the Southeast: Archaeology of Alabama and the Middle South* (Birmingham: University of Alabama Press, 1980).
9. Effie Bendann, *Death Customs: An Analytical Study of Burial Rites* (London: Dawson of Pall Mall, 1969), 50, 77–78.

10. Grenville Goodwin, *Social Organization of the Western Apache* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1969).

11. The identification of Power's E-ri-o can be traced through Alfred Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 78 (1925), 234, as the Pomo near Fort Ross, and Sally McLendon and Wendell Oswalt, in Robert Heizer, *Smithsonian Handbook of North American Indians: California*, vol. 8 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 278, as Kashaya Pomo, derived from the Spanish *el rio*.

12. Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 194.

13. Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (New York: Warner Books, 1994), 233.

14. Jay Miller, "Delaware Personhood," *Man in the Northeast* 42 (Fall 1991): 17–27; Jay Miller, *Shamanic Odyssey: The Lushootseed Salish Journey to the Land of the Dead*, Ballena Press Anthropological Papers 32 (1988): 141.

15. Anne Terry Straus, "Northern Cheyenne Ethnopsychology," *Ethnos* 5:3 (1975): 326–357; id., "The Meaning of Death in Northern Cheyenne Culture," *Plains Anthropologist* 23:7 (1978), 1–7. See also Miller, *Shamanic Odyssey*, 131–132.

16. Bruce Trigger, *The Huron: Farmers of the North* (New York: Holt, Rinehard, Winston, 1969), 104.

17. John Swanton, *Source Materials for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 103 (1931).

18. Leslie Spier, *Yuman Tribes of the Gila River* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1933), 296, 299, 302, 308.

19. To further offset this concern, the pyre used aromatic mesquite, whose intense heat was extolled as "the ultimate in fragrant fuels" by Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), 153.

20. Heizer, *California*.

21. Heizer, *California*, 268, 776, 297.

22. Kroeber, *Handbook*, 499.

23. Ruth Underhill, *Social Organization of the Papago Indians* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 190.

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25. Ray, *Primitive Pragmatists*, 116.

26. Ray, *Primitive Pragmatists*, 119.

27. Edwin Loeb, *Pomo Folkways* (Berkeley: University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 19:2, 1926), 149–405, 290.

28. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 287.

29. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 290, 296.

30. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 286.

31. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 292.

32. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 289.

33. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 291.

34. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 288.

35. Loeb, *Pomo Folkways*, 294.

36. Kroeber, *Handbook*, 429–432, 859–861.



37. Heizer, *California*, 383, fig. 10.
38. Kroeber, *Handbook*, 860.
39. Kroeber, *Handbook*, 637.
40. Kroeber, *Handbook*, 740, plate 69.
41. Susanne Hilton and John Rath, "Objections to Franz Boas's Referring to Eating People in the Translation of the Kwakwaka'wakw Terms *baXwɔbakwalnuXusiwe* and *hamats!a*" (working papers of the Seventeenth International Conference on Salish and Neighboring Languages, Portland State University, August 1983), 98–106.
42. Edward Gifford, *The Kamia of Imperial Valley*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 97 (1931): 79.
43. *Ibid.*, 71, 72.
44. Frank F. Latta, *Handbook of Yokuts Indians* (Santa Cruz: Bear State Books, 1977), 667, 675, 682.
45. Sergei Kan, *Symbolic Immortality: The Tlingit Potlatch of the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), 114.
46. Miller, *Tsimshian Culture*, 44.
47. Kan, *Symbolic Immortality*, 127.
48. Kan, *Symbolic Immortality*, 112.
49. This custom was reported in the first detailed, balanced, and coherent Americanist ethnography by Reverend Ivan Veniaminov, *Notes on the Islands of the Unalaska District*, trans. Lydia T. Black and R. H. Geohegan, ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1984), 398. This work was published in 1840 to describe and compare Aleuts and Indians (Kolosh), particularly ̕lingits.
50. Kan, *Symbolic Immortality*, 113.
51. Kan, *Symbolic Immortality*, 112.
52. Kan, *Symbolic Immortality*, 112.
53. Kan, *Symbolic Immortality*, 120–121.
54. John Adams, *The G̕iksan Potlatch: Population Flux, Resource Ownership, and Reciprocity* (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson of Canada, 1973), 32.
55. Miller, *Tsimshian Culture*, 277 n44.
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57. Robert Hall, "In Search of the Ideology of the Adena-Hopewell Climax," in *Hopewell Archaeology: The Chillicothe Conference*, ed. David Brose and N'omi Greber (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979), 169, quoting Francis Huxley, *The Way of the Sacred* (New York: Dell, 1976), 262; Robert Hall, *An Archaeology of the Soul: North American Indian Belief and Ritual* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
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59. Glob, *The Bog People*, 145.
60. Gerhard Herm, *The Celts: The People Who Came out of the Darkness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 157.
61. Hugh Dempsey, "The Blackfoot Indians," in *Native Peoples: The Canadian Experience*, eds. R. Bruce Morrison and C. Roderick Wilson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995), 381–413, 396.
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67. Portability, however, remains a concern. Families that fled to America from the Baltic states quickly adopted cremation in the expressed hope that they would eventually be able to take the remains of their loved ones home, as many have indeed begun to do lately (Astida Blukis Onat, Ph.D., personal communication, October 31, 2000).

68. Jonathan Perry, "Sacrificial Death and the Necrophagous Ascetic," in *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, eds. Maurice Block and Jonathan Perry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 74–110, 72.

69. Perry, *Sacrificial Death*, 77.

70. Perry, *Sacrificial Death*, 76.