

Funerals and the Cultural Emphasis Color

Shane Hirschman, Color, May 2, 2007

According to American customs, funerals are time of mourning, remembrance, and painful closure. In respect to the deceased, Western traditions dictate that funeral grieving attendees avoid color altogether and opt for the lowest value, black. In a circumstance where a funeral attendee wears white or bright colored clothing, Western audiences interpret this etiquette as a sign of disrespect. With the exception of Jewish funerals, flowers play the only colorful role in Western funerals, where light colored flowers (usually ferns, white roses, white roses, etc.) cover the top of a casket, called a casket spray. The color of the flowers play an insignificant role; however, it is important to note that in U.S. Armed Forces funerals, the U.S.A. flag usually covers the casket, which would stress the importance of the colors: red, white, and blue. Also, New Orleans Jazz funerals have some color differences that vary from the typical American, Christian or Catholic funeral. In general, funerals in the United States are dark and subdued to allow the mourners to reflect on the unfortunate dealings with death.

While the solemn void of color at funerals is familiar to most Westerners, other culture have completely different traditions for funeral arrangements and ceremonies. It is nearly impossible to describe the colors for every single international culture; however, there are some drastic differences in African and Asian funeral customs worthy of mention.

For example, East Asian countries typically utilize white as the value for their funeral attires; due to the fact that white is symbolic of death in East Asian cultures. Interestingly enough, Western influence has altered contemporary East Asian funerals, as black is now permitted and traditionally combined with small accessories of white, such as armbands, tunics, etc. Black is specifically worn by funeral



A Funeral arrangement in a Temple in Tokyo.



Funeral in Africa.

guests, not related to the family. Therefore, Asian funerals primarily adhere to monochromatic clothes and colors can be seen as inappropriate. In China, red is strictly seen as offensive, if worn at a funeral, because red represents happiness in Chinese culture. In Chinese funerals, yellow and white chrysanthemums are the flower of choice.

Third world countries and countries that are more isolated from Western influence, deviate profoundly from many U.S. funeral color traditions. African societies alter their appearances and wear specialized funeral clothes to honor those who have passed away. Instead of black, African societies usually wear red and white during funerals. Additionally, many clay and metallic art objects are sometimes created to remember the deceased. Hindu funerals tend to emphasize bright flowers, fruits, and vegetation as a means to mourn during funerals and similar to African funerals, craftsmanship plays as significant role making traditional art objects, usually varying in color.



Aniyesti Hindu funeral in Bali.