

Aspects of Burial and Cremation in Vietnam and Cambodia

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Even before I joined the cemetery service at St. Albans City and District Council I had an interest in burial rituals hence visits to cemeteries always featured in my holiday itineraries. My husband and I have just returned from a fascinating holiday to Vietnam, travelling by boat through the Mekong Delta into Cambodia, culminating in the wonderful Khmer temples at Angkor. Although adjacent these two countries have different cultural traditions which are reflected in their burial and cremation practices.

Vietnam

Although most Vietnamese people would say they are Buddhist in fact their religion appears to also be a fusion of Chinese beliefs, Confucianism, Taoism, ancestor worship and Vietnamese animism. Although Buddhists usually cremate their dead in Vietnam it is more traditional to be buried. One tradition central to Vietnamese life (and death) is geomancy (feng shui) and the position of the grave is very important for family fortunes – if the wrong spot is chosen bad luck may descend on the family. The procession that carries the deceased from the family home to the grave begins the transition from living family member to ancestor. Ancestors continue to help and protect the family and their graves are usually situated close to the family home, either in a cemetery at the bottom of the garden, in a rice paddy or field, pictured right. We saw many graves in the middle of rice paddies as we travelled up the Mekong.



The family will spend a very high proportion of their income on the burial, which begins with the purchase of an elaborate tall wooden coffin. One of the many coffin shops we saw on the banks of the Mekong is pictured below. The coffins are transported by boat to the family home. The body is not usually embalmed. During viewings the mouth may be propped open to allow visitors to drop in grains of rice or gold coins. Family members wash the body with heavily scented lotions



and dress it in the best clothes. The body is then wedged in the coffin

with reed branches, paper and other objects to keep it in place as it decomposes. The funeral ceremony may include hired musicians, huge displays of expensive food and Buddhist monks carried in hammocks. The period of mourning may last up to three years after which the body is exhumed, the bones washed and reburied in a smaller casket. Candles are lit and daily offerings of food are made on the special altar for the dead person's soul. If the family fortunes should suffer during this period the spirit of the ancestor may be to blame and the grave will need to be moved.



We visited the home of one family who had constructed a concrete seating area at the bottom of their garden near the family cemetery, with a table to place food for their ancestors. They thought this would stop the spirits entering the house. Many houses also have small colourful spirit houses (they look rather like our bird tables) outside where offerings are placed and incense and candles are lit.

Cambodia

The predominant religion in Cambodia is Theravada Buddhism and it is traditional to cremate. After death the body is kept in the home in a closed coffin for three days, on a block of ice and with copious tea leaves (frequently replaced) to freshen the atmosphere. Lucky paper is burnt at the foot of the coffin. The coffin is opened (so the spirit can listen) when monks visit to chant but the face remains covered with a white cloth. On the third day the body is removed to the temple (pagoda) for cremation, the body is exposed for a farewell look and the cloth covering the face is retained for good fortune. A white flag is displayed outside the house during this period and children of the deceased shave their heads and dress in white.

Cremation is usually carried out in the temple and the ashes placed in an urn. The urn is placed in a stupa (also called a chedi) in the pagoda grounds or within the pagoda itself. The size of the stupa, pictured above right, reflects the status of the deceased and will usually contain only the ashes of one person. We saw a number of memorial masons premises, one of which is pictured right, with its array of various sizes of stupa/chedi to suit every pocket on display. Although most Cambodians are Theravada Buddhists a minority of ethnic Chinese follow Mahayana Buddhism and are buried - their graves often occur intermixed with stupas.



Many of the temples were destroyed or damaged during what the Cambodian's refer to as the "terrible times" of the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1978) and the majority of monks were executed. Hence almost all the temples are recent reconstructions in highly decorated concrete rather than in traditional materials. In isolated villages cremation may still be carried out in front of the house of the deceased.

Our wonderful local guide (whose brother died in a camp under Pol Pot's regime) took us on a very emotional visit to the former S21 prison where the last 14 victims of the regime were buried, pictured above.

The temple at Phrom Pros, which can be seen in the background of the picture on the right, was destroyed during this period and only rebuilt in 2001. It is close to the site of the Khmer Rouge prison and the "killing fields" of Cheoung Ek. A new crematorium was marked out with a wooden framework and can be seen in the foreground of the picture. It is due to open in 2006.

Both Vietnam and Cambodia also have substantial minorities of Muslims and Catholics, the latter reflecting their French Colonial heritage.

Finally, we spent three days visiting the wonderful temples at Angkor. An incredibly memorable and moving holiday in which it was our privilege to meet Vietnamese and Cambodian people who welcomed us and let us observe their way of life in this part of South East Asia.

