



# Soul Food and Sin-Eating: Folklore, Faith and Funerals

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABSTRACT

The author describes the funerary food traditions of several religions, traditions that can serve the bereaved as well as symbolising preparation for existence beyond the grave.

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As far back as records go, there is evidence of the dead being laid to rest, and burial gifts, including food and food vessels from different eras, have been discovered in archaeological remains throughout the world. These gifts are thought to have been intended for the use of the deceased on his or her journey to another life. When people were executed there is evidence that they were given a last meal. 'Lindow Man', buried in a peat bog in Cheshire during the fourth century BCE, had consumed wholemeal bread or grains just before his violent death.

Each culture has its own approaches to funerals, but there is often a core of rituals and etiquette. Younger generations will often incorporate past customs into their present and future practice (Gatrad, Brown and Sheikh, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. In modern Western society, traditional funeral customs have been largely abandoned but the relatives and friends of the deceased person continue to gather together to eat and drink after the funeral is over, telling stories and sharing memories. Analogies, anecdotes, metaphors and idioms will all feature in sharing memories of the deceased and the funeral eulogy may well be framed in the guise of a story. In other societies, death and funeral rituals are far more elaborate and extend over a greater period of time. Food and drink consumed during the wake may be regarded as symbolic of nourishment for the deceased as well as a means of strengthening the family and community in the face of death. Often there is a final ceremony and a feast marking the end of the official mourning period and the transition of the central mourners into new status and roles.

In the early church death was regarded as a release from the trials and tribulations of the world to a fuller life in heaven. The anniversary of a person's death – the 'Year's Mind' as it was called – was, therefore a greater reason for celebration than a birthday. Often this anniversary was a time for feasting and celebration. Family members were also remembered

<sup>1</sup> Gatrad, R., Brown, E. and Sheikh, A. (2008) *Palliative Care for South Asians: Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs*. London: Quay Books.



at the festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost when traditional food was shared. On All Souls Day (November 2<sup>nd</sup>) food and drink was placed on graves or left in the family home as a symbol of spiritual strength for souls in purgatory, who, according to popular belief, were thought to be present on this day. In the twenty-first century, Mexican Catholics have continued these traditions with very exuberant festivities when offerings of food and drink are placed on graves and elaborate altars. And in Portugal, on the anniversary of a death, thirty or forty loaves known as 'charity bread' are baked by the family and distributed to the poor of the parish in return for prayers for the deceased.

From as early as the sixteenth century, in the reign of Queen Mary, those who could afford it would donate food, money and mourning clothes to the poor. In Lincolnshire and the Yorkshire Dales cakes and biscuits bore the initials of the deceased or symbols such as hearts, an hourglass or even a skull! These were distributed to those who congregated outside the church gates after a burial. Most of these biscuits and cakes were said to have been baked very hard and quite large to prevent paupers pocketing more than their fair share! Those who invited the poor and needy to a funeral feast were believed to be imparted with grace. The feast itself was in anticipation of the Common Meal to be enjoyed by believers in the New Jerusalem when Christ, the Sacrificial Lamb, will invite all to sit and partake. Eventually the practice died out and was replaced by a single feast for the chief mourners after the funeral when cinnamon-spiced bread and mulled wine were popular fare. Today, throughout the world, feasting often follows funeral rites, partly to comfort the bereaved and to signal a resuming of 'normal' living, and partly by way of expressing gratitude to those who have officiated at the funeral. In some parts of Africa it is customary to fast for a day or two following someone's death, and this fast is broken by communal feasting.

In eighteenth century Scotland, 'corpse watchers' received whisky, bread, cheese and oatcakes around midnight and these foods were also traditional funeral fare in the family home after a funeral. Funeral guests were invited to feast after the funeral was over and, if the cemetery was some distance away from the family home, whisky was sometimes served en route (Fenton, 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

In parts of England and Scotland from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, 'sin-eating' was once a common funeral tradition. In exchange for payment a person known locally as a 'sin-eater' was believed to take upon themselves, by eating or drinking, the sins of the deceased. According to Aubrey, writing in 1687,<sup>3</sup> the rite was performed when the body was removed from the house for burial. The corpse was placed on a bier and a loaf of bread and a bowl of beer were passed over the body to the sin-eater who consumed them and was given a sixpence in payment. In Wales, the bowl of beer was said to have been replaced with a bowl of milk. Arguably, sin-eating may combine the notion of the scapegoat in the Jewish tradition and the Christian Eucharistic sacrifice.

In ancient Irish Catholic tradition, the dying were thought to suffer from spiritual hunger and thirst at death, and traditionally a dying person's request for food or drink was always granted through offering them 'death sustenance' for their journey to paradise. In other cultures this spiritual journey was perceived as potentially hazardous and thus sustenance was necessary for what was to come. Food and drink was left both in the presence of the deceased's body and placed in the coffin or the grave.

Beverages and alcoholic drinks such as beer and wine have been a feature of the wake and funeral hospitality throughout Europe for centuries. By the late nineteenth century,

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<sup>2</sup> Fenton A. (2002) 'Food for Personal Occasions in Lowland Scotland' in *Food and Celebration: From Fasting to Feasting*. Ed. P. Lysaght. Slovenia: Zolaz Ba

<sup>3</sup> Dick O. (ed) (1972) *Brief Lives: John Aubrey* Penguin:Harmondsworth, p229



sandwiches, cake, tea and coffee became popular. In Northern Germany it is still customary to provide 'Beerdigungskaffee' (funeral coffee) with plain or sugar biscuits for funeral participants after a burial. Austrian tradition includes a funeral breakfast consumed by relatives, friends, neighbours and the coffin-bearers prior to the funeral. Sometimes a very elaborate meal is served with a large meat platter of roast pork, sausage together with potatoes and other vegetables, followed by a dessert and pastries.

Food and drink plays a very important part in the Orthodox Christian funeral. In some communities the priest may pour a bottle of red wine making the sign of a cross over the shrouded body of the deceased before the coffin lid is closed. Boiled wheat mixed with sugar and cinnamon and decorated with nuts and raisins may also be shared in the church courtyard by funeral participants.

From Biblical times feasting and fasting has held a significant role in the Jewish tradition. After a funeral, the beginning of 'shiva' may be marked by friends of the family who provide a Meal of Consolation, known as the 'se'uddat havre'ah'. Traditionally this includes wine, hard-boiled eggs and round rolls. The circular shape of the eggs and the rolls is said to be symbolic of the cycle of life and death and new life. Providing food is an ancient custom, intended as a way of showing comfort and helping mourners to maintain their physical strength through eating. It also means that the family of the deceased do not need to leave the house or focus on worldly matters. On the 'yahrzeit', the anniversary of a person's death, family members often fast.

In the Muslim tradition, just as the expression of sorrow after a person dies is regarded as a task for the women, so the period of mourning is marked by women who prepare special food for the third, seventh and fortieth day after the burial. Whilst the men of the family attend the mosque, women will stay at home receiving visitors who will be served with food such as sweets and sweet bread rolls symbolic of 'sweet thoughts' for the departed.

There are cultural differences in Hinduism, dependent on caste. If it is within their means, families may perform acts of charity to ensure the peaceful repose of the departed soul of their relative. In Hindu aristocratic society a whole team of cooks may be hired for the entire twelve day period of mourning following a person's death. Their job is primarily one of feeding all the funeral guests:

As the day progresses, the courtyard is transformed into a communal kitchen. An army of cooks, cleaners and helpers has appropriated a large corner of the courtyard, where coal fires have been set up. One can see mountains of vegetables being washed, cut, chopped, diced and cleaned, daal being boiled in gigantic cauldrons, onions being fried, rice being washed, dough being kneaded – there is great bustle and activity. (Laungani, 1997)<sup>4</sup>

The ceremony prior to the cremation uses culinary ingredients such as ghee, coconuts, rice balls, nutmeg, cinnamon sticks and a variety of other pungent spices which may be either applied to the body or included in the coffin. Following the funeral, it is customary to locate beggars who will be fed after the funeral rites have been performed. This meal may take place in a restaurant on the banks of the river where the ashes of the deceased are scattered.

In the Sikh tradition, the family does not usually cook food until after the cremation. In Great Britain, after the cremation has taken place, the family may attend the gurdwara to offer prayers and to listen to passages read from the scriptures. The service will conclude with the distribution of food which symbolises the continuity of social life and resumption of normal activities. On the first anniversary of the person's death, the family gather and have a meal.

<sup>4</sup> Lunging P. (1997) 'Death in a Hindu Family' in Parkes, C.M., Laungani, P. and Young P. (eds.) *Death and Bereavement Across Cultures*. London: Routledge



This is not a sad occasion, but is seen as a way of remembering the deceased and celebrating their life.

We have seen that the sharing of funeral food is often more than an ordinary family meal. Across faith and cultural divides the rituals that accompany the sharing of the meal is a drama that requires special preparation. Arguably, this preparation is regarded as not only a necessity for the bereaved who re-integrate themselves into everyday life but, in many cases it is a symbolic preparation for the deceased departing from an earthly life to existence beyond the grave.