

*There is no need
for expensive funerals*



On the efficacy of funeral ceremonies

Funerals have originated among the theocratically governed nations. They are an afterthought of the priest, an outgrowth of theological and clerical ambition, seeking to impress upon the laity a superstition, a well-paying awe and dread of a punishment of which the priest himself knows nothing beyond mere speculative and often illogical hypotheses.

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To the Writer of the “Occult Fragments”¹

Dear Sir and Brother,

In your article on “Devachan” you have explained at length the enjoyment that the Spiritual Ego in combination with the higher essence of the fifth principle, feels in a sort of rosy sleep extending over an enormous period. The Ego that takes its birth in Devachan, after the period of gestation, is unconscious of what passes here on earth to which it cannot be attracted. It is only the shell formed of the fourth and the lower remnant of the fifth principle that remains wandering in *Kāma-Loka*, and it is this *reliquiæ* that often makes its appearance under certain conditions in the *séance* room of the Spiritualist. All this has been clearly taught in the “Fragments” which will help to dispel many a doubt. The information however that could be gathered from the “Fragments” does not explain how far the shell made up of the 4th and lower 5th is conscious of its past existence, and whether it consciously suffers for its past misdeeds in any shape. To the Hindus and Parsīs again it is of the highest importance to know whether any obsequial² ceremonies are of any the least benefit to this shell or to the Ego resting in Devachan. Enlightened reason rejects the idea that the blundering ceremonial acts performed mechanically could be of any avail to the disembodied portion of man, and yet the Parsīs and the Hindus have to spend large sums of money from year to year to allay a superstitious dread lest they might unconsciously do injury to the departed soul. The funeral ceremonies are a real curse to the Parsī, and the middle classes are ground down by needless expenses which lie heavy upon them. Their civilization has been greatly retarded by this crushing superstition. It will therefore be no small boon to learn the opinion of the Occultists as to how far men on earth can if at all — benefit the four remaining principles of a deceased person. At page 179 of

¹ [The “Occult Fragments” are a series of articles by Allan Octavian Hume and Alfred Percy Sinnett that appeared in *The Theosophist* in the early 1880’s; they are based upon teachings received from H.P. Blavatsky and the Masters of Wisdom.]

² [servile]

the 4th volume of *The Theosophist*, Mr. Chidambaram Iyer quotes a *Śāstra*¹ which says that:

. . . he who omits to perform Śrāddha on the anniversary of the day of death will be born a Chandāla a crore of times.²

This is evidently the writing of an uninitiated priest³ who scarcely knew anything about the true doctrine of rebirths. But sentences like these sway the populace, and thoughtful persons for want of a correct knowledge of the occult teaching on this point are themselves troubled with doubts.

This subject very conveniently falls in with the subject of “Devachan” and the promised article on “Avīchi,” and I sincerely trust you will be good enough to enlarge upon this point as it is of the highest moment to the Asiatic races to know what their funeral ceremonies are really worth.

Yours fraternally,

“N. D. K.,”⁴ F.T.S.



Editorial response 1, by H.P. Blavatsky.

The writer of the “Fragments” having gone to England, sometime has to elapse of course before he can answer the questions. Until then as a student of the same school we may, perhaps, be permitted to say a few words upon the subject.

In every country, as among all the peoples of the world from the beginning of history, we see that some kind of burial is performed — but that very few among the so-called savage primitive races had or have any funeral rites or ceremonies. The well-meaning tenderness felt by us for the dead bodies of those whom we loved or respected, may have suggested, apart from the expression of natural grief, some additional marks of family respect for them who have left us forever. But rites and ceremonies as prescribed by our respective Churches and their theologians, are an afterthought of the priest, an outgrowth of theological and clerical ambition, seeking to impress upon the laity a superstition, a well-paying awe and dread of a punishment of which the priest himself knows nothing beyond mere speculative and often very illogical hypotheses. The Brahman, the Mobed, the Augur, the Rabbi, the Mullah and the Priest, impressed with the fact that their physical welfare depended far more upon his parishioners, whether dead or alive, than the spiritual welfare of the latter on his alleged mediatorship between men and God, found the device expedient and good, and ever since worked on this line. Funeral rites have originated among the theocratically gov-

¹ [rule, religious scripture or commentary]

² The punishment, even if true, would not be so dreadful after all in this our age of enlightenment, when social equality and education is levelling all the castes.

³ Most assuredly the threat does not come from an initiated Rishi.

⁴ [Navroji Dorabji Khandālawala, was a highly respected Judge and staunch friend of the Founders. He was initiated into the Theosophical Society on March 9th, 1880, and later became President of the Poona Branch of the Theosophical Society. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.]

erned nations, such as the ancient Egyptians, Āryans, and Jews. Interwoven with, and consecrated by the ceremonies of theology, these rites have been adopted by the respective religions of nearly all the nations, and are preserved by them to this day; for while religions differ considerably among themselves, the rites often surviving the people as the religion to which they owed their origin have passed from one people to another. Thus, for instance, the threefold sprinkling with earth with which the Christian is consigned to the tomb, is handed down to the Westerners from the Pagan Greeks, and Romans; and modern Parsism owes a considerable portion of its prescribed funeral rites, we believe, to the Hindus, much in their present mode of worship being due to the grafts of Hinduism. Abraham and other Patriarchs were buried without any rites, and even in *Leviticus*¹ the Israelites are forbidden to “make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any marks” upon themselves. In the same manner the oldest Zoroastrian books, the old and the new *Desātīr*, with the exception of a few acts of charity (to the poor, not to the Mobeds) and the reading of sacred books, prescribe no special ceremonies. We find in the *Book of the Prophet Abad* (*Desātīr*) simply the following:

154. A corpse you may place in a vase of *aqua fortis*,² or consign it to the fire, or to the earth, (when cleansed of its *Nasā* or dead matter).

And again:

At the birth of a child or the death of a relative, read the *Nosk*, and give something in the road of Mazdam (for Ormuzd’s sake, or in charity).

That’s all, and nowhere will one find in the oldest books the injunction of the ceremonies now in use, least of all that of spending large sums of money which often entails ruin upon the survivors.

Nor, from the occult standpoint, do such rites benefit in the least the departed soul. The correct comprehension of the law of Karma is entirely opposed to the idea. As no person’s karma can be either lightened or overburdened with the good or bad actions of the next of kin of the departed one, every man having his karma independent and distinct from that of his neighbour — no more can the departed soul be made responsible for the doings of those it left behind. As some make the credulous believe that the four principles may be made to suffer from colics, if the survivors ate immoderately of some fruit. Zoroastrianism and Hinduism have wise laws — far wiser than those of the Christians — for the disposal of their dead, but their superstitions are still very great. For while the idea that the presence of the dead brings pollution to the living is no better than a superstition, unworthy of the enlightened age we live in, the real cause of the religious prohibition [not] to handle too closely the dead and to bury them without first subjecting the bodies to the disinfectant process of either fire, vultures or *aqua fortis* (the latter the prevailing method of the Parsis in days of old) was as beneficent in its results as it was wise, since it was the best and most necessary sanitary precaution against epidemics. The Christians might do worse than borrow that law from the “Pagans,” since no further than a few years back, a

¹ xix, 28

² [nitric acid, HNO₃]

whole province of Russia was nearly depopulated, in consequence of the crowded condition of its burial ground. Too numerous interments within a limited space and a comparatively short time saturate the earth with the products of decomposition to such a degree, as to make it incapable of further absorbing them, and the decomposition under such a condition being retarded its products escape directly into the atmosphere, bringing on epidemic diseases and plagues.

Let the dead bury their dead¹

— were wise words, though to this day no theologian seems to have understood their real and profound meaning. There were no funeral rites or ceremonies at the death of either Zoroaster, Moses, or Buddha, beyond the simple putting out of the way of the living the corpses of them who had gone before.

Though neither the *Dabistān* nor the *Desātīr* can, strictly speaking, be included in the number of orthodox Parsī books — the contents of both of these if not the works themselves anteceding *by several millenniums* the ordinances in the *Avesta* as we have now good reasons to know — we yet find the first command repudiated but the second corroborated in the latter. In Fargard VIII, 74 (233) of the *Vendīdād*, Ahura Mazda's command: "They shall kill the man that cooks the Nasā," etc., is thus commented upon:

He who burns Nasā [dead matter] must be killed. Burning or cooking Nasā from the dead is a capital crime,²

for:

Thereupon came Angra-Mainyu, who is all death, and he counter-created a sin for which there is no atonement, the [*immediate*] cooking of corpses.³

Ahriman being man's own ignorance and selfishness.

But as regards the rites observed after the funeral of the corpse, we find no more than this — a repetition of the injunction given in the *Book of Abad (Desātīr)*,

An Āthravan shall first go along the way and shall say aloud these victorious words: "Yathā ahū vairyo" — The will of the Lord is the law of righteousness. The gifts of Vohu-Manō⁴ to the deeds done in this world for Mazda. He who relieves the poor makes Ahura king.⁵

Thus while abrogating the Fersendajian usage of burning the dead among the devotees of Mah-Abad, Zerdusht the 13th (of the Persian prophets), *who introduces* many improvements and reforms, commands yet no other rites than charity.

¹ [Quoting *Luke ix*, 60]

² Fargard I, 17 (63)

³ Twelve hours at least had to elapse between the death of the person and the burning or the destruction by any other means of the corpse of the dead. This old law was equally forgotten by the Brahmans as by the Zoroastrians. It was not the act of *burning* that was forbidden, but the burning before the corpse was empty, *viz.* before the inner principles had had time to get entirely liberated. As the *aqua fortis* was thought possessed of an occult property to that effect, hence the preliminary burning of the flesh by this means — with the Fersendajians.

⁴ [Paradise; *Vohu-Manō* or Good Thought being the doorkeeper of heaven — see Fargard XIX, 31.]

⁵ Fargard VIII, 19 (49)

Very few among the so-called savage races were encumbered by funeral rites, unlike the extravagant expenditure lavished by Hindus and Parsis, as well as by Roman Catholics and Greeks, upon obsequial ceremonies.

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In your note to the letter on “The Efficacy of Funeral Ceremonies”¹ you remark “that very few among the so-called savage primitive races, had or have any funeral rites or ceremonies.”

Allow me to point out that the aborigines of the Chota Nagpur plateau have a very ancient custom of erecting large blocks of unhewn stone in memory of their “departed dead.”

These pillars vary in height from 5 to 15 feet.

I append hereto a rough copy of some at a village called Pokuria, 4 miles south of Chaibassa, the highest of which is 8 feet 4 inches above ground. See Col. Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, p. 203.

W. D.



Editorial response 2, by H.P. Blavatsky.

We are sorry to be unable to reproduce the sketch of the said pillars. But we would observe to our amiable correspondent, that in saying that “very few among the savage primitive races had or have any funeral ceremonies,” we were not thinking of the monoliths, and memorial stones placed on their tombs. The latter cannot be classed with either “rites,” or “ceremonies,” but belong to the various modes of disposing of the dead, and preserving the memory of the seat where they were buried. They entail none of that extravagant expenditure lavished by the Hindus and Parsis as well as by the Roman Catholics and Greeks upon obsequial ceremonies in which human variety forces them to outvie each other in the eyes of their indifferent neighbours, and to satisfy the lucre of their Brahmans and priests, under the alleged penalty of offending their dead — a superstition worthy of, and pardonable in, savages, but wholly unworthy and as unpardonable in the XIXth century, and among civilized nations.



¹ See *The Theosophist*, June 1883, p. 221.

Suggested reading for students.



On the soul of the spiritual man lit by its own light.

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