

living for the dead: who are they really?



Written by Catherine Brew, BLarch, GradDip Heritage Studies of Red Plait Interpretation LLP, this address was presented by Angie McLachlan to delegates at the ICCM Learning Convention and Exhibition, Forest Pines Hotel, Broughton, North Lincolnshire on 30th September 2013.

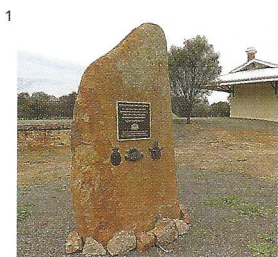
We all know that death is the one thing certain in life. It will happen to us all; all at different times in life and in different ways. But it's a 100% dead certain that we're all heading for the same final event – what happens to you afterwards is another debate.

But if death is such a certainty, then why does it remain the last social taboo? What is it about death that makes people avoid talking about it? There's the obvious issue that it is painful for the people left, especially when a loved one dies, and then there's our human genetics which creates our survival instinct. However, it interests me that after 20,000 years of modern man exploring life, the human condition and the universe, that death remains a taboo. After all and regardless of your spiritual beliefs regarding death, we've had 20,000 years of knowing that you can't have life without death. It's a given.

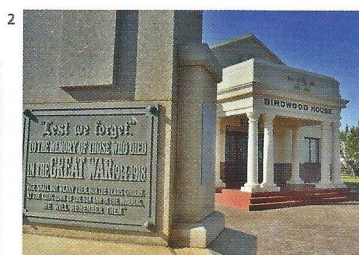
But death continues to be a difficult subject for many.

In the early days after death, the grief of family members is very raw. It is also the time when families often make decisions about funeral arrangements and interment options (that is, unless discussions were had prior to death). Emotions run deep and the feelings of loss are incredibly acute. The cemetery and the particular grave become the place to mourn, grieve and be alone with the deceased. And so in these early days, this need to have a place to visit becomes incredibly important.

This is why in Australia, the raising of war memorials after the First World War was so crucial to the national psyche. In response to the sacrifice of countless soldiers, local communities formed committees and undertook the task of honouring their soldiers through the erection of local memorials. It significantly changed the Australian landscape. Critically, with Australian men dying in foreign lands and with many bodies never being found, war memorials gave families a grave to visit.



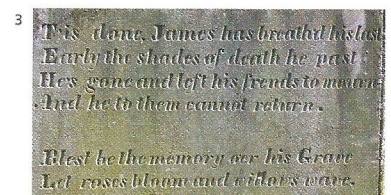
Popanyinning War Memorial



Geraldton War Memorial

However, in the absence of war, or perhaps in more ordinary circumstances of death, cemeteries reflect the individual. Unlike the uniformity of Commonwealth War Graves, headstones can also reflect (very deeply) the family's emotional state at the time of their loved one's death. As places for the living, cemeteries offer people a place to remember, mourn and honour the deceased. In the UK we're familiar with the elaborate funeral rituals of the Victorians and the poetic emotion-filled epitaphs.

For example the following epitaph illustrates perfectly the feelings at the time of the death of their friend; the loss and sorrow coming through strongly. It reads:



*Tis done, James has breathed his last
Early the shades of death he past
He's gone and left his friend to mourn
And he to them cannot return.
Blest be the memory over his Grave
Let roses bloom and willows wave.*

Similarly, religious sentiments come through from the parents of this little girl who died – demonstrating their belief in the bittersweet actions of the divine;

*God has taken back our darling
Placed our bud amongst his flowers
Taken back the child he lent us
To a better home than ours*

or this one:

*Here lies a father's hope
A mother's pride
And a wife's dependence*

These kind of memorials speak their own language, a language of death, that demonstrate attachments of love, loss, grieving, death and the hereafter, but more importantly enable us to connect to the deceased. We don't need to know them personally. Their headstone expresses not just how they died, but how they lived; their greatest beliefs, their personal views on life, sometimes their profession and what kind of person they were. We did not need to know the deceased personally to catch a glimpse of who they were. You might think, 'so what?'. None of this is really that new to us all in this room. We've all seen many epitaphs on old graves. But what I want to talk about is why these epitaphs are so important.

¹ Taken from: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gasgaslex/>

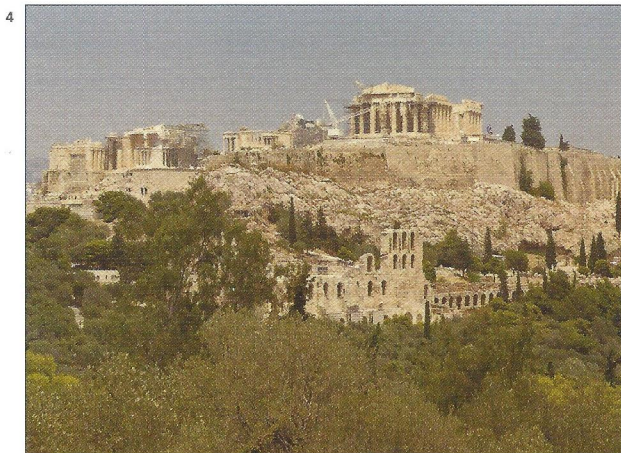
² Taken from: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/gasgaslex/9501084552/in/set-72157634960432413>

³ Taken from: <http://gravestoned.blogspot.com.au/2011/09/epitaph-let-roses-bloom-and-willows.html>

I believe that the dead have now only become known to us through the living. But memories fade and remain private to loved ones. If we don't attend the funeral, how do we really know who are our dead? How do we feel part of the continuum of generations if we can't access our dead? But do we really need to know who are our dead? What do our cemeteries tell us about our communities? In some ways, not a lot. Grave information today is incredibly minimal, but in other ways they also perfectly mirror our changing society.

In a world that's ever busier and very much focussed on social media rather than personal communication, communities are shifting and have been shifting for centuries.

Shared traditional, pre-modern communities like the ancient Greek polis (city-state), below, involved such a shared vision of life and death.



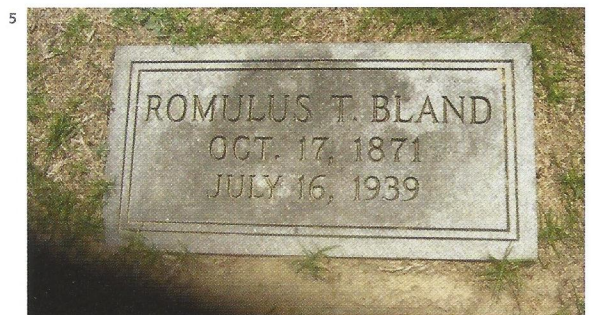
The Acropolis of Athens

Much like 300 years ago in the UK, in a community of this kind, identity is inseparable from the individual's place in a rigid and hierarchical social structure. This place in society is not chosen by the individual; rather as something naturally determined and unalterably given by birth. So, the lord is born a lord, the commoner a commoner: these are fixed and immutable identities (Sayers, n.d) and reflected in death.

In modern society, however these forms of identity and community as seen in the Greek polis have largely disappeared. The shared framework of beliefs and values which orders life and death, and also defines identity in traditional society, has been lost. 'Modern society has thus dissolved into a mass of separate individuals each pursuing their own arbitrary and subjective ends' (Sayers, n.d) and the same applies in death. So how does this relate to what we find in cemeteries....?

Imagine turning up in a new village. You're looking for a quiet place to retire. You know nothing about the area, but you decide to stroll through the cemetery. As you read the epitaphs you discover that this place was once home to Jo Biggens who was famous locally for weaving, you come across John Smith the local minister – according to his headstone, he fought hard for peace during the war, and then there's Mary Jacobs...actually there are lots of Jacobs in this cemetery – maybe it's a local name. Oh look, poor woman – four of her seven children died. Just imagine!!

Then consider the same scenario with a more modern cemetery. The grave of William B Back has a modern plaque; it simply reads: *William B Back 1856 – 1929*. I wonder who he was you think....there's no further information. There's a marble headstone that reads '*David James 1922 – 2005*'. Then there's Romulus Bland..... Knowledge of who these three were remains with family and friends or those who were at the funeral.

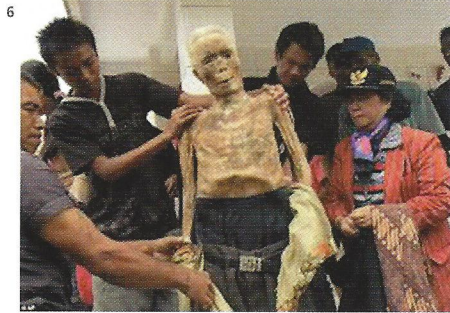


It's clear that the village cemetery with its informative headstones offers a much more insightful connection to the community and the ancestors you are visiting. It gives you a sense of place that allows you to connect to that place and its people. Filled with religious sentiment and a desire to be connected to such divine virtue, these older cemeteries tell us life stories and the headstones are a public declaration of the deceased's spiritual worth as they head to their desired place in the afterlife.

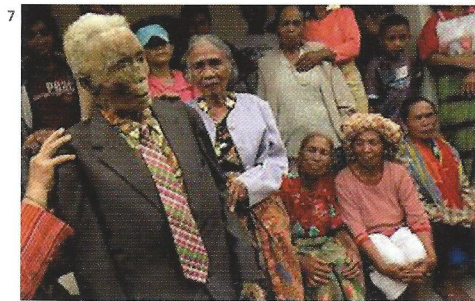
Some cultures go as far as ritually redressing their dead regularly to make those connections. It's not just for the family to honour the spirits – the whole community gets involved. In parts of Indonesia, locals believe dead family members are still with them, even if they died hundreds of years ago. Families like this dig up their loved one every 3 years and honour the spirits by redressing them. Villagers bind cloth rolls containing the bodies in front of a stone grave and the coffins containing the mummies are then put in a grave house during the ritual. Children grow up participating in the ritual and so it becomes normal practice for all ages.

⁴ Taken from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acropolis_of_Athens

⁵ Taken from: <http://duplin.lostsoulsgenealogy.com/cemetery/blandcempics.htm>



Families redress their ancestors ritually in parts of Indonesia



In researching this ritual, I came across many websites with comments from British people saying how disgusting this practice is, what happened to 'Rest In Peace?', Some said 'It's macabre'.... Another remarked 'leave them alone'. In some ways this does not surprise me, but as one person also commented, 'It just yet again proves that a large proportion of the western "civilisations" are so out of touch with the concept of death and forget how it was celebrated and respected even in our countries, as little time ago as the Victorian era. Come the time I die, hopefully many years from now, I wouldn't be surprised if I'm just lumped into a black binbag and put out with the rubbish.' (Watson, 2012)



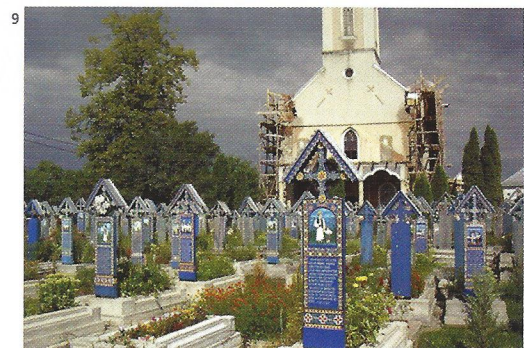
Our approach to death has changed enormously over the centuries. In medieval times, death was ever present. Epidemics, poor hygiene and limited medical advancement meant that death was much more part of everyday life. Although still feared and equally devastating to families as it is today, people were more familiar with coping with it.

Now I'm not suggesting that British people start digging up their relatives and redressing them every few years, but what it shows to me about these Indonesian communities is that there appears to be an acceptance of death and a celebration of life in a way that modern British people cannot cope with.

This started me thinking about the affects of our cemeteries in reaffirming how we continue to deal with death, or rather, not deal with death. Headstones tend to focus on the living's loss, sorrow and fear around death, rather than the celebration of the deceased's life. Part of this comes from the fact that decisions about graves are made when people are at their most grief stricken, but I believe that it's also about our inability and difficulties in dealing with death. Because of this, cemeteries and emotion-filled epitaphs come to hold the trauma of death.

What would happen to our attitudes about death if graves considered more than death? Would death become less scary and less taboo if cemeteries focussed on the celebration of life rather than the 'desperation' of death?

There's one cemetery in the world that's been trying this out since the mid 1930s. In the Maramures region of Romania lies Săpânța, an unassuming little village where it seems like nothing has changed for the past 100 years. Farmers still go about their work in horse-drawn carts, old women still wear traditional patterned scarves on their heads and on Sundays, they drink the incredibly potent plum liquor, Horinca. But Săpânța has a very unique claim to fame. It is home to the "Merry Cemetery" – the lifetime work creation of Stan Ioan Patras; today his vision is carried out by his apprentice.



When a citizen of Săpânța dies, Dumitru Pop, a farmer, woodcarver and poet, gathers his chisels and paintbrushes ready to carve onto an oak cross, a poetic and pictorial homage to the deceased'. 'Locals don't view death as something indelibly solemn. The local Dacian culture's philosophy vouches for the immortality of the soul and the belief that death is a moment filled with joy and anticipation for a better life.' (Fat Nancy's New Diet, 2013).

⁶ Taken from: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2193132/Mummies-dug-change-wardrobe.html

⁷ Taken from: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2193132/Mummies-dug-change-wardrobe.html

⁸ Taken from: www.medievalists.net/2013/01/06/wraiths-revenants-and-ritual-in-medieval-culture/

⁹ Taken from: <http://armchairtravelogue.blogspot.com.au/2009/06/merry-cemetery-of-...>



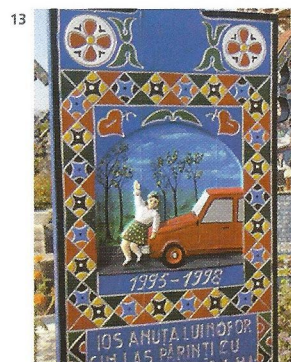
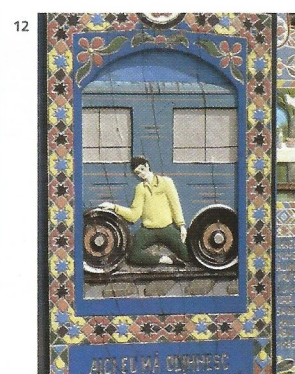
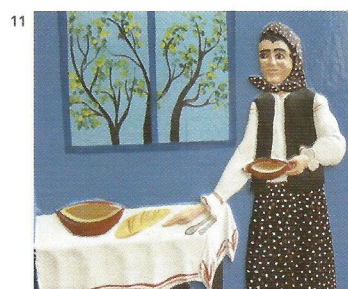
The crosses are mostly painted blue (the blue symbolising the sky to which the soul rises after death). The 800 or so headstones are also filled with other bright colours and depict an image of the deceased (pictured either at the moment of death, or doing his/her favourite thing in life) and offer up a glimpse into the lives of the dead through fun – and sometimes funny – poems. This cemetery is far from being a place for solemn reflection. Stan Ioan Patras has succeeded in laying aside the sadness and dark sides of death, rather turning the drama into hope.....bantering death with realism and humour, emphasizing more on life's triumphs. You could say the cemetery is thoroughly light-hearted! (Dangerous Business, 2012).

I observed many people laughing out loud as they read epitaphs; like this one about someone's mother-in-law:

*Under this heavy cross
Lies my poor mother in-law
Three more days she would have lived
I would lie, and she would read (this cross).
You, who here are passing by
Not to wake her up please try
Cause' if she comes back home
She'll criticise me more.
But I'll behave so well
That she'll not return from hell.
Stay here, my dear mother in-law!*

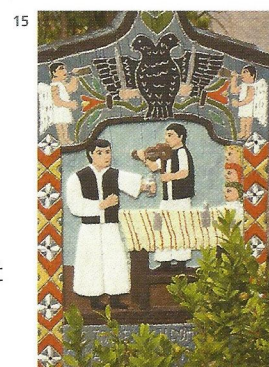
The Merry Cemetery feels like a celebration of life and of the character of the individual, and the colourful wooden grave markers with brightly painted pictures, make the place feel more open and welcoming. Perhaps it would also make it easier to remember the individual as a person, and celebrate their life rather than mourning their death. I imagine too that there would have been some people who had penned their own epitaphs, wanting to have the last word.

Accidents are plentiful. You can see the people who died in car accidents, or who were run over by vehicles or even the case of the young man drowning. Women were most often weaving, farming or cooking – but what instruments they are shown using indicates that special dish for which they were known. Dough rolled out, carrots chopped, mixing bowl in hand and – my favourite – washing the dishes. I wondered, is that REALLY how you would want to be remembered washing the dishes? Men are represented as the butchers, bartenders, shepherds, policemen and the soldiers that they were, essentially their roles in the community (Buses and Bed Hopping, n.d).



Ioan Toaderu loved horses, but, he says from beyond the grave: *One more thing I loved very much, To sit at a table in a bar. Next to someone else's wife.*

And, while most epitaphs simply explain a bit about each person's life, others act as warnings to those who might read them. This man was a drunk and probably a cheat; note the blonde, redhead and brunette on the right! The double-headed black dove at the top indicates his family was worried that he might be judged a sinner (Buses and Bed Hopping, n.d).



¹⁰ Taken from: www.dangerous-business.com/2012/07/merry-cemetery-a-different-way-to-look-at-death/

¹¹ Image source: © Cath Brew

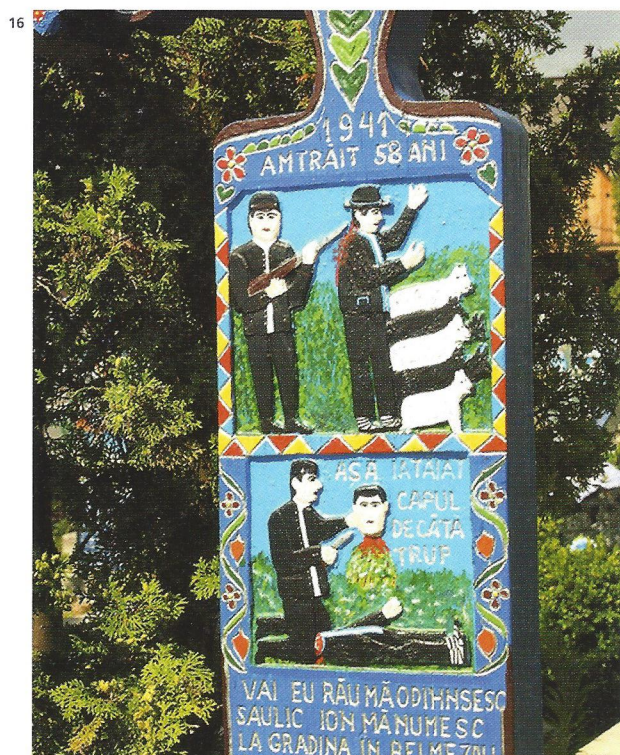
¹² Image source: © Cath Brew

¹³ Image source: © Cath Brew

¹⁴ Image source: <http://merlinandrebbecca.blogspot.com.au/2012/05/merry-cemetery.html>

¹⁵ Taken from : www.dangerous-business.com/2012/07/merry-cemetery-a-different-way-to-look-at-death/

This man was murdered and buried without his head!



Now, I'm not suggesting that in the UK we ignore death and try to make cemeteries funny places. Laughter is one thing, but the different phases of grief remain an important function in coming to terms with someone's death.

For many years now, people have been trying different things with funerals – we have green burials, funerals where people can write their messages of goodbye on the coffin,

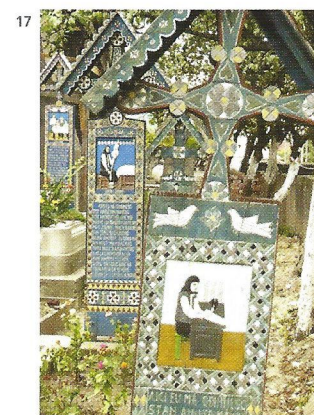
there's multimedia displays in the funeral service, balloons and doves get released and jokes told in the service. We are exploring life and death and pushing the boundaries out all the time, but what I am saying, is that the exploration of life is often limited to the funeral service.

Essentially, after the funeral service has finished we cease to know anything publicly about the deceased. All the wonders and humour of their life that were expressed at the funeral do not make it to the headstone....and so in death, the individual becomes just another name in the cemetery. We spend our entire lives building communities only to negate their stories in death. I'm not sure that sits comfortably with me. And I wonder, if we focussed on life in our cemeteries, then perhaps death would be seen to be more part of the continuum of life's journey and feared less?

If you're thinking that cemeteries should be about death and death is sad and difficult – what on earth is she talking about? It is worth remembering, that George Bernard Shaw once said, *'life doesn't cease to be funny when people die any more than it ceases to be serious when people laugh'*.

The Merry Cemetery is a unique place of pilgrimage. It is a place where people come to mourn their dead, but, above all, it is a place expressing in a very deep and optimistic manner the true meanings and beauties of life. Surely that's not a bad thing?

Perhaps we need many more Merry Cemeteries after all?



¹⁶ Taken from : www.dangerous-business.com/2012/07/merry-cemetery-a-different-way-to-look-at-death/

¹⁷ Image source: © Cath Brew

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