

## SOUTHWEST FOLKLIFE ALLIANCE – END-OF-LIFE PROJECT

### Zohreh Saunders' Submission - January 17, 2015

#### **Introduction and Summary**

As a citizen folklorist I set out to learn the role food plays in the funeral customs of my friends in Tucson who represent a variety of different backgrounds. I was interested in this subject, not only because of my general interest in food and food preparation, but because in my personal experience food seemed to occupy a prominent place at the end-of- life.

In an article, in *Esquire*<sup>1</sup> Tom Junod, writes,

There are no foodies at funerals. There is only hunger, of an almost existential kind—hunger mixed with desolation and exhaustion and, above all, loneliness—and so people don't eat the food served after funerals so much as they submit to it, just as they submit to the dubious comforts of ritual, just as they submit to the necessarily tenuous consolations of well-wishers, just as the man lying in the box ... submitted to the ministrations of death itself. See the food served after funerals is atavistic... It says Jew. Italian. Irishman. Southerner. Christian. White.Black. Chinese. Mexican. It calls you back to your *tribe*, man.

I had witnessed Persian/Jewish and Bahai'i funerals, and just before this project was due, I attended my mother-in-law's American/Protestant funeral. The friends I interviewed for this project (see interview summaries) represented other nationalities: Brazil, Romania, Scandinavia, Northern Iran, Mexico; and other religious traditions including Reform and Orthodox Judaism, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran, and Mormon.

I learned from my investigation, that Tom Junod is on target, that funeral food—the ceremonial dishes-- in most cases return to the comfort foods from one's cultural heritage. So the *halvah* for Iranians is constant, while for Romanians it is *koliva* and *colaci*; for Lutherans and Mormons-- funeral potatoes; for Ashkenazi Jews-- the dairy meal of lox and bagels or noodle kugel; for Mexicans-- the *pan de muerto*; and for Brazilians --*the bolinos de bacalhau* (codfish balls). However, the further you move from your roots or from your ethnic or religious community, the more likely the meal eaten after the funeral will be taken at a restaurant, not necessarily connected to your roots.

From my limited sample, the ceremonial foods such as *halvah*, *koliva* and *colaci*, *pan de muerto*, *noodle kugel* and even the cod-fish balls all seem to include or are based on wheat or a grain. Funeral rites and ceremonies go back to the dawn of civilization when humans began to domesticate plants. In the Fertile Crescent, wheat and barley were domesticated about 10,000 years ago. It seems likely that these grains, which provided more than half the daily calories of our ancestors, would be consumed at ancient

funerals and burials which evolved into the breads and cakes prepared as ceremonial foods for our funerals today.

Today, as more woman work and spend less time in the kitchen the ceremonial foods such as the koliva, colaci, halvah and pan de muerto are purchased rather than prepared by the family. The meal served after the funeral is sometimes prepared by church volunteers, but more frequently, especially when it is a memorial service, the family goes to a restaurant or arranges for a catered meal.

Most ethnic and religious traditions have customs where food or other gifts are distributed to the poor or to a charity. In less urban and more insular communities, the gift giving is more personal and direct such as the gift bags of foods distributed at the funeral in Romania or the placing bowls of *halvah* at the burial site for the poor in Iran. Today in our more urbanized world, donations of money are often given to a charitable cause favored by the deceased. At the same time the funeral feast marks divisions in class or wealth, for example the extravagant funeral dinner in the hotel ballroom of the LaJolla gentleman, is in marked contrast to my father's more modest funeral, though both were Iranian born.

Funeral meals acknowledge the deceased's or the surviving family's heritage, but also serve to bring the community together. In almost all traditions, neighbors and the community bring food for the family to ease their burden during the mourning period. Church volunteers are organized to provide and serve the post funeral meal to the mourners and attendees. In the Muslim tradition, the family of the deceased provides meals at the graveside and at certain prescribed days to the extended community. For Mexicans the Day of the Dead celebration is a means to remember the departed and to unite with all people who have lost a loved one, regardless of their faith or tradition. Food plays a prominent role in these festivities which further strengthens community bonds.

In the following pages I describe my impressions of funerals I have attended and based on interviews with friends, I record their views of their customs and traditions. Recipes and photos of the ceremonial foods or the customary dishes served at these funerals or memorial services are also included.

## **Part I – My Experience**

### **1. Persian/Jewish Funeral– New York City (1961)**

In 1961, I was just starting my sophomore year at Queens College, in New York City when my aunt came over one day to tell me that I needed to leave school and get a job to help my mother financially. My father had been in an out of hospitals for the past year with an undiagnosed illness, and was thus unable to work. He also had no insurance and no back-up support since he was self-employed. My mother had never worked outside the home, and with no income to support me, my 14-year old sister and 9-year old brother, who were still at home, I was the logical choice to help out.

I was devastated to have to drop out of school, but I managed to find a job as a receptionist for the publisher of a popular encyclopedia for children. They had posh offices on Lexington Avenue and I thought myself fortunate to have landed the job with little experience and minimal typing skills. After working there for only a few weeks, my father died. He was 51. I was 19 and bereft.

Since my father was relatively young and the death unexpected, there had been no prior arrangements for a funeral or funeral plot. Except for my brother who was born in the U.S. we were all Iranian citizens. My father was a Sephardic Jew, and my mother was Bahai', but she had to find the resources for a Jewish funeral. A wealthy Jewish family friend helped my mother with the arrangements and paid for the burial in a Jewish cemetery on Staten Island.

My memory of the funeral is vague, but what stands out is what happened when my mother, older sister, and I were ushered into the anteroom of the synagogue before the service. Someone pinned a black ribbon unto the black dresses we each had worn for the occasion. I thought nothing of it, since I had seen people wearing black armbands to indicate a death. The Rabbi walked up to me and after reciting some Hebrew words (I had had no religious education) took out a razor and slashed the ribbon on my chest. I can still hear the sound of the rending of the ribbon and I burst into tears from the shock and realization that my beloved father was gone forever. It was only later that I learned of the ritual of *Keriah* that is described by S in her narrative below.

The other memory that shaped my focus on “funeral food and customs” for this project, was the special dish that is customary for Persian funerals. To honor my father, my mother and other close family sat *Shiva* for the 7-day mourning period in accordance with Jewish custom. In many ways it was excruciating, because as family and friends stopped by and sat with us we had no sooner stopped crying, when the tears would flow again upon the entrance of another visitor. When death occurs early or unexpectedly and there are still young children and a wife who has been largely dependent, the loss is particularly hard and devastating. The gifts of food and meals were a kindness and meant to give comfort.

The standard gift of food was *halvah ye shekar* which is a cake of sorts made by stirring flour in butter or oil until it turns slightly brown and is aromatic. A mixture of sugar, rosewater, and water are then added and stirred to thicken the cake, followed by cardamom and saffron which are added as flavorings. The cake is placed in a serving bowl with a sprinkling of pistachios. In the hands of a home cook, it is not a particularly appealing dish and though sweet it is not a dish to everyone's taste. By the end of the seventh day we must have had 5 or 6 of these dishes, and I had had enough comfort as I could stomach. On the seventh day of *Shiva*, we received a special delivery at our door. It was a large mysterious package from Bloomingdale's addressed to my mother and me. This was in 1961 when it was uncommon to place orders through the mail, except through the Sears catalogue. When we opened the box, we found a huge fancy basket wrapped in cellophane and adorned with a ribbon. It was filled with an assortment of beautifully wrapped packages in blue and silver foil. There were a variety of chocolates,

nuts, cookies, candies, and other goodies that outshone the dishes of the Persian Halvah that graced our dining table. My new boss, the publisher of the encyclopedia for whom I had worked for only a brief time at that point, sent the basket with a simple note, "To comfort you in your grief." It was indeed a novel comfort.

## **2. Persian/Bahai'i Funeral - La Jolla, California 2009**

An old friend I dated briefly in my 20s died in La Jolla, California in 2009. My husband and I decided to go to the funeral, since it would give us a chance to visit my sister, brother, and other relatives who also lived in Southern California.

I had attended a few modest Bahai'i funerals in the past, but nothing on the scale of this one. The gentleman was in his 80s when he died after a short illness of Lou Gherig disease. His wife, children, and grand children who all felt the loss keenly honored him with a most extravagant funeral.

The pre-burial service was held in the morning at a beautiful chapel that was connected to the cemetery and attended by about 75 men, women and children all dressed in elegant black suits and attire. The chapel was arrayed with huge sprays and wreaths of flowers in all colors, but predominately white, with banner ribbons indicating whom they were from. The Bahai'i service includes some obligatory prayers by family members and usually a chant by one of the members of the community who has a beautiful voice and is practiced in this art. One of the relatives spoke briefly about the deceased and his love and appreciation for the Bahai'i faith. For non-Bahai'i's there was also a brief explanation of Bahai'i beliefs.

The close male relatives helped carry the closed casket to the gravesite, where there was also a short prayer. The widow sprinkled rose water from a silver bottle on the grave and passed it to other mourners who did the same. Roses, gladiolas, and other flowers had been passed around to the woman, some of whom dropped their flowers on top of the casket. After the ceremonial covering of the grave, dates, halvah and coffee and tea were offered to the guests at the gravesite.

Later that day, at about 4:00 pm, friends, family, and the Bahai'i community were invited to a sit-down reception in one of the ballrooms of a prominent hotel. There must have been more than 300 people in attendance. The atmosphere was almost festive and more like a wedding than a funeral. Round tables were placed around the ballroom with flowers and a printed program, including pictures and a bio of the deceased. The obligatory Persian tea and coffee, fruit, pistachios baklava, and cookies, were served immediately as one arrived, but no alcoholic drinks since as they are not permitted for Bahai'is. Adorning the room were huge containers spilling with orchids of all colors and sizes.

The deceased's son acted as the master of ceremonies but in typical Persian manner, the program was delayed until most of the "fashionably late" participants had arrived. Once the program began there were more prayers, another chant, and then a slide show

presentation on a large screen, including music, depicting the important events in the deceased's life.

While the program was going on, the hotel staff began setting out the dinner buffet. The buffet tables were covered with silver chafing dishes filled with all kinds of Persian dishes. The buffet included: plain basmati rice with saffron and barberries; rice with sour cherries; rice with dill and lima beans, chicken and lamb kabobs, stews of all sorts including *khoresh ghormeh sabzi* (lamb with parsley), *khoresh ghemeh* (lamb with split peas), *khoresh bademjoun* (lamb with eggplant), salads, *lavash* (flat bread) feta cheese, and salads. When the guests had finished the main meal, the dessert buffet appeared. There were typical Persian sweets such as baklava, *sholeh zard* (saffron infused rice pudding), as well as tarts, eclairs, cheesecake, etc. Tea and coffee were also available.

For wealthy Iranians in California it was probably not an unusual display, but for me having attended fairly modest funerals, it seemed an astonishing way to remember and honor the dead.

### **3. Protestant Funeral 2015 – Syracuse, New York**

As a bookend to this project, my husband and I attended his mother's funeral just a week before this report was due. She missed reaching her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday by just 71 days. She died in Virginia, where she had been in assisted living since her late 80s. Her wish was to be buried alongside her husband in the family plot in Syracuse, New York

Thus, her body was transported to Syracuse, and her daughters, a spouse, a grandson, and my husband and I all made the trip to attend her funeral. We came from Virginia, Florida and Arizona all relatively warm climates. Syracuse, as is typical in January, was grey, cold, and snowy. In spite of the cold, our small group gathered at the funeral home and enjoyed the fellowship and the humor of the service. Her son-in-law, a retired Episcopal rector, led the service by stating, "with my interest in anthropology and archaeology, I've learned that people have been observing death essentially in the same way for the past 65,000 years. We stop, reflect, and then go on with our lives." The youngest daughter who had been the principal caretaker, shared many humorous stories about her mother's life. The atmosphere was cheerful rather than somber. After all, my mother-in-law had lived a long and full life so there was much to celebrate.

We all drove to the cemetery, only a few miles away. By that time the mercury had dropped to a windchill of minus 18 degrees. Considering that most of us did not have proper winter garb for such cold weather, the minister cut short the prayers at graveside and we all climbed back into our cars to rendezvous at a nearby Italian Restaurant. This hearty meal of soup and lasagna helped warm us after the bitter cold. The daughter, who held a joint credit card with her mother, paid for everyone's meal, saying, "As her last act, this is what Mother would have wanted to do for all of you."

Later that same day, a cousin who had been in the funeral home business invited us to dinner at her home. We learned from her that recent trend to cremation is leading to the

decline of the long-prosperous funeral-home business. To counter this trend, some funeral operators have added restaurants and bars to their establishments primarily for the convenience of the funeral or memorial service attendees. However, this is not currently permitted in New York State.

She had prepared a lovely home-cooked meal consisting of baked breaded chicken, funeral potatoes, steamed broccoli, green salad, and raspberry/rhubarb pie for dessert. The meal was similar to those served after many protestant funerals in the U.S., although on a smaller scale, since there were only seven of us.

## **Part II -Interview Summaries**

### **1. Iranian/(Tabriz) Muslim Funeral (1990s)**

O is a young attractive woman who moved to Tucson about 5 years ago from her home in Tabriz, Iran when she married her distant cousin who was already living in Tucson. She is a multi-talented and a self-taught cake decorator and baker. She is also pursuing a BA degree while she works and pursues her other interests. Her family is Muslim, but she is an agnostic.

O attended two funerals in Tabriz, Iran (near Azerbaijan) that she can recall: the first for her grandmother when O was 12 years old and the second for her aunt when O was 21. In preparation for the interview, O had skyped her mother in Tabriz to fill in details of the customs for the funerals because she had not attended the burial of her grandmother.

Her grandmother shared a house with them, but died in the hospital in the early 1990s. When a person dies at home, there is a brief prayer and the body is turned to face Mecca. Holy water is sprinkled on the face while the Koran is read. A paisley woolen cloth is placed over the body and the family stays with the deceased saying prayers until the body can be taken to the morgue (*sard khaneh*) where it is washed in a ritualized fashion by the person who washes the body (*mordeh shoor*). The family of the deceased provides the 9 meters of white cloth (*kafan*) used wrap the body. The body is placed in a coffin and carried to the cemetery by only male family members, excepting husbands. Burial must take place within 24 hours of death, but may be delayed since burials are held only during the day.

At the cemetery the body is removed from the coffin and placed on its right side directly on the ground facing Mecca. People often place a rock or thumbstone called *sang eh ahlad* on top of the grave. They believe when the soul leaves the body the first thing it will encounter is the rock and this will awaken the soul to realize that it is freed from the body.

In a slightly different description of the Muslim funeral in Iran the body is removed from the coffin and placed on the ground three times before it is eventually placed back in the coffin. This ritual symbolizes the refusal of the deceased to leave this earthly life behind. Once the coffin is lowered into the grave, a family member is positioned in the grave so he can place a brick and a mosaic *khesht e kham* under the head, while removing part of

the shroud to uncover the face. <sup>ii</sup> In many parts of Iran, though not Tabriz, rosewater is sprinkled on the grave. Participants recite prayers and there is often a paid professional male who chants and recites soulful prayers to induce tears among the mourners. Women are not supposed to wail or mourn publicly in some Muslim traditions.

O remembers that after her grandmother's funeral, family and friends who were at the gravesite were all invited to her grandmother's home for a meal of stewed chicken and cumin rice. Other family members and a hired cook prepared the meal. *Halvah*, a traditional rich cake like pudding made with a flour roux, water, sugar, saffron, cardamom, and rosewater was also served to mourners along with dates, and tea. O remembers that though the occasion was sad, she was happy to be reunited with her large extended family that had come from afar to attend the funeral.

In the more distant past, on the second day after the death, neighborhood children would pass a flyer around announcing the death and inviting people to a dinner. A picture of the deceased was included in the flyer, but only for a deceased male. In the case of O's grandmother, some 400 family members and friends were invited to a dinner at a restaurant on the third day, but in each case the men and women must be seated separately. The menu was extensive and included barley soup, lamb tongue, *jujeh kabob* (rice with chicken kabob), *kuku* (similar to a fritatta), *kashk e bademjoun* (eggplant birani with sun-dried whey) as well as fruit, *halvah*, dates, preserved fruits, and tea.

The seventh day (*hafteh*) and the 40<sup>th</sup> day (*cheleh*) are also a time for the family to visit the grave and offer participants special meals. According to Islamic scripture, graves are not marked so Sunni Muslims do not generally visit the site of the grave after death. However, among Shia Muslims, the predominant sect in Iran, small stones are used to mark the graves and more recently, elaborate engraved stone markers are more customary. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day, everyone goes to the cemetery where the headstone is erected. These are more often horizontal gravestones that span the gravesite and today may also include an engraved picture of the deceased. This event is more like a picnic where people spread a paisley cloth over the gravestone and sitting on carpets around the gravesite serve fruit juice with chia seeds, *halvah* and dates. Flowers, candles or an oil lamp, and also arranged on the stone and people take turns rose water or other aromatic water on the grave while prayers are recited.

In Tabriz, the family of the deceased would also host an open house for neighbors (seven doors in each direction). The open house was held every Thursday during the 40-day period after the funeral for a scaled down menu of chicken and rice, and the ubiquitous *halvah*, dates and tea.

There is a widespread custom to offer *nazy* free food to the poor after the funeral on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> day and on the anniversary of the death. This is usually a *halvah* made of sugar or dates. These offerings are regarded as "good deeds and there is the hope that the act will elevate the deceased's status in the eyes of God." <sup>iii</sup> Today in Tabriz, people give money or other gifts to charity. O's family donated an ambulance to the local health center after her grandmother's death. A plaque including a prayer or a poem and the names of the donors is displayed at the memorial service.

Each year after the death, there is another dinner and memorial service held for the deceased where prayers are read. When O's aunt died recently, they held a memorial service in Tehran and instead of prayers said by the mullah in the mosque, they opted for a more personal commemoration of instrumental music and a reading of a poem written by one of her relatives.

## **2. American/Jewish Funeral - Tucson 2013**

S grew up in Queens in New York and moved to Tucson about 13 years with her husband. Susan retired from her career as psychiatric nurse practitioner and worked in a number of settings including hospice. Her master's thesis was on death and dying. She is an active member of a Reform Synagogue where she officiates as a volunteer at Jewish funerals.

S has attended many funerals as a result of her volunteer responsibility as an officiant in her Reform Congregation and is thus very familiar with traditional Jewish funeral customs and practices.

Once death occurs someone must stay with the body until the undertaker arrives. The eyes are closed and a candle is placed near the head. The dead should be buried within 24 hours except on the Sabbath. Funerals may also be delayed to accommodate family members who have to travel great distances.

The body is wrapped in a shroud and placed in an unadorned coffin as is now required by law. Before such regulations, the body was buried simply in the shroud. At the beginning of the funeral service a black ribbon is pinned over the heart on the clothing of first-degree relatives (children, siblings, spouse, and parents of the deceased and then slashed. The Chabad explains this custom called *keriah* as follows:

...The most striking Jewish expression of grief is the rending of garments [Keriah] by the mourner prior to the funeral service.

The Bible records many instances of rending the clothes after the news of death. When Jacob saw Joseph's coat of many colors drenched with what he thought to be his son's blood, he rent his garments. Likewise, David tore his clothes when he heard of the death of King Saul, and Job, who knew grief so well, stood up and rent his mantle.

The rending is an opportunity for psychological relief. It allows the mourner to give vent to his pent-up anguish by means of a controlled, religiously sanctioned act of destruction. Maimonides.... notes with sharp insight that this tear satisfies the emotional need of the moment, or else it would not be permitted as it is a clear violation of the biblical command not to cause waste. For this reason, we may assume, the tear for parents must be made with bare hands. <sup>iv</sup>

Instead of flowers, donations to charity are encouraged. The service includes prayers, a eulogy and today, family members and friends may share their good memories of the deceased, followed by the burial.

The most intense period of mourning referred to as *Shivah* (seven) is the 7-day period following the burial that begins with the Meal of Condolence. After the burial mourners return to the home of a family member of the deceased and a volunteer committee of the congregation provide the Meal of Condolence. This is usually a “dairy meal” which may comprise hard-boiled eggs (symbolizing the circle of life), bagels and cream cheese, lox, tuna fish salad, noodle kugel, fruit, cakes & cookies and tea and coffee.

During *shivah* the mourners take a complete break from their normal routine to focus exclusively on the departed and receive consolation from extended family, friends and the community. As people come to the house where the family is sitting *shivah*, they will often bring cakes or cookies or other refreshments to share and may also provide a meal for the family.

*Kaddish*, is a sacred custom, where a prayer is said on behalf of the deceased petitioning God that the deceased was a good person. It is said every day during *shivah* (usually at home) and then weekly at the synagogue for the next eleven months for Reform Jews, but daily for Orthodox Jews until the anniversary of the death, which is called the *yahrtzeit*. *Kaddish* is then said each year on the *yahrtzeit* and on certain Jewish holy days during the year. For Orthodox Jews, ten males (a *minyán*) must be present for the *kaddish*. Generally, *kaddish* is said for one’s father or mother, or child, but if a person dies without children another relative may assume the prayer ritual. This sacred ritual ensures the deceased is honored and not forgotten.

After S concluded her description of the Jewish way of death and remembrance she said, “Even when the death is painful and unexpected, I find meaning in these traditions that have endured the centuries. They provide comfort by addressing the psychological needs of the mourners and helps to bring the community together.”

### **3. Romanian/Eastern Orthodox Funeral – 2012**

MS was born in Romania. She moved to Texas with her first husband and children about 23 years ago after the overthrow of Ceausecu, who ran a Stalinist police state. She and her second husband, raised in Brooklyn, NY, moved to Tucson from Texas about 10 years ago. MS is looking forward to retirement in a few years and is active in progressive causes.

MS recounted the events related to the recent death of her mother in Romania. Her mother had had several bouts of breast cancer, but when it appeared again and she was 84, she decided against any further treatment. She opted to die at home.

MS flew to Romania to be with her during her last days and give her comfort and support. Her mother let go on her own terms. She instructed MS before she died, "Don't cry for me, have a glass of wine and remember the good times."

When her mother died a few days later, MS met with a friend who had recently buried her father to help her through the unfamiliar customs and bureaucratic requirements for funerals in Romania. M explained to her friend that in keeping with her mother's wishes, she wanted the simplest and most scaled down funeral. They called the funeral home and someone came for the body within the hour and asked for the clothes that her mother would want to wear. Since MS didn't have the time to find the appropriate dress she promised to deliver it later.

MS had to make the rounds of a number of public offices for the death certificate and other required documents. She returned to the funeral home with her mother's dress and explained that she wanted a closed coffin. Although the local practice is a closed coffin, it has a window on the top to permit mourners to view the deceased. The coffin is put on display for a 24-hour period in a small area at the funeral home that can accommodate 10-12 people. As is often the practice, there is also the attempt to sell the family other items such as a special handkerchiefs, or a coins to cover the eyes, etc.

MS's friend spread the word of the death including the time MS would be at the funeral home to receive visitors, which was second day after the death. Someone must remain with the body until the burial, which is usually held on the third day. Friends who came to the funeral home brought coffee, snacks, cookies and pastries. While keeping watch they told stories remembering MS's mother and the good times they had together.

The Eastern Orthodox Church has a large presence in Romania, however local folk customs also prevail. In pre-Christian times when someone died there was a party atmosphere similar to a wake, with feasting, drinking, and much laughter. There were also people who were hired to wail and promote outward grief and crying among the mourners.

The funeral was held at the chapel in the funeral home and presided over by an Eastern Orthodox priest. The priest gave a generic sermon not related in any meaningful way to the deceased. A ceremonial round loaf called *koliva* is blessed by the priest and shared with everyone present. In the past a family member made the *koliva* but today it is usually ordered from a bakery. There are many versions of *koliva* in Greece, Bulgaria, the Balkan countries, Romania, Russia, and among Christians in the Middle East where it is used as an offering on ceremonial occasions including funerals. Recipes vary but the primary ingredients are wheat kernels, which are boiled until soft and then sweetened with honey or sugar. *Koliva* also contains some or all of the following: sesame seeds, almonds, ground walnuts, cinnamon, sugar, pomegranate seeds, raisins, anise and parsley. Romanians decorate the *Koliva* with crosses of cocoa, chocolate or candy." <sup>v</sup>

Before the funeral, the family prepares a gift package of *kolaci* (a sweetbread shaped into a circle) as well as the deceased's favorite foods. After the funeral these packages are

distributed to all the mourners, the workers in the cemetery, gypsies and other needy people who come to the cemetery to receive the free food. The offering is made with a statement, "To be well received and to pave the way for the deceased." MS packed a scoop of *koliva*, a piece of kolaci, and an assortment of her mother's favorite foods like chocolate, a packet of coffee, and a can of sardines into a paper sack for distribution after the funeral.

After the service the young men carried the coffin to the gravesite, where there was another benediction. The priest threw the first handful of dirt on the grave followed by the other family members.

Usually, family members also provide a feast after the funeral for close family and friends where wine and water is also served. Instead, MS took her friends for a late lunch at her mother's favorite restaurant, which happened to be Chinese.

The Eastern Orthodox customarily commemorates the 40<sup>th</sup> day and the anniversary of the death. However, today those customs are not always observed. In Romania in June there is a religious holiday to honor the dead. Families will usually go to the cemetery for a picnic, serve *kolachi*, and give away mugs or bowls of cherries.

MS returned back to Tucson after the funeral and arranged another farewell dinner in honor of her mother's dictum to "eat well and drink well because we will have time to rest when we die."

#### **4. Brazilian/Catholic Funeral – Brazil (1950s)**

MB was born in Brazil. Her mother was Brazilian but her father was of Portuguese extraction. MB immigrated to the United States about 47 years ago and lived in the New York City area where she married an Italian-American. She moved to Tucson after she retired as a Special Education Teacher.

MB's maternal grandfather died in the early 1950's when MB was about 8 years old. He was the Governor of the State of Niteroi across the bay from Rio De Janerio, Brazil. His body was kept in his home until the time for the burial which usually occurs within 24 hours of the death. Brazilian funeral traditions combine Catholic and voodoo traditions. There is much wailing and weeping and almost a contest as to whom might be able to cry the most and the longest. MB remembers having to walk up to the casket and kiss her dead grandfather, which she did with much trepidation. The priest was present to bless the body with holy water.

After the funeral, which is very emotional, family and friends who have come from distant places gather at the home. Here, the atmosphere is very different, similar to a wake with a much drinking and merry-making. Both alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages are served including *cachaca* a clear distilled spirit made with cane sugar, *cafezinho*, which is a very strong black coffee heavily sweetened and served in small cups, and *caipiriinha*. This is a mixed drink made with lime juice, *cachaca*, and sugar,

The hired cooks are kept busy in the kitchen making finger foods, such as *bolinhos de bacalhau* deep-fried codfish balls. In addition to the food, there is music, joking, and the kids run around playing together. The adults reminisce about the “good-old-days.” Of course the atmosphere for a funeral for an older person who has lived a long life is a lot less somber than for the untimely death of a young person.

MB’s husband’s died just before he had intended to retire from the police department in New York. His funeral took place in New York City and since he held an important post in the Department and died unexpectedly after a short illness, this affair was in marked contrast to the funeral in Brazil. It was a very sad event and all ceremony, including an honor guard that carried the casket to the church. The memorial service took place in the church where MB and her sons both spoke. A formal reception was held in a local restaurant with a sit-down meal and MB has difficulty remembering what was served or what she ate.

## **5. American/Protestant & Mormon Funeral – Minnesota & California 1990s & 2011**

MH is of Swedish extraction, raised in Minnesota and went to college in California and Minnesota. She worked as a travel agent as well as for various airlines while she and her husband lived in Gig Harbor, Washington. They moved to Green Valley about 10 years ago where they currently reside. MH has been involved in setting up the food bank in Sahuarita, which is operated through her church.

MH has attended a number of funerals for close family members including her mother, father, brother, father-in-law, and mother-in-law. The funerals for her mother and father were held at the Lutheran church in Minnesota. The funerals were held within 3-4 days of the death when the close family could be present. There was an open casket at the funeral home where family and friends could visit the day before the funeral. Her parents had prepaid for the cemetery, casket, and stone.

She was involved in planning the service, which always included the traditional Swedish hymn “Children of the Heavenly Father” which she sang for me. When she was a child there were always lots of flowers at the church, but these days people usually contribute to a charity in the name of the deceased. She remarked, “It is unfortunate that when you die in old age, the young minister doesn’t know you so the eulogy is not personalized.” The male children and grandchildren were pallbearers. Because her parents died in the winter months and the ground was frozen the casket was laid beside the grave as if it would be buried.

All who attended the funeral were then invited to the fellowship hall of the church where the volunteer committee including the pastor’s wife organizes and serves a repast of finger foods. The buffet often includes little ham and cheese sandwiches, tuna and egg salad, potato salad, little squares of iced sheet cake, coffee and punch.

Following the reception they returned to her parent's home to open the cards and to reminisce about her parents. They studied the old photo albums and watched family movies. There was also much laughter as they shared humorous stories. Neighbors brought casseroles and hot dishes, supplemented with ham and wine which helped fuel the story telling and remembrance of the good times and to celebrate their lives.

MH also described the funeral for her mother-in-law who had converted to Mormonism 10 years before her death. MH remembers this funeral more vividly because she and her husband went to California to take care of her mother-in-law during the last three months of her life. She died at age 93 and MH felt the Mormon community basically took over after that point. It seemed her mother-in-law's wishes were not considered in her death. She was a hairdresser and had always taken great care with her hair and make-up. So when she was laid out in the open casket in white temple garments with no make-up and her hair not done up, MH knew her mother-in-law would not have been pleased with her appearance at this final farewell.

A big church funeral was planned but the Bishop was reluctant to allow the non-Mormon family members to speak about the deceased at the service. After some negotiation MH was allowed to include the Lutheran hymn that is also part of the Mormon hymn selection and to allow the close family members to speak during the service. Since one of the daughters-in-law is Mexican-American there were lots of flowers in the ward house.

After the service the members of the church had organized a typical Mormon buffet table (very similar to the Lutheran version) for the mourners. It included ham, funeral potatoes, jello fruit salads, crescent rolls, cake, pie and punch but no coffee.

Her mother-in-law was cremated and her ashes sit in an urn in MH's home among the "knick knacks," because her husband and brother-in-law cannot agree as to how to dispose of the ashes.

## **6. Mexican/Catholic/Protestant Funeral (2002-2011) & Day of the Dead Celebration**

C was raised in Tucson and attended Pueblo High School in the 1950s where she often felt she was asked to represent the school as "the token Mexican."

Her father was born in Durango, Mexico in 1910 but his family had been in the area for about 5 generations. His family became Mexican with the Revolution for 1810 for liberation from Spain and then they became Americans due to the Gadsden Purchase in 1852. C's father and uncles had mines in Magdalena so were on the wrong side of the 1910 Mexican revolution overthrowing Porfirio Diaz, so her father returned to Florence, Arizona where his grandparents lived. Her father became a naturalized American citizen because not having proof of his citizenship he feared he might be deported, as was common in the 1930s.

Her father wanted C to be proud of both her American and Spanish culture so when she was a child he read to her in both languages. Afraid she might face discrimination if she spoke English with a Spanish accent, he insisted she speak primarily English. C went on to college in New York State and received two graduate degrees from the University of Arizona, and another from Texas A&M University. She spent her career as a professor, author, and archivist at Texas A & M where her husband was also a professor. She and her husband returned to Tucson after their retirement.

C's maternal grandmother was born in Italy, and her grandmother was adopted and raised in a Mexican family in the Bisbee area. Her maternal grandfather, who was a miner, moved to Bisbee from Mexico. C's mother was born in 1919 and proudly identified as Mexican and tried to instill in C an appreciation of her mixed cultural heritage.

C's mother died in 2002 in Green Valley at the age of 93. C's sister, who never wanted to identify herself as Mexican, arranged their mother's funeral at the Catholic Church in Green Valley. The service was in English and the priest would not allow the family to speak. The funeral seemed impersonal and not what her mother would have wanted. Her mother would have preferred a Mariachi Mass, with lots of food and drink and a celebratory atmosphere. C said, "Life and death are entwined and death is just another step in the journey."

C was more involved in arranging her father's funeral, which took place in 2011. He lived to be 101. He had been physically active his whole life, but also pursued his interests in Spanish Mexican history and culture. On his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, as a surprise, C located a lady he had dated in high school. Although her father was Catholic, C arranged for the funeral to be held in the Episcopal Church in Tucson where she is a member and active in the Altar Guild. She brought in bright paper flowers to decorate the church and held the service in Spanish. She also arranged for traditional music including a flute. The Altar Guild provided refreshments after the service. The menu was generic including finger sandwiches, cools, cake, lots of fruit, alcoholic and non-alcoholic punch and tea and coffee. C's father was cremated in accordance with his wishes.

C honors the memory of her father and mother each year by hosting an elaborate Day of the Dead celebration on November 2 of each year. "It is a celebration in which Mexicans remember and honor their deceased loved ones. It's a festive and colorful holiday." Although it started out as small affair for close family and friends, it has ballooned into a very large gathering at her home in Tucson because she has encouraged friends to bring their friends. This year, I also attended because one of the people I interviewed for this project had attended in prior years and knew I would be welcome by C.

I was very impressed by the lavish spread and the celebratory atmosphere. C and her husband live in central Tucson in a modest home with a large backyard. They filled it with tables, drink and grill stations, and lights to create a festive atmosphere. There were more than 100 people in attendance and the *offrenda* altar decorated with fragrant marigolds, candles, mirrors, sugar skulls, and *pan de muertos* (special sweet bread made for this occasion) was set in the entry way. There was space on the altar for guests to

place their offering of food and objects that their departed relative or friend would have enjoyed in life. There were also photos of the departed next to the offering including a television, books, chocolates, a jar of coffee, donuts, bottles of wine, a pipe, a toy truck, etc. In the invitation, C explained “it is believed that the spirits consume the essence and the aroma of the foods that are offered. When the spirits depart, the living consume the food and share it with their family, friends, and neighbors.”

As you walked into the house, there was the fragrant smell of Mexican dishes. An extensive buffet of Mexican food including tacos, *moles*, *arroz con pollo*, refried beans, corn and tomatoes, varieties of squash with pieces of pork, chorizo and *the pan de muertos* (bread for the dead), and stacks of tortillas were arranged on colorful cloths. C does all of the cooking, but she uses some frozen dishes that she enhances to make them her own. The tortillas are purchased. “I was never allowed to make tortillas when I was young because my mother said, ‘I would become a slave to a man, and have to get up everyday to make fresh tortillas’ as was the custom in most Mexican homes.” She also hires help for the serving and cleanup

As a way to honor her mother’s wish for a Mariachi Mass and in keeping with the Day of the Dead festivities, C invites the Pueblo Highschool Mariachi Band to play for the party. There were about a dozen members who sang and played their instruments. They were dressed to the nines in their traditional costumes, the girls in long skirts and the boys with trousers, lined with silver buttons on the side seams and tight fitting jackets. Each of the musicians and singers had one side of their face done up in white make-up and artfully decorated to mimic a skull. These young people were very accomplished and the school has taken top honors for their Marichi bands for many years.

As a professional archivist, C explained the history of *Dia de los Muertos* in the invitation as follows:

In prehispanic times the dead were buried close to family homes and great emphasis was placed on maintaining ties with deceased ancestors, who were believed to continue to exist on a different plane. With the arrival of the Spaniards and Catholicism, All Souls’ and All Saints’ Day practices were incorporated into prehispanic beliefs and customs and Day of the Dead came to be celebrated.

The belief is that spirits return to the Earth for one day of the year to be with their families. It is said the spirits of babies and children who have died (called angelitos, “little angels”) arrive on October 31 at midnight, spend an entire day with their families and then leave. Adults come the following day.

I was fortunate to be invited to experience this event, as it was a coda to my investigation of funeral and mourning food customs.

## End Notes

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- i [www.esquire.com/print-this/funeral](http://www.esquire.com/print-this/funeral) food-0311
- ii [www.iranchamber.com/culture/articles/rituals\\_of\\_death.php](http://www.iranchamber.com/culture/articles/rituals_of_death.php)
- iii ibid
- iv [www.chabad.org/library/article](http://www.chabad.org/library/article)
- v from wikipedia- koliva

## References and Acknowledgements

Death Warmed Over by Lisa Rogak and Food of Life by Najmieh Batmanglij were both a good source for some of the recipes in this report. I also read a number of articles on the web about funeral customs in Iran, Romania, and among Jews which are referenced in the notes. Mourner's Dance by Katherine Ashenburg and Making an Exit by Sarah Murray are two other books that provided background and helped in my appreciation of funeral of practices around the world.

I also want to thank my kind friends who agreed to be interviewed and shared their stories with me and my husband who helped with editing and his support and understanding when I was off working on this project.

## **Halvah** (From *Food of Life*, Najmieh Batmanglij)

### Ingredients

1 cup unsalted butter (oil may be substituted)  
2 cups sifted all-purpose flour  
1/3 cup water  
1 cup sugar  
½ teaspoon ground saffron dissolved in ¼ cup hot water  
¼ cup rosewater  
½ teaspoon ground cardamom  
2 Tablespoons ground pistachio nuts for garnish

### Directions

1. In a large, deep skillet, melt the butter and stir in the flour gradually, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon. Fry over medium heat for about 20 minutes or until it is golden brown (caramel color). Remove from heat.
2. Bring the water and sugar to a boil in a saucepan. Remove from heat and add saffron, rosewater and ground cardamom. Mix well.
3. Gradually stir this syrup into the still-hot flour and butter mixture, stirring quickly and constantly with a wooden spoon to make a thick, smooth paste.
4. Transfer to a flat plate and pack firmly with a spoon. Decorate by making geometric patterns with a spoon and garnish with ground pistachio nuts.

## **Raspberry/Rhubarb Pie** (From Betty Crocker.com recipes)

### Ingredients

3 cups fresh or frozen rhubarb  
3 cups fresh or frozen raspberries  
6 Tablespoons butter, melted  
2 Tablespoons vanilla  
1 1/2 cups sugar  
1/2 cup all-purpose flour  
1 frozen deep dish pie crust  
1 refrigerated pie crust, softened as directed on box  
1 quart vanilla ice cream

### Directions

1. Heat oven to 350°F. In a large bowl, mix rhubarb, raspberries, 4 tablespoons of the butter, vanilla, 1 1/3 cups of the sugar and flour until all fruit is coated; spoon into deep dish pie crust.
2. Slice a few small diamonds in refrigerated crust. Place crust on top of the pie.
3. Using a small basting brush; spread remaining melted butter over the top crust.
4. Sprinkle remaining sugar over top.
5. Bake 30 minutes. Cover the top of the pie with loose layer of foil; return to oven for an additional 40 to 50 minutes or until the crust is golden brown and the rhubarb mixture is bubbly.

6. Remove from the oven; allow to cool 2 to 3 hours. Slice and serve with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

### **Noodle Kugel**

#### Ingredients

8 oz. dry egg noodles, cooked according to package directions  
8 oz cottage cheese  
1/2 cup raisins  
2 eggs, beaten  
1/2 ts salt  
1 ts cinnamon  
6 Tablespoons sugar  
1 pint sour cream (or half yogurt)  
4 Tablespoons butter, melted  
1-2 grated apples can be added

#### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 400F
2. Butter a casserole dish
3. Mix cooked noodles in a large bowl with the cheese, raisins, eggs, salt, cinnamon, sugar, sour cream and yogurt and 2 Tablespoons of the melted butter. Pour mixture into prepared casserole dish, smoothing top and sprinkling with the extra melted butter.
4. Bake for 45 - 50 minutes until kugel is light golden brown. It can be eaten warm or cold...

**Koliva** (from *Death Warmed Over*, by Lisa Rogak)

#### Ingredients

1 cup wheat berries  
4 quarts water  
1 cup raisins  
1 cup chopped walnuts  
1/2 cup honey  
1 teaspoon honey  
1/4 cup confectioners' sugar  
1/3 cup Jordan almonds

#### Directions

1. In a large stockpot, stir the wheat berries into the water. Bring to a boil, decrease the heat, and simmer over a low flame, stirring occasionally, for about 2 hours, until tender.
2. Drain the wheat in a colander and spread it out onto a large towel for about a minute to absorb the remaining water.

3. Put the wheat in a large mixing bowl and add the raisins, walnuts, honey, and cinnamon. Mix well. Let cool.
4. When cool, pour the mixture out onto a large serving platter and shape into a mound. Sift the sugar over the top, covering evenly.
5. Use the Jordan almonds to form a cross on top of the mound. Serve immediately.

### **Bolinhos de Bacalhau**

#### Ingredients

1 pound salted cod  
2 cups mashed potatoes  
1-2 Tablespoons minced parsley  
2 large eggs  
Freshly ground black pepper  
Olive or other oil for frying

#### Directions

1. Soak cod in cool water for 2 days, changing water frequently to reduce salt.
2. Place in a pan and simmer cod in water to cover on low heat for 20 minutes.
3. Drain and flake it well.
4. Add mashed potatoes, eggs (beat the eggs with the pepper first), add parsley.
5. Mix well and form into small balls. Fry in olive oil until golden.

Drain on paper towel. The recipe should be doubled a few times for a crowd

### **Funeral Potatoes**

#### Ingredients

6 cup diced potatoes  
1 can (10 3/4 oz.) condensed cream of chicken soup  
1/2 stick butter, melted  
1/2 cup milk  
1 cup sour cream or plain Greek yogurt  
2 cups grated cheddar cheese, or use a mix of cheddar and gruyere  
1/4 cup grated onion (optional)  
Salt and pepper to taste  
3/4 cup crushed cornflakes or panko bread crumbs (optional for crumb topping)  
An additional 2 Tablespoons. butter (optional for crumb topping)

#### Directions

1. Prepare the potatoes: Scrub 6-8 medium russet potatoes and wrap in foil. Bake the potatoes in a 350 degree oven for 45 minutes to 1 hour, or until they are easily pierced with a fork but not too tender. When the potatoes are cool enough to handle, peel and dice them. You can substitute plain frozen diced (not shredded) potatoes. Let the potatoes thaw before using them in the recipe.

2. Combine soup, butter, sour cream or yogurt, milk, cheese, onion, salt and pepper in a large mixing bowl. Mix well. Add the diced potatoes and stir gently until combined.
3. Place potato mixture in a 2-3 quart casserole dish or 9 x 13-inch baking pan.  
Optional 1: Mix 2 T melted butter with crushed corn flakes or panko bread crumbs. If using panko, season with a little salt and pepper. Sprinkle crumb mixture over potato mixture.
4. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 30-45 minutes or until hot and bubbly.

### **Pan de Muerto** (from Death Warmed Over, Lisa Rogak)

#### Ingredients

½ cup unsalted butter  
½ cup milk  
½ cup water  
5 to 5½ cups all-purpose flour  
2 packages dry yeast  
1 teaspoon salt  
1 Tablespoon whole anise seed  
1 cup sugar  
4 eggs  
1/3 cup freshly squeezed orange juice  
2 Tablespoons grated orange zest

#### Directions

1. In a saucepan over a medium flame, heat the butter, milk, and water until the butter melts.
2. In a large mixing bowl combine 1 ½ cups of the yeast, salt, and anise seed, and ½ cup of the sugar. Add the butter and milk mixture and stir until well combined. Add the eggs and beat in another cup of flour. Continue to add more flour until the dough is soft but not sticky. Knead the dough on a lightly floured board for 10 minutes, or until smooth and elastic.
3. Lightly grease a large mixing bowl and place the dough in it. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise in a warm place until doubled in bulk, about 1-½ hours. Punch the dough down and shape into 2 loaves. Let rise in a warm place for 1 hour.
4. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Bake the loaves on a baking sheet for 40 minutes or until the tops are golden brown. While the bread is baking, prepare the glaze. In a mix the remaining ½ cup of sugar and the orange juice and zest over high heat small saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly, for two minutes, then remove from the heat. Keep warm. When bread is done, apply the glaze to the hot loaves with a pastry brush.