

TANATOPRACTICE

Marta Woźniak

University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland

Introduction

Life and death are considered as things personally relating every human being. Since the moment of a birth every living person gets closer to death. Death is the natural border of human's ontogenesis (Brotkiewicz, 2000).

The description of an after life is a common topic in religions all over the world. The earliest descriptions of processes done on purpose on corpses come from prehistoric times and are found as drawings on the walls of caverns. In the ancient Egypt people were writing down inscriptions and hieroglyphs painted on sarcophaguses and inside tombs. Every religion considers death in a different, specific for itself way. Ancients tried to accustom themselves with the thought about their death. They even wrote rules how to prepare to it. Tibetan and Egyptian books of death can be an example (Machinka, 2003).

Trying to avoid contacting with death, people wanted to take power over it. A good example are cannibalistic practices where one man decided about the life and death of another one. Similar tasks belonged to mummification and bodies embalming, where defeating death was done by preventing rotting of a body and gaining a new life in heaven. Nowadays people try to manage their own life and death with a suicide. Preparing and directing our own funeral is a partial expression of domination over the death (Machinka, 2003.).

Fascination and fear accompanying death gave birth to ritual behaviour and ceremonies. Praying for the death one had huge meaning for the living ones and also protected from the future influence of ghosts. Their job was to separate death from life very strongly. Sometimes to complete a ceremony the dead one had to be hold. This stopping was called tanatopractice (Machinka, 2003, Petoia, 2004, Książczyńska, 2005).

The aim of tanatopractice was to make up the corpse so that it looked as it was not dead. Sometimes it looked even better than during life. According to L.V Thomas (1991) tanatopractice is a continuation of a duty of taking care about the dead person's body.

Development

Visions of death and of dealing with a corpse were developed during the ages. Death being on one hand a very individual experience on the other hand involved many other people. Prehistoric human as *Homo erectus* and *Homo neandertalensis* had their burial rituals. (Nowaczewska, Rosiński, 2003). Every population living on Earth made its own burial schemes.

Burial rite is a bunch of activities connected with death and the corpse. They are universal behaviours met in every community since the palaeolithic era. Common feature about them is inescapability of dying and thinking about what happens after it. This belief created atmosphere of magic, mysteriousness, fear and disgust. That is why many religions developed burial ceremonies. A burial became an act of feelings and meant that biological death is not the end of a spiritual activity of a human, but just the end of one's physical existence. According to Tokariew (after Burdach, 2001) the development of burial rituals was caused by the need of tidiness and the will of getting rid of the corpse.

Eschatology is connected with religious beliefs. It is a total of opinions about the final destination and an afterlife of a human, mankind and the whole world. Depending on a religion main themes are: reincarnation (Hinduism), an afterlife prize (Islamic paradise, Catholic Heaven) or punishment (hell in Zoroastrism, Judaism, Christianity). The opinions refer also to many possible ways of incoming to the land of the dead, last judgement (Zoroastrism, Judaism, Christianity, Islamic) and the end of the world (Wielki Słownik PWN, 2005).

Funeral rite is representative for a certain period of religious beliefs which were developed during many ages of a tradition, economic and social factors as well as the environment. Activities done to a corpse to conserve or consolidate it or to dissect it in accordance with the beliefs is called tanatopractice. L.V. Thomas (1991) refers this idea to a corpse which undergone a temporary conservation. According to the author insistency to conserve a corpse has just one aim: to hold and beautify the body of a dead person. This aim can be reached in two ways. One of them is tanatopractice (connected with "aesthetical" preservation of a corpse until its burial) and the other way is mummification and cryogenisation. The first of them is to assure the rebirth of the dead one in one's own body, the second of them has to hold the dead one in between the world of living and the dead.

The basic function of tanatopractice is to make of the dead body a second self of the living. "Comb me, make me up, I want to be beautiful... I do not know what I am going to become after some time... in the ground." – quotes Thomas (1991) the request of Martine Carole, to show what can be done to a corpse so that it would not shock mourners with its progressive decay.

Even Neanderthals performed very complicated funeral ceremonies which suggest the present of belief in post mortem life. According to Niewęglowski (after Książczyńska, 2005) opinions of ancient communities about afterlife can be seen in two different variants:

1. belief in physical continuity of a life in a grave and behind it (idea of “living dead”)
2. belief in dualistic nature of a human which consist of s body and a soul which after death dismantles and lives at its own

Endeavour to conserve a corpse was connected with the belief in “living dead”. The same reason caused the need of getting rid of it. It gave birth to cremation, which was the most efficient way of disposal of a “living dead” (Książczyńska, 2005). Since antiquity there are known methods of a body mummification (which led to permanent exsiccation) and cremation. Since the second part of the XX century there is also known cryogenisation (Kęćciek, 2002).

Sample partition of fundamental ways of treating corpse can be as follows:

- inhumation
- cremation
- mummification
- cryogenisation
- vampirisme
- cannibalism

Similar partition offers G. Montandan.

In the article there will only be discussed new tanatopractice technics because inhumation, cremation and mummification are extensively described in literature.

To specific practices connected with conservation of a body after death we can count cannibalism and vampirism. In both cases we deal with a not completed burial which was caused by missing of some part of a skeleton (talisman, relic) or by mixing up bones or even digging them in different places (Petoia, 2004). Vampirism problem is rather connected with beliefs and legends and cannibalism with primitive men so they will not be discussed here.

Contemporary mummification

Thanks to the technology and medicine development, the possibilities of tanatopractice are changed. In rich countries, where the high level of life is present, tanatopractice techniques become normal services. In these societies, despite that to the conservation of corpses big attention is paid, the funeral ceremonies are being shortened and simplified. Today people caring more about conquest over illness or death, than keeping their bodies in good condition beyond this world (Kwiatkowski, 2005, Thomas, 1991).

New methods of embalming depend on drainage of the blood vessels and pressing in (15 min per perfusion of the 10 liters of a liquid, per person weights 70 kg) formaldehyde solution, glycerine and botox. Nevertheless the embalming can be improper. There is a big problem with capillary vessels through which embalming liquid cannot pass. The next problem occurs by the mechanical injuries and damages of arteries or veins. Therefore today Embalmers are using several methods preserving of human bodies (Thomas, 1991).

New techniques of embalming are being practiced on the mass scale in USA, Canada and Australia. In Europe embalming is being used very seldom. There is exception, the need of long-distance transportation of bodies or postponing of the funerals.

The mean target of the tanatopractice techniques is to give a dead body a look of living person. The putrefaction can start after funeral. First treatments disinfect surface of body, than the liquids are taken out from stomach and the gullet is bound. The throat is filled with a gauze (bandage), mouth sewed from inside. The trachea is cut and bound, in such a way, that the extraction of putrefacting lungs is not possible. Natural openings in the body are closed by using tampons filled with conservative substance. The eyeballs are covered with coverings.

Recently four methods of the human body putrefaction slowdown are used:

- arterial embalming (the blood is replaced by conserving liquid, described above)
- under skin embalming (conservation of these parts of body which cannot from different reasons cannot be treated by arterial embalming)
- cavity embalming – this kind of embalming is being done by using steel tap (length 50-60 cm, diameter 1.5 cm). It has the needle at the end, with triangle-shape blade connected to pump. On the beginning the gases, liquids and extements are taken out, after that the embalming liquid is pumped into the body e.g. Thanatyl C.
- surface embalming (eyelids, the mouth and other parts, which are damaged are coated with preservative such a gel or liquid), (Kwiatkowski, 2005, Thomas, 1991)

The body prepared in this way can survive about two months. It is enough time to transport the body or to organize funeral. Some treatments allow, that the dead person can be shown to the public. It is so called *tantaranta*. The body and the hairs are washed, the nails are cleaned and cut off. In case of men's' bodies the beard is being shaved. Finally for the natural color of skin restoring the face, neck or the hands are covered with masking paste and cosmetics. The last treatment is putting the clothes on and brushing the hairs (Kwiatkowski, 2005).

Cryogenisation

Another modern method of tanatopractice is cryogenics. It consists in freezing a body in liquid nitrogen and keeping it in a laboratory. The body will be provided with necessary nutritives, so that after a long time of hibernation it will be able to function on its own. Originally, the aim of this method was to stop decay of the body of a terminally ill person until the moment when a medication is invented. Later cryogenics has become one of the ways of life prolonging (Kwiatkowski, 2005, Kęciek 2002).

In 1964 professor Robert Ettinger wrote a book titled *Prospect of Morality*. He described there the process of the decay of body cells which don't die at once after the circulation ceases, but it's a gradual process, which takes place in tissues with various speed. Ettinger claims that the doctors should never say that the patient is dead, but that today's level of technology doesn't allow us to perform reanimation. The chance of being re-born one day raised interest in people suffering from terminal diseases and these who would just like to endure their lives. This, in turn, caused emerging of new cryogenic concerns (Kęciek, 2002).

American company specializing in this field, Alcor Life Extension, offers two types of congealing. The freezing of the head only (60 000 \$) is a cheaper option and is connected with the belief that an organism can be cloned from one cell only. The more expensive option (160 000 \$) involves putting the whole corpse in a silo with liquid nitrogen. Representatives of companies like Alcor encourage people to being frozen with the words: "Silos with liquid nitrogen are not coffins but ambulances, slowly driving the patients to emergency rooms that have not yet been built" (Kęciek, 2002).

The process of congealing the body looks as follows:

- the brain get the oxygen and nutrients to keep functioning
- the body is gradually cooling down (to avoid any damages)
- blood is pumped out, cooled down and kept in another room
- blood vessels are filled with chemicals (isotonic salt solution and glicerol prevent liquids from crystalizing)
- the body is covered with ice in order to reach temperature of – 43 celsius degrees
- the body is wrapped up in foil film
- the body is submerged in a silo with liquid nitrogen (-196 celsius degrees)
- sometimes the nitrogen is replaced with liquid helium (- 273 celsius degrees)
- the bodies are placed there head down, so that they can be clearly seen through a glass sight.

Cryogenics, which is considered a part of science, cares about the symbolic which can be connected with the funeral ritual (Kwiatkowski, 2005, Thomas, 2002).

The scientists (after Kwiatkowski, 2005, Thomas, 2002) more and more often prove the ineffectiveness of this method. There are four main postulates against it, and not fulfilling even one of them results in impossibility of ever coming back to life.

1. The process of congealing should be started not later than 2 minutes after death – the necrosis after this time is irreversible. The problem here is to precisely define the moment of death.
2. The physiological salt solution filling in for blood should reach every vein, even the blood capillaries. In a dead body it is impossible.
3. The congelation of water in body cells – the human body consists mainly of water and freezing water will form microscopic lumps of ice that will rip the cell membranes.
4. Gradual cooling of the body should be performed in such a way that all the organs would be cooling down at the same speed. This is however impossible because of the chemical structure of cells and their different sensitivity to temperature.

From the very moment of creation of the cryogenics as one of the methods for tanatopraxy, 200 people have been placed in silos with liquid nitrogen. These were mainly Americans and Japanese, as among these nations a kind of a 'cryogenic cult' can be observed. However, cryogenics has become famous owing to the gossip that one of the frozen people is the creator of Mickey Mouse, Walt Disney. Along with the others he's waiting for the impossible.

Conclusion

Death is a subject appearing in every culture and epoch. Since the moment when a man started to direct his destiny consciously, death became his shadow. Creatures before *Homo sapiens* felt need to bury their companions.

First intentional burials did not differ significantly from those that are performed commonly nowadays. In both cases a body finally was placed in the soil. However, rites and rituals has changed. Extremely poor in the Neanderthal period, gradually became more and more rich and elaborated. But today burial rites are forgotten. It is connected with bigger and bigger speed of life and civilization development. A human being does not have time for appropriate rites so a dead has to be satisfied with a short reminiscence and a lavish gravestone.

Presently more attention is paid to tanatopractice techniques than to burial rites. The family of a dead desires him to look as good as possible during a funeral mass. It prefers to retain in memory a picture of a dead as a man he was before death not as he will become for a certain period of time. Fascination or fear of a human corpse was a reason for creation different techniques of bodies treatment after death. Some of them intended to keep human body and move away a decomposition process, while other meant a ritual dismembering process of a body for religion purposes. What happened then with a human body, with its soul depended on believes and rituals of a given group of people.

In every civilization death was a definitive end of social life. However thanks to the progress in medicine we can control over its processes. One is certain that until people die, and science provides us with new solutions human bodies can expect further development.

References

- Bortkiewicz Paweł, *Tanatology*, Poznań 2000
Kęciek Krzysztof, *Recepta na zmartwychwstanie*, Przegląd Antropologiczny, nr 12/2002
Kwiatkowski Bogusław, *Mumia*, Warszawa 2005
Nowaczewska Wioletta, Rosiński Franciszek M., *Neanderthal man– cousin or forefather?*, Quaestiones selectae, 2003, s. 121-144
Petoia Erberto, *Vampires and werewolf*, Kraków 2004
Thomas Louis – Vincent, *Osign. Human and his civilization*, Łódź 1991
Wielka Encyklopedia PWN, 2005

Mailing address: Marta Woźniak
University of Wrocław, Plac Uniwersytecki 1
50-137 Wrocław, Poland
atram-kot@o2.pl