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DISPOSAL OF THE DEAD

By A. L. KROEBER

SOME years ago, in assembling data on methods of disposal of the dead in aboriginal California, I was struck by the fact that the distribution of burial and cremation customs failed to conform to the distribution of other culture traits in the area and was unusually irregular in itself.¹ The lines separating the two mortuary practices on the map ran across rather than with topographic, climatic, and floral boundaries. They departed considerably from the approximately definable limits of culture areas or sub-areas. And there was no agreement whatever with the distribution of other customs connected with death, such as name taboos, mourning restrictions, property destruction, or the public mourning anniversary ceremony. If the distributions were to be interpreted as is customary, it was evident that methods of corpse disposal had had a history that was less simple and regular, and more fluctuating, than most elements of native Californian culture.

Archaeological evidence, though incomplete, partly confirmed this conclusion. Burials have been found in the territory of several groups practising cremation at the time of discovery: Salinan, Costanoan, Coast Miwok, Maidu, Yokuts. Conversely, mounds on Humboldt and perhaps on San Francisco bay showed cremated remains in addition to the usual interred ones. This may not seem a specially impressive list, but it must be remembered that native California is a region of unusual cultural stability, and that ordinarily the archaeological and ethnological data from any particular area in the state are in close agreement.

As there are bound to be variations in the stability of customs, a tendency of corpse disposal practices to be changeable would be of no special moment, were it not for the powerful affects released by death and the fact that affects are not expressed

¹ Handbook of the Indians of California, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 78: 841-843, 900-901, map fig. 70, 1925.

spontaneously in culture but in conditioning. The naive assumption would probably be that a charging with affect would cause an established custom to be adhered to with special tenacity, and thus make for its stability. But as there need be no positive relation between intensity and permanence of emotion, or the intensity of an emotion and its manifestation in behavior, a theoretical problem is raised. It is evident, for instance, that our culture is at present divided between interment and cremation, the latter practice being of recent origin, on the increase, but still in the minority. Sentiment is in part indifferent; but considerable elements of our communities feel a quite powerful preference for one or the other of the conflicting usages. Is there then perhaps inherently less stability in affect-laden customs, or is such stability as they possess due to factors other than the degree of associated emotion?

Rivers has called attention to a situation in Australia analogous to that in California. He says:

Few customs of mankind take so firm a hold of his imagination as his modes of disposing of the bodies of his dead. . . . It is difficult to see in the environment of the Australian anything which could have led him, unaided and untaught, to evolve a variety of funeral rites. What, as a matter of fact, we find is that nearly every one of the chief known methods of disposal of the dead is practised in Australia. We find inhumation in the extended and the contracted positions, we find preservation on platforms, on trees and in caverns. There is embalming though of a simple kind, and, lastly, there is cremation. . . . People do not adopt new funeral rites merely because they see or hear of them elsewhere.²

Rivers goes on to argue that this condition is "the outcome of permanent settlements of strangers" in Australia. This explanation is part of a plan for resolving culture variations by the mechanism of contact of migrant bodies of people, rather than through more intricate and subtle modes of culture contact. This particular argument serving other ends, it need not be further examined at the moment; the fact of diversity and change in Australian mortuary customs, however, is of bearing.

Variety and change also characterize the late prehistoric

² W. H. R. Rivers, *The Contact of Peoples*, in *Essays and Studies presented to William Ridgeway*, 474-492, 1913 (passages cited, 480, 481).

periods of Europe. Déchelette has reviewed the salient facts with his usual lucidity. The Palaeolithic and most of the Neolithic interred; but cremation occurred in Finistère, Aisne, and Marne in the latter period; and desiccation, contracted burial, secondary burial all are established. "None of the mortuary customs of the Neolithic seems to have had constant usage in Gaul." The belief that cremation was introduced in France by a wave of bronze age invaders can no longer be maintained. In fact, cremation did not prevail in France until the fourth phase of the bronze age; although Brittany, following its Neolithic beginning, burned the dead during the first and second phases. In Greece, cremation begins with the early iron age, later Mycenaean tombs still containing burials. In western Asia cremation was unknown or rare, whereas India adopted it early. In central Europe, from Scandinavia to Italy, cremation got the upper hand in the second bronze phase. In north Germany, it remained in vogue into Roman times; in south Germany and France, burials often replace urns of ashes in the late finds. Cremation evidently originated "spontaneously" (independently) among several peoples of Europe and Asia.³

For South America, there is Father W. Schmidt's instructive assemblage of data, marshalled in support of still another interpretation, the *Kulturkreis* theory.⁴ His map is herewith reproduced in somewhat altered form. There are some evident centers of frequency or characterization for the various mortuary usages, but scarcely any practice has a well limited distribution, so that the history of their interrelations is almost certain to be complex and custom must often have changed.

Father M. Küsters has made a more intensive study of African funerary practices.⁵ The distribution of a few of his items is reproduced in the accompanying map. It appears that certain habits, such as air burial in trees or scaffolds, and simple exposure or discarding of corpses, have an exceedingly irregular distribution

³ J. Déchelette, *Manuel d'Archéologie*, 1: 465, 471, 1908; 2: 133, 154, 159, 1910.

⁴ *Kulturkreise und Kulturschichten in Südamerika*, *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 45: 1014-1124, 1913 (map, p. 1076).

⁵ *Das Grab der Afrikaner*, *Anthropos*, 14-15: 639-728, 1920-21; 16-17: 183-229. 913-959, 1921-22.

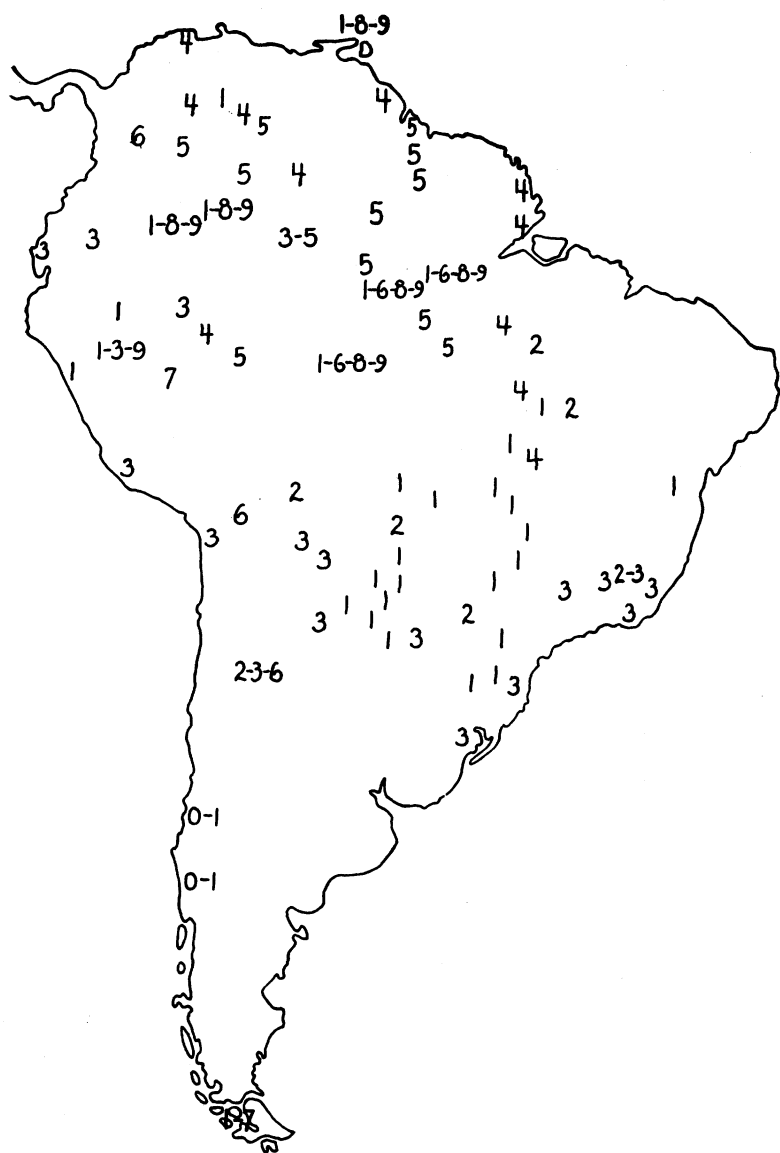


FIGURE 1.

Disposal of the dead in South America: adapted from Schmidt. 1, simple burial; 2, secondary burial; 3, urn burial; 4, urn reburial; 5, house burial or reburial; 6, mummification; 7, cremation; 8, secondary cremation; 9, eating of ashes; 0, scaffold exposure.

in Africa. Other practices show some tendency to group on the map: mummification in the West African culture area; water burial in the area of Madagascar, the opposite coast region, and the headwaters of the Nile and Congo; cremation in the part of the continent east of longitude 10 east of Greenwich. In each of these instances, however, there are scattered occurrences outside

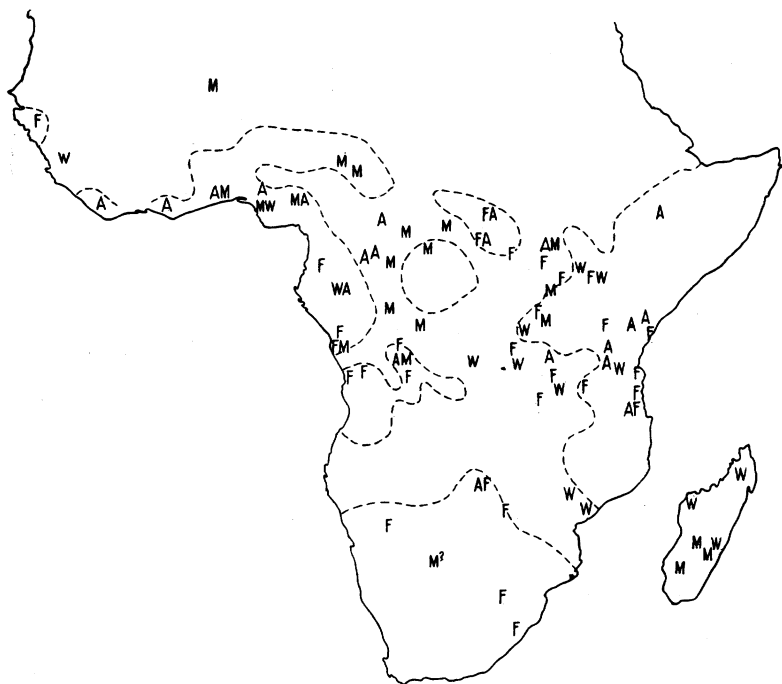


FIGURE 2.

Disposal of the dead in Africa south of latitude 20° north: selected from Küsters. A, air burial (in trees, on scaffolds); F, fire, cremation; M, mummification; W, water burial; broken lines, limits of simple exposure of discarding of corpse.

the regions of characterization. Küsters reviews also burial in graves with roofs or niches, in houses or burial huts, under rock piles, in urns, secret and partial burial, unflensing of the bones, and other methods. The assemblage of these on his original map makes this bewildering in its complexity. Of particular interest are the frequent limitations of a particular method to a particular

social class, so that several methods coexist in one tribe, and the same method has different applications in successive tribes. Thus, river burial is sometimes reserved for chiefs, sometimes for the drowned, sometimes is the normal practice of a group. Tree and platform burial is in certain populations restricted respectively to musicians, magicians, the bewitched, the lightning struck, criminals, and kings; cremation is generally reserved for criminals, but also occurs as the usual practice; exposure is variously in usage, according to tribe, for the corpses of criminals, slaves, children, the common people, the entire population. These variations between adjacent peoples, and the numerous instances of coexistence of several practices within one population, constitute a powerful argument for instability. They virtually prove change where ordinary intertribal distributions only indicate it. A tribe following three or four methods, and in contact with tribes that follow other methods or employ the same methods for different populational groups, can scarcely be likely to adhere long to its customs of the moment without alteration.

These instances perhaps suffice to establish that disposal of the dead often shows a fluctuating history instead of the relative stability which a first judgment might attribute to it. From this follows the generalization that intensity of feeling regarding any institution is likely to be a poor criterion, if any, of its permanence. Emotion evidently attaches secondarily to social behavior much as thought does. The completeness and plausibility of a rationalization are no index of the reality of its purported motivation; the immediacy and intensity of emotion concerning a cultural practice are no index of the origin or durability of that practice. The stimulus of such an emotion may be a physiologic or "natural" situation, to which a social practice also relates. The emotion or some of it promptly adheres to the practice. But it has not caused the practice; it evidently does not maintain it; and it attaches itself to a new practice as soon as this, from causes which may be relatively uncharged with emotion, displaces the older practice.

The further question whether affect-laden practices are not perhaps actually more unstable than emotionally low-toned ones,

cannot be answered summarily. There are certainly instances of mortuary habits that have continued for long times with only minor modification: in dynastic Egypt, for instance; in most of Europe during most of the Neolithic; in all but the fringe of Pueblo culture.⁶

More fruitful, perhaps, is a consideration of the type of motivation or historic causality that influences modes of disposal of the dead. Here it appears that a feature which is pretty likely to characterize mortuary practices is their dissociation from certain large blocks of cultural activity, especially those having to do with material and economic life, its subsistence and mechanical aspects. That is, disposal of the dead has little connection with that part of behavior which relates to the biological or primary social necessities, with those activities which are a frequent or constant portion of living and therefore tend to become inter-adapted and dependent one on the other. On the other hand, disposal of the dead also does not lend itself to any great degree of integration with domains of behavior which are susceptible of formalization and codification, like law, much of religion, and social organization. Standing apart, therefore, both from the basic type of activities which mostly regulate themselves unconsciously, and from those which largely involve relations of persons and therefore become socially conscious and systematized, disposal of the dead falls rather into a class with fashions, than with either customs or folkways on the one hand, or institutions on the other. It does not readily enter intrinsically into the inevitable integrations of the bases of life nor into attempts at wider systems. In their relative isolation or detachment from the remainder of culture, their rather high degree of entry into consciousness, and their tendency to strong emotional toning, social practices of disposing of the dead are of a kind with fashions of dress, luxury, and etiquette.

It may be added that in so far as mortuary practices may be accepted as partaking of the nature of fashions, they will tend to

⁶ A. V. Kidder, *An Introduction to the Study of Southwestern Archaeology*, Phillips Academy, Andover, 1924.

discredit certain interpretations based on them. Rivers' contention that the variety of Australian practices is to be construed as due to intrusion of migrant groups certainly falls to the ground. Schmidt's employment of such practices as indicative of the spread of hypothetical blocks or complexes of culture becomes less convincing. And Küsters' inquiry into motivation, objectively founded as part of it is, can hardly be followed all the way if fashion impulses have moulded methods of disposing of the dead as extensively as it would seem they have.

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