



Death ritual is at least as old as our Neanderthal predecessors who lived in Europe and the Middle East from 100,000 to 110,000 years ago, and may even reach back to Peking Man, almost one-half million years ago.<sup>2</sup> Wallace describes the ritual handling of the human body by the Neanderthals. They buried their dead in caves, depositing the body in the earth with great care. The legs were usually flexed or contracted tightly against the body, and the head was frequently pillowed on the arm. Grave goods were often placed with the deceased. A child's body was surrounded by a circle of ibex horns; a young man was buried with a hand ax, a flint scraper, and an assortment of animal bones; an old man was buried with an entire bison leg, tools, and lumps of red ocher. Burial with tools may have been related to the belief that the dead man required these implements for his journey to the other world. Red ocher may have symbolized blood, life and rebirth.

A human specimen unearthed by Solecki in Shanidar in the Zagros Mountains of northeastern Iraq was discovered in soil which contained fossil pollen of prehistoric flowers. Perhaps the mourners had covered the corpse with flowers as part of a mortuary ceremony. The flowers may have been symbolic of rebirth, an expression of magic by irritation (Swartz and Jordan: 336-337).

Cro-Magnon, successors to the Neanderthal, occupied southern Europe and the Mediterranean littoral from about 40,000 to 10,000 years ago. They buried their dead in the mouths of caves in flexed or sleeping positions with grave goods and personal ornaments. The bodies were heavily painted with red ocher. Animal bones and skulls found near many of the graves suggest the possibility of funerary feasts. Wallace described Cro-Magnon implements manufactured from human bone: shallow cups made from human skulls; human teeth pierced threading on a cord and incised with ornamental designs. These objects may have been used in a magical ritual "to control, to secure the good will of, or to return to life; or if he attempted to identify the witch responsible for his death. Perhaps living wished to protect against a spirit attack, or to assist the poor soul, recently separated from its bodily home.

Inhumation was probably the most widespread disposal pattern. Originally earth burial might have been designated to protect the living from contamination, or to prevent wild animals from molesting the body, or, as a sympathetic rite, to promote rebirth. The position in the ground varied: prone, supine, lateral, sitting, or flexed. Often the dead person was interred with grave goods, e.g., ornaments, tools, or weapons. Among some groups, a body was temporarily buried, exhumed after a specified time, and then reinterred in a second burial.

Lessa describes cremation as an ancient and widespread ritual, standard among the Hindus. He lists several motives: unwillingness on the part of nomads to leave their dead behind; fear that the dead might return; a desire to free the soul for departure to the afterworld; to protect against wild beasts, or evil spirits; a desire to provide warmth and comfort in the afterworld. (Lessa 1971: 761).

Exposure to the elements was practiced by the Eskimos probably out of necessity, as they were unable to dig in the frozen ground. The Plains Indians wrapped the dead person in a blanket or robe, and lashed the body high in a tree, or set it on a raised platform. The Parsees of India, descendants of the ancient return to life; or if he attempted to identify the witch responsible for his death. Perhaps living wished to protect against a spirit attack, or to assist the poor soul, recently separated from its bodily home.

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acquire the virtues of the departed. (Wallace, 228).

#### Ritual Practices

Death ritual begins when a person stops breathing, or is otherwise identified as dead. Treatments of the body, disposal of the remains, and the behavior of close kin and others for a specified period of mourning are spelled out by society.

The body may be washed, anointed, shaved, combed, painted or perfumed. It is left naked or dressed, covered with a shroud, and sometimes adorned with jewelry. The mouth, nose, vagina, urethra and rectum may be stopped up, perhaps to prevent evil spirits from invading the body. Today it is intended to check the seepage of body fluids.

Coins or weights are placed on the eyelids to

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FAMADIHANA FESTIVAL

Ambohitjafy, Madagascar

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# Unearthing the Ma'nene Festival

## Ritual And Living Between Life and Death

3 YEARS AGO by [Cam Sternwhigh Photography](#) [Yui Yabutake](#)

**WARNING:** This post contains graphic imagery of the dead. If you are sensitive to photos of deceased persons and bodily fluids, please do not continue reading. The purpose of this post is not to satiate your morbid appetite. We strive to expand the horizons for those open to understanding the rituals of cultures and religions from around the globe. Our hope is that we respectfully represent the spirits of the deceased as we curiously and reverently examine the human condition

The following photographs have been sourced from the photographic archives of Yui Yabutake. Yabutake spent 18 years living amongst The [Toraja](#) people, an ethnic group indigenous to a mountainous region of [South Sulawesi, Indonesia](#). Yabutake was accepted as a member as a young child and once becoming a young man, he wed a Toarajan girl. At an early age he was witness to many ethnographers who would "invade" the population with their "foreign glass eyes" (Cameras) in hopes of documenting the religious and cultural aspects of the Toraja. However this proved to be difficult because because of the colonial history in the region and the immediate trepidation that the ethnographers were greeted with. Yabutake however became as curious about the cameras that ethnographers brought as they were curious about the local secluded culture. Yabutake taught himself all he could about the



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# Leaving The Afterlife

Written By: Jo Washimuri  
Photography: Golfball

In the west we are so wired to believe that when a loved one or friend dies, passes on, or flat lines, whatever term you choose, that person simply ceases to be with us. We mourn their passing and have an intense longing for their company again. As the old saying goes, you never really know what you have until it is gone. In the case of the Famadihani in Madagascar however, when a loved one ceases to breathe it simply means an evolution in the relationship that will continue forever. The friends one makes and the family bonds one is born into remain for an eternity.

From the beginning of man's search for meaning in an intellectual sense, there has been a search for the origins of man's beliefs of posthumous fate. Scientists and religious leaders alike have touted the benefits and socially restorative functions of the funeral rites and the keen observations of the symbolism of death related behavior as a cultural window into that society's value system. In the west there has been a lot of ambivalence between the relationships of the living and the dead when it comes to the concept of death and the idea of finality. In Madagascar however there is a great sense that energy never dies, it is only transferred, thus the consciousness is alive in perpetuity.

For the Malagasy when a loved one evolves, which in the west would be identified as dead, the ritual begins immediately. The motions of the death ritual are clearly spelled out within the society. In the beginning the motions seem familiar to most; the body may be washed, anointed, shaved, combed, painted or perfumed. The body may be dressed in the deceased's favorite wardrobe, covered in shroud or simply left naked. Sometimes the corpse is adorned with jewelry. All these things depending on what the deceased wishes were before death if they were conveyed at all. The body cavities are usually plugged in order to prevent the seepage of body fluids, however for the Malagasy the cavities are filled in order to prevent the entry of evil spirits. Coins are placed over the eyes to prevent the body from staring at the living.

When the evolution of the loved one is announced to family, friends, and neighbors, everyone draws together. The reactions are typical human reactions that one would find amongst most cultures on earth; people express grief through tears, long wails, and sometimes loud screams. There may be singing, and beating of the breast. The closest friends and family will wear white, black and red or go so far as to paint their bodies in these colors. They cover their bodies with ashes or dirt. They may even cut their hair or not shave. The



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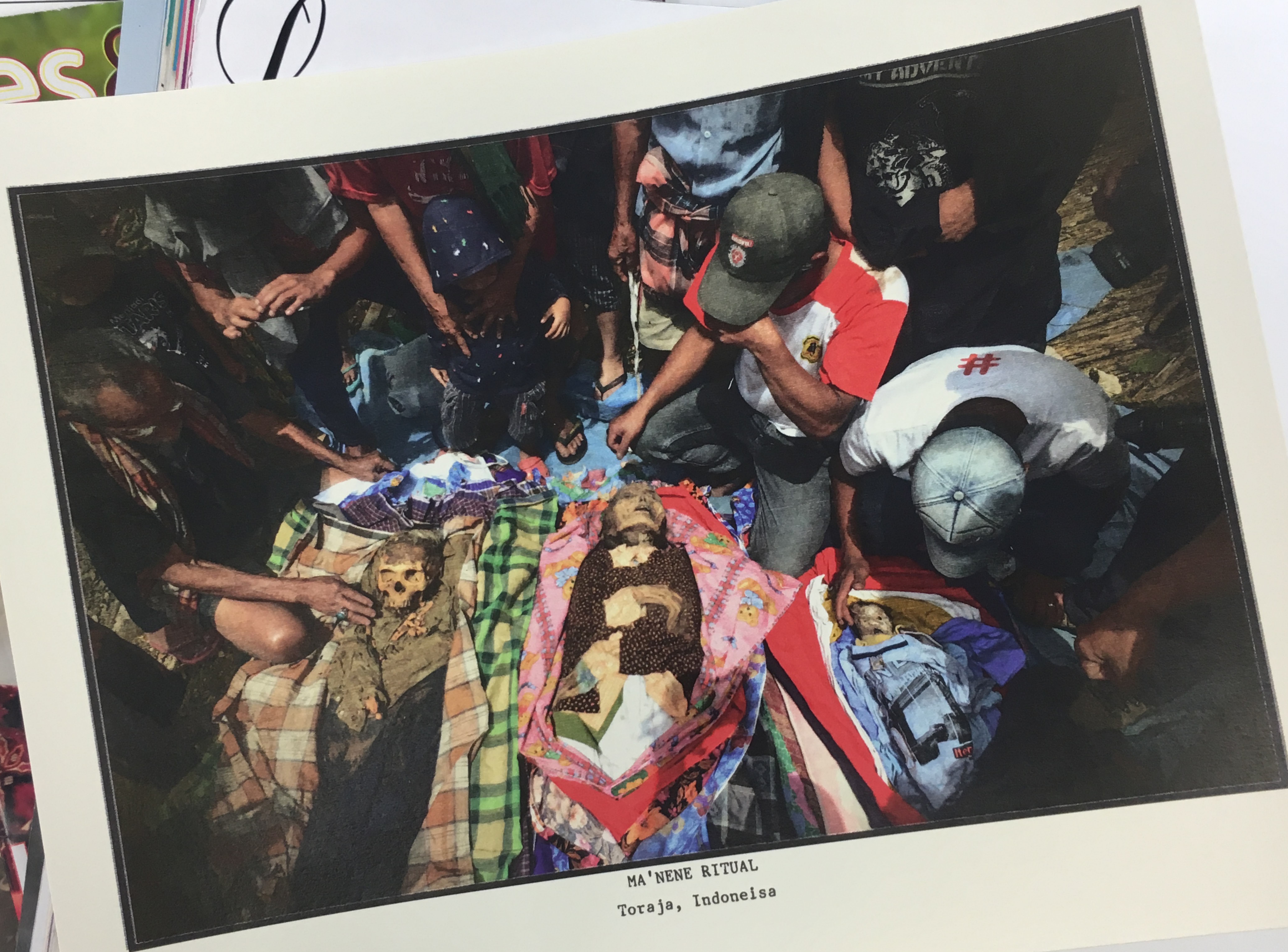
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