

Natalie S. Brown

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An Outsider Perspective

Throughout my entire life, I have been fortunate to be at the fringe of many cultures of which I am an outsider. Growing up in Parker, AZ, my community consisted in part of people from four Native communities that together formed the Colorado River Indian Tribes: the Chemehuevi, Hopi, Mohave, and Navajo (Dine), as well as Latinos. This diversity, among such a small population (3,000 people in the town of Parker; 19,000 in La Paz County) taught me quickly that there are many ways of being, many ways of looking at the same situation.

After college, two trips to four African nations provided me with keen insight and experience at what it is like to be not only an outsider, but also not part of the majority culture. Small projects in Agua Prieta, Sonora provided a taste of this, but not to the degree of unfamiliarity that Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and South Sudan did. To not only lack understanding of rituals, traditions, foods, music, local histories, and shared experiences, but to also lack understanding of language, systems, and ways of interacting within necessary structures, is daunting and overwhelming on a whole other level.

It is from this experience and place of limited understanding that I reflect upon the refugee and asylee communities that I have been privileged to get to know in Tucson, and the additional challenges that they face when a loved one passes away during those first few years in the community.

As I write this, sitting on a beach in Rio de Janeiro on a hot Christmas day, watching the waves roll in and bathing suit-clad beachgoers celebrate, I have yet another opportunity to be a willing student of cultural brokers, delightful hosts who are willing to patiently explain the nuances of life in Brazil and forgive my ignorant lack of comprehension of Portuguese.

Whenever possible, the voices of insiders to the cultures discussed herein will be unaltered. In addition, I will add my own outsider perspective, coming from a place of deep respect and friendship grown from five years of work with these communities, sharing meals, attending weddings, births, and yes, end of life celebrations with these friends, Tucson's newest residents.

One particularly memorable funeral, and an excellent example of the unexpected challenges of transplanting traditions from home in a new setting, was a Bhutanese funeral I attended following a tragic, unexpected death. The Hindu priests were performing rituals for a community awash with grief. One such ritual, which I do not pretend to understand the meaning of, included dipping hands in water with flowers, leaves, and other plant material floating in it. They then put their hands on their faces, appearing to touch their lips, or perhaps even taste the water. It was hard to see from the back of the room, and harder now, years later, to recall the specifics. What I do remember distinctly is my colleague and I realizing, with some degree of horror, that these were oleander flowers – and therefore, highly toxic. In fact, just weeks prior, the Reid Park Zoo had had a tragic death of their own

to deal with: that of a giraffe after an employee fed it oleander branches, unaware of their toxicity.

We were now faced with an outsiders' dilemma. Should we interrupt a solemn ritual which we considered ourselves privileged to be invited to in the first place, given its intimacy, in an attempt to prevent illness or worse, or should we remain politely silent given the situation?

We quietly pulled aside a community leader whom we knew well and asked him to explain to the priests in whatever way he felt most appropriate.

In the weeks to come, we worked with our English-as-a-Second-Language course instructors to incorporate lessons about local toxic plants into their curricula. We also suggested other free, similarly colored flowers to be substituted for future rituals, after learning that the flowers had been chosen for their availability (after all, they are grown in abundance in Tucson) and attractiveness, but not for any specific significance tied to the genus or species.

Prior to this experience, if you had asked me to list the 100 most important things for a newcomer to know about life in Tucson before planning a funeral, there is absolutely no chance that anything related to botany would have made the list, much less the toxicity of oleander.

This realization that we often do not even know the right questions to ask, much less the answers, is an excellent and perhaps mandatory place to start from for this project.

Bhutan & Nepal
Hinduism
Chhatra Tiwari

I interviewed Chhatra Tiwari in his home. We sat in the dining room, along with his mother-in-law, while his kids played in the living room, often running over to ask him a question. His wife Deepa was in the kitchen, and throughout the interview, she spoiled me with tea and a dinner consisting of a spicy vegetarian noodles. Deepa, Chhatra, and Deepa's mother often broke into Nepali, conferring to clarify details of what Chhatra was explaining.

In his words:

At the end of someone's life, a priest is called. He conducts a goodbye ritual, which the entire family is present for if at all possible.

After death, we Hindus prefer cremation. If person dies before noon, the body is taken immediately for cremation. If they pass away in the afternoon, the cremation will be the next morning. Of course, here in the U.S., this is not possible. Things take time; we must wait.

At one point early in the conversation, I am struck by Chhatra's casual use of the phrase "kick the bucket", spoken with far more reverence and formality than is typical. The shock of hearing this idiom used by one of our newest citizens is momentarily distracting.

At the funeral, flowers are significant, and are used to form garlands and necklaces. The color is not important. Incense, fruit, and candles are also significant.

Following the death of a loved one, an official mourning period begins, usually lasting 13 days. No one who is mourning will eat salt, onion, garlic, or meat, or consume alcohol. They will only eat one simple meal per day, consisting of rice, fruit, and other simple foods. For the 13 days, the priest will be present to conduct rituals including reciting important words and comforting the family.

Those in mourning are isolated and have no contact with others who are not mourning. Men shave their heads if their father dies. Sons and daughters have separate demarcated areas. Women do not shave their heads, but otherwise, all customs are the same. During mourning, no sexual contact is allowed.

If a young person dies, the rituals depend on the age. If the child is over five years old, then the parents mourn for 10 days. If the child is over 10 years old, then the parents mourn for 12 days.

After 13 days, everyone comes together to pray, sing, and sometimes, there are drums. A kirtan is special type of song sung at the end of the mourning period by all present. Then, the priest announces the time to eat a special meal, and leads that celebration.

Traditionally, when one's mother passes away, her adult children are not to consume milk for a period of 45 days to 1 year. Similarly, when one's father passes away, his adult children are not to consume yogurt for 45 days to one year. Recently, these time frames have been dramatically

decreased. In some cases, when a parent dies, children will not consume meat for one year, but this is becoming less and less common, Chhatra explains, as people become “more modern”.

Chhatra explains that a puja is a religious celebration with fasting to remember gods and goddesses at certain times during the year. Similarly, on the anniversary of one’s parent’s death, a Memorial Day is honored, including a one-day fast, each year for the rest of the child’s life. This is a good thing, Chhatra explains, because it gathers the entire family together.

Maintaining Rituals after Resettlement in the U.S.

Newly arrived refugees without jobs have an easy time of observing these traditions, according to Chhatra. But with a new job and employers who do not understand, it is heartbreaking to not be able to follow all rituals, he explains.

He believes that it is very hard for immigrants to preserve rituals. “My kids don’t know what the Temple looks like”, Chhatra says, somewhat mournfully.

Recently, some people have reduced the 13 days to five, to make the fasting more manageable. You can’t stay home without pay that long and pay your bills, he explains. “Tradition must meet modern times. I talk with religious leaders in Phoenix about this. Religion must adapt.”

“In Tucson, we only have one priest now, and he is planning to move, so what will we do? A few years ago, Tucson had 5-6 priests. One died, others moved away, and now there’s only one left.

People leave to be closer to relatives resettled elsewhere or for jobs.

The Bhutanese/Nepalese population in Tucson was 1,500-2,000. Now it is down to 800-1000, he estimates. Phoenix, in contrast, has a community of 5,000-6,000 by Chhatra’s estimate.

Ethiopia

Tilahun Liben

Orthodox Christian

Tilahun graciously agreed to come to my home for this interview. As we talk, he becomes animated, pausing to ensure that I have understood, that I have taken sufficient notes, before he moves on to his next point. Ignoring offers of pen and paper, he periodically emphasizes a description by tracing an outline of the object with his finger on a couch cushion, the indentation of his touch lingering just briefly.

In his words:

At the end of life, if there is a serious sickness, then after the mass, the priest will come from church with the deacon, both wearing robes, and will bring the holy sacrament or communion, the blood and body of Jesus, to that person's house, to the place where he sleeps. This must be the person's own priest, not just any priest. Everyone has an Amharic name and a Christian name, but a person is only ever prayed for using their Christian name.

The dying person tells his will to the priest, who essentially becomes the executor of the will. The priest will subsequently tell the family how the person wanted his/her belongings divided, and that they should honor his/her wishes and not to defy that person by doing otherwise.

After death, the family will cry loudly, wailing, moving from room to room in the house. Neighbors will hear and come to join them. The wailing will last part of the day, until the priest tells them that it is time to stop. After out-of-town family members arrive, the loud wailing will take place again.

Community Insurance

The concept of community insurance was intriguing to me. Tilahun explained it this way:

Everyone pays weekly into the communal fund, approximately \$5, so that when someone dies, that money is used for the funeral expenses including the coffin, tent, food, beverages, and flowers.

In addition, someone from the community will go from house to house to announce when the funeral will take place.

Chikashum: person whose duty it is to publicly announce a funeral by going from door to door.

Family members wear significant colored garments (linens) colored called tilet. This is a special cloth. All who see you wearing it will ask you, "Who died"? Family members wear it for two weeks. After two weeks, they wear dark or black clothing, which they wear for 2-3 months.

All the community brings cabbage, lentils, and injera.

The family stays in the house, isolated, for 15 days.

If an outsider comes, the family will cry with them again.

If a spouse dies, the surviving spouse will wear black.

Men and women both shave or cut their hair if an immediate family member passes away. Nowadays, the hair is trimmed, rather than dramatically cut or shaven as in the past.

There is no music. Even the neighbors will not play music or news at all out of respect.

Burial:

Someone from the community is also sent to dig the grave; this cannot be someone related to the deceased, and is always someone from community insurance group.

In our culture, it is never acceptable to cremate a body.

At the burial, the priest recites important words, burns incense, and puts the ashes from the incense into the grave.

The priest tosses three handfuls of soil into the grave to represent the Trinity. The family members then do the same. After this, a shovel is used to fill the grave. All must help to cover the coffin. Afterward, a wooden cross with the deceased's name is placed on the grave. There is no music involved.

After the funeral, all return to the house, wash their hands with water before entering in a ritualistic way to remove the soil that was thrown into the grave.

If the family has money, they will slaughter an animal, but most do not. So, they cook lentils and cabbage. The community women's group will help by preparing lentils, injera, and cabbage, and serving this to all at the deceased person's house.

Nifro is eaten, a mixture of chickpeas and wheat.

The family sets outside, all eat together, and the visitors bow to the family before they leave.

The neighbors will then bring food to the family for three days, consisting of dishes cooked in their own homes and ready to eat.

A big tent /tarp is set up outside the family's home for three days, during which time the family stays under it, sleeps on a mattress on the ground outside, people including neighbors come and sit and sleep there also. After the third day, at approximately 5AM, the people wake up. The family cries, everyone comes and cries with them, for a long time, then the priest comes and tells them to stop crying. He preaches about the deceased, and then they take the tent down.

Remembering:

After 40 days, the family cooks a large meal and takes some food to the mass at church, which is given in the name of the deceased person to the priest and the deacon, as well as congregation.

After 80 days, 6 months, and one year, this is repeated, but the first one (after 40 days) is the largest and most significant.

After 40 days, a tombstone and headstone are placed with a ceremony involving the priest speaking as well as family members.

How do Refugees in Tucson Uphold these Traditions?

The community fund concept does not exist here, so things are very hard and expensive. The tilet traditions are continued.

In the past, everyone was required to walk to the burial site. Everyone present, four at a time, would take turns carrying the coffin from the funeral site to the burial site. Now, it is acceptable to use transportation.

Recalling a recent death of an Ethiopian man in Tucson:

Here, we cannot take three weeks to mourn, but we do what's possible, we take as much time as we can to mourn with the family. We prepare the food for the family, even if we cannot do some of the other things I described. He recounts scheduling around his work and his wife's classes to find times to be with the mourning family, and how much shorter the visits to the home were than they would have been in Ethiopia.

It is hard to go home (to Ethiopia) if someone dies, so we mourn here. If someone in Ethiopia dies, they will not call the relative; they will call a friend of the relative. Then, the person will choose a day to tell the family member of the deceased. For example if some family member of an Ethiopian in Tucson dies in Ethiopia, and I get the call, I will not tell him that day. I will wait until the weekend, when he does not have to work, so that we can be with him when he mourns so he does not miss work and is not alone.

In the U.S., everything is hard because we do not have the community insurance. Also, if someone passes away back home, we cannot go. That is very hard.

Pseudonym*

Zimbabwe

INTERVIEW COMPLETED

*Name changed at the request of the interviewee

Closing Thoughts (DRAFT)

At times during the interviews, I would ask for more vivid descriptions, for more clarity or sensory descriptions, and was met with confusion or puzzlement. That which was so familiar, so obvious, was hard to describe.

What did the incense smell like? Well, it smelled like incense, it smelled like church, it smelled like it always does, it smelled good.

And so, I was reminded once again, that that which we are closest to is often the hardest to articulate, and that we take so very much for granted that what is our “norm” is a universally shared experience, without need of explanation.















