



# **Burial practice in contemporary Iceland: Tradition and conflict**

**Silke Schurack**

**Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í mannfræði**

**Félagsvísindasvið**



**HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS**

**Burial practice in contemporary Iceland:**  
*Tradition and conflict*

Silke Schurack

Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í mannfræði

Leiðbeinandi: Sveinn Eggertsson

Félags- og mannvísindadeild  
Félagsvísindasvið Háskóla Íslands  
Júni 2014

Ritgerð þessi er lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í mannfræði og er óheimilt að afrita ritgerðina á nokkurn hátt nema með leyfi rétthafa.

© Silke Schurack 2014  
2409752389

Prentun: Prentsmiðja Háskólaprent  
Reykjavík, Ísland 2014

## **Abstract**

Burial options in Western societies are increasing in diversity. Yet, in Iceland, burial culture remains monopolized by the National Church and specialists such as funeral services. Alternative burial practices, as for example natural burials, are entirely absent. The reasons are the consequences of several aspects as will be shown in the following essay by exploring a range of written material from Iceland as well as from other Western societies for comparative purposes. Iceland's society is demographically rapidly changing and as response to that it is important to open and clarify the current legal framework concerning burial matters. This can be done by increasing awareness through public discourse and loosing the ties between the law and the church in this area.

## Table of Contents

1	Introduction.....	5
2	On the anthropology of death.....	7
3	Death.....	10
3.1	Cultural response to death.....	11
3.2	The corpse.....	14
3.3	Memories and immortality.....	17
3.4	Forms of disposal.....	19
3.5	Death and identity.....	22
4	Burial practice in contemporary Iceland: tradition and conflict.....	24
4.1	Laws and regulations.....	30
4.2	Business of death.....	33
4.3	Changing society.....	35
4.4	Openness and closeness: the individual and the community.....	37
4.5	Icelandic tradition.....	41
5	Conclusions.....	42
6	Bibliography.....	45
6.1	Pimary sources.....	45
6.2	Secondary sources.....	47
6.3	Graphics.....	49

## 1 Introduction

What would be more universal than death? Yet what an incredible variety of responses it evokes. Corpses are burned or buried, with or without animal or human sacrifice; they are preserved by smoking, embalming, or pickling; they are eaten-raw, cooked, or rotten; they are ritually exposed as carrion or simply abandoned; or they are dismembered and treated in a variety of these ways. Funerals are the occasion for avoiding people or holding parties, for fighting or having sexual orgies, for weeping or laughing, in thousand different combinations. The diversity of cultural reaction is a measure of the universal impact of death (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991/99, p. 24).

Death, like birth, is a major event in life and often seen as a kind of mystery. To cope with the phenomenon of 'death', mankind has developed a net of belief systems around death, whereby some even see death as possible major driving power for the emerge of religion (Weber, Berger, Malinowski; see Walter 1993, pp. 272-273), and with that comes an immense diversity of cultural response to death. Yet, burial culture does not have to be coherent with religious values at all (Toelke, 1996, pp. 103-104), and especially in many Western societies, other values and persuasions have replaced religious thought. Despite these changes, national churches have retained control over the domain of burial matters (Jupp, cited in Walter, 1993, p. 273), and Iceland is no exception (Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, 2009: 46 pp.). In spite of the fact that Icelandic society has experienced changes in several aspects; such as social, cultural and religious ones, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland or National Church of Iceland (*þjóðkirkjan*) in addition to burial service and legal regulations are the dominant forces in constructing the general frame of Iceland's contemporary burial culture. Other factors that may be rooted in the history of the country can be significant to bear in mind regarding burial practice and the attitude towards changes in funeral matters as well. Burial grounds are places where many aspects come together: past, present and future; continuity and disruption, as well as

identity and cultural display. Place and form of burial can be of significance within the whole picture of mortuary practice. In Iceland, the churchyard is the only legal burial ground<sup>1</sup>.

Memory is an important part of identity and the self of individuals and communities; therefore, remembering is essential for *who* we are and how we shape our social and private environment as well as the future. Memory and mortuary practice are closely connected to material culture (Parker Pearson, 1982, p. 99) inasmuch as material objects can serve as mnemonic and communicational devices expressing relationships and identities; function as substitutes or replacement for the biological body and represent thereby the social identity of the deceased. Additionally, objects and spaces can also mark shared and valued experiences. Memory can be incorporated in particular actions, giving these actions thereby a special meaning (Hallam & Hockey, 2001), and “ritualized” this way, they fulfill particular functions.

The event of death can be experienced as extremely tragic and creating counter-memories in order to gain control over the event and is a substantive step in the process of recovering (Wertheimer, as cited in Hallam and Hockey, 2001, p. 112). Funerals, thereby, provide a significant opportunity for shaping such counter-memories as well as forging memories related to the deceased in general; in the end this is the ritual of sending the beloved ones off into the “other” world, making loss an irreversible fact; marking off two states of existence (Hertz, as referred to in Spencer, 1996/2007, p. 489). The Icelandic term *útför*<sup>2</sup>, for example, means literally that. Funerals, therefore, have a significant function for the survivors.

Whatever this answer might be, in the end, it serves the survivors. They are the ones who will remember the dead or prevent them to return as ghosts troubling the living; restore the equilibrium that was so severely punctured by death. Cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> There are very limited possibilities for scattering the ashes or using a family burial ground (the latter usually involves a complex bureaucratic process).

<sup>2</sup> The word *útför* literally translated means to go out (in a sense of out of a certain area- mental or physically). The Icelandic term *jarðarför* can be seen equally to burial. The word literally translated would mean to go into the ground or earth. However, both terms: *útför* and *jarðarför* indicate a journey (*för*).

response to death can be roughly divided into different components, such as treatment of the corpse, rituals of different kinds and purpose, place and form of burial, mourning work and of course remembrance. All of these components make sense and have meaning within their context.

By exploring miscellaneous written materials, including scholarly work, laws, journals, blogs, newspaper articles, personal experiences, and additional material in the form of articles and web sites from the United States and Europe for comparative purpose, this paper seeks to consider the following questions:

- a) *Why is it, that there are nearly no alternative burial methods in Iceland?*
- b) *How does the demographically changing Icelandic society reflect in burial culture?*
- c) *In what way may an individual shaped funeral be important for the survivors?*

## **2 On the anthropology of death**

On the shoulders of a number of scholars, such as James G. Frazier, Emilé Durkheim, Robert Hertz and of course Phillipe Ariés, Geoffrey Gorer, Maurice Bloch, Jenny Hockey and Tony Walter and many more, a significant body of knowledge concerning death, dying and mortuary culture has emerged.

Hertz's (1907/1960) research on funeral rites explores, amongst other, the notion of double burials and the symbolism of decay, i.e. the mourning process appears to be somewhat in accordance with the state of the decomposing body. He divided the state of the corpse into a "wet" (decomposing phase) and a "dry" phase (only the bones are left), and sees a correlation between the transitional process (wet phase) of the dead and the mourners (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 51). Similar to Frazier, he additionally points out the fear of the dead amongst "primitive" societies, especially during the transitional (*liminal*) period. Indeed, it is notable, that in many cultures this transitional period is of significance in several aspects and demands appropriate treatment and a social response.

Phillip Ariés (1977/1983) conducted a complex research on death stretching over several years, thereby exploring a wide range of material (e.g. art, journals, diaries,



letters and other written material, cemeteries and more), which resulted in a remarkable compendium over fairly gradual altering attitude towards death from the Middle Ages to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Western societies. He roughly identified five different “faces of death” over time: the *tame death*<sup>3</sup>, *death of self*<sup>4</sup>, *remote and imminent death*<sup>5</sup>, *death of the other*<sup>6</sup> and the *invisible death*<sup>7</sup>. Of course this was no step by step, clear-cut development and there is overlapping, as well as differences between classes, locations and communities. Ariés was, on the other hand, also criticized for showing some nostalgic tone in his work, being unfair to the progressive era that notably influenced the shaping of the *invisible death* (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 1996, p. 130).

Phyllis Palgi and Henry Abramovitch (1984) contribute a rather extensive survey about the most important anthropological and sociological works on death and mortuary practices up to the 1980’s. Different methods and theories proposed so far were discussed in comparative way and their possible weak points were singled out. According to Palgi and Abramovitch, being conscious about the finiteness of earthly life, is a universal phenomenon: “[d]eath awareness is a natural sequel to the development of self-awareness- an intrinsic attribute of human kind” (1984, p. 385). Despite death being such an essential and universal matter, Palgi and Abramovitch deplore that anthropologists tended to overlook the concept 'death' on its own terms instead “incorporated [it] in various studies” (1984, p. 24), Metcalf and Huntington share a similar critical view (1991/1999, p. 27). Furthermore, Palgi and Abramovitch draw attention to some criticism highlighted by Johannes Fabian (1972), that is, that the interest in death related customs within anthropology is largely focused on

---

<sup>3</sup> Death should not be feared (in the end, one is supposed to be resurrected after the reunion with God) and everybody, regardless of social status should be prepared anytime.

<sup>4</sup> The individual moves more into focus and their life is to be judged by God after death (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 1996, p. 129).

<sup>5</sup> In this period death clearly moved away from being experienced as the communal event that it had been, to a more private area; leaving the mourning work up to the closest relatives and friends; making it more intense and overwhelming (at least in the bourgeois).

<sup>6</sup> Love and true friendship outlast death.

<sup>7</sup> The institutionalized, invisible death: death and dying happens in institutions, death is even “denied” through medical care/science and mourning is barely recognizable by others.

“others” (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984, p. 385). The tendency of researching exotic cultures rather than the “familiar” has been popular in the field of anthropology since it’s childhood.

Yet, death in Western societies enjoys increasing attention in recent decades (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 1996, p. 129, Mellor, 1993, p. 11), thereby new aspects are being considered and methods improved. At the University of Bath, Somerset (United Kingdom), an interdisciplinary study group on death and society, Centre for Death and Society (CDAS) is currently active, considering questions like the relationship between the dead and the living, “influence of economics, politics, inequality, social networks, technology and culture” (University of Bath); and also Nancy Scheper-Hughes is very engaged in death and dying research and in teaching on the topic.

Additionally, various death specialized websites provide quite a collection of death related themes. Today, new questions are emerging in light of contemporary processes and events; present knowledge and considerations looked at in new relations, as for example the individual focused, multicultural society along with the large variety of forms of disposal currently available, inspired by economic and ecological concerns as well as simply creativity in regard to individual beliefs or persuasions, as well as boundary-remaining and boundary-fusing cultural aspects of burial practice within a cultural diverse society (Reimars, 1999). Further concerns are for example the importance of an individual shaped funeral for memory making and recovering (Hallam & Hockey, 2001), and also death industry as manufacturing, a branch of business deserves entirely some attention. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon (1996) also considers questions like: how do different groups of people (e.g. children) within a given society experience death (p. 130)? Yet, a further subject of interest is: how do the bereaved experience the dying process and death of a beloved one within their social context? An attempt to find some answers to the latter question was made in an Icelandic study in 1995 (Elín M. Hallgrímsdóttir, 1996, pp. 60-66).

Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey (2001) focused their research on the relationship between material culture, memory and memory making and death; which is particularly interesting for the following discussion on burial culture and involves considerations about, for instance, memory making as a part of the process of recovery.

### 3 Death

Death is an event mankind deals with in a great variety of ways. As universal as that phenomenon is, naturally, death has been and is understood in various ways in a different context and therefore requires appropriate treatment. Death is both: a *biological* and a *social* event, and because it is so inevitable and physically irrepressible- and yet somehow kept as a mystery, it holds a bottomless recourse for human imagination; for according to Michael Jackson, the wish of being in control over one's environment and life in general is essential for humans and their struggle of being:

Even in extreme circumstances, human beings find or imagine ways of conniving in their own fate, yielding their own will to the will of others, or to God, or assenting to fate so that the inevitable seems something done of their own free will. (Jackson, 2005/2008, p. 182)

Again, cultural response to death varies extremely through time and space (Ariés, 1977/1983): from being a subject of the greatest fear, being romanticized, and tabooed till being worshiped and even “overcome” and turned into a different state easier to cope with (e.g. *sleep*<sup>8</sup> as metaphor for death is very strongly consolidated in Western societies). Even though it is obvious what happens to the corpse after death, there are ideas of a life force, a soul, or at least some phenomena in that direction that are significant to the self of an individual, and that could exist outside the body (Vilhjálmur Árnason, 1996, pp. 53-59). And this life force is the part people ascribe enormous significance because this is what we socialize through, communicate and connect to emotionally and seek to keep doing when the person is

---

<sup>8</sup> This notion of sleeping as well as the connection to night as synonym for death is very old (Ariés, 1977/1983, p. 605; Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 69) and still very strong today, and so it is in Iceland. The coffin is equipped with a pillow and sheets, basically like a bed; again a connection between death and sleep. Not only in literature and poetry, song lyrics and general language; interesting too is, that according to the law, a churchyard is a protected area and the peace must not be disturbed by noise as well as it is not allowed to rise buildings or structures which produce noise (Lög um kirkjugarðar, greftrun og líkbrennslu, 1993/ 36).

gone; and maybe this life force, the soul and the uncertainty about where it will go after the body is dead, makes out the whole mystery about death<sup>9</sup>. As Tony Walter and others support the thought that religion might have developed on the grounds of death (Walter 1993, pp. 272-273). This point will be further considered in chapter 4.

However, it is obvious that death is far more than simply a biological event. The social impact of death and loss on groups and individuals can be enormous and concerns about death in general can be incorporated into daily life (for example based on a particular belief system) and also expressed in various ways (e.g. folklore material).

Whatever the cultural answer to death is, it concerns the present and future of the survivors: on the one hand keeping the dead in forms of bad spirits or ghosts away from the world of the living, on the other hand keeping contact with the dead for various reasons, preserving the social presence of the deceased, the memory of what is lost or threatened by loss and the recovering from that crisis; balancing social, mental and emotional equilibrium. Cultural response can be seen as roughly composed of several aspects: e.g. the treatment of the corpse, ritual actions concerning the separation of the deceased from the living world, choice of place and form of burial, mourning work and memory. These aspects, of course, are not to be understood as a fixed sequence in a process but are interwoven and make sense within their social and individual context.

### **3.1 Cultural response to death**

Rituals have long interested and baffled anthropologists particularly, and are a concept that has been repeatedly revised and re-defined, depending on the contemporary paradigm and, naturally, from what angle the subject is approached each time. However, according to Mitchel, it seems to be generally accepted that

---

<sup>9</sup> These ideas are known from societies all over the world and throughout history. Maybe it is possible to call this an *archetype*, i.e. a set of similar ideas found in many places but with no observable common origin.

“ritual either involves different forms of actions from everyday life or at least different purposes” (Mitchel, 1996/2007, p. 490); though these different forms of actions cannot always be so easily separated; ritual actions have at least some fixed structure (Parker Pearson, 1982, p. 100).

However, rituals have been considered as a keyhole into the past but Arnold van Gennep argues that a ritual “has a meaning as it stands”, regardless of whether it is rooted in the past or not (e.g. the very act of scattering the ashes - giving someone free or “back” as ritual act), and has introduced a theory about the structure and function of rituals; thereby highlighting the importance of the *liminal* phase or “state of transition”- a concept introduced by Victor Turner (1967) - though Van Gennep understands the concept in a slightly different way than Turner when it comes to funeral rites (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991/1999, pp. 31-33). Metcalf and Huntington argue that Hertz and van Gennep are the only writers conceding the *liminal* phase the necessary attention. However, according to van Gennep, death rituals should be considered separation rituals (Spencer, 1996/2007, p. 489), i.e. sending the dead to their new destination and allowing the survivors to move on.

Another interesting angle on rituals was pointed out by Catherine Bell (1992); following Bourdieu’s theory understanding rituals as a part of a structuring process, i.e. *practice* and *experience* creating *meaning*, Bell introduces the term *ritualization* (as cited in Nilsson Stutz, 2010, p. 35); that is to say “a strategic way to act” separating ritual actions from others, which gives it a “privileged, significant and powerful” character<sup>10</sup>. The experience through physical participation, experiencing a cosmology (in a sense of a particular order) constructed during the ritual, the participant acquires profound sense of doing it correctly; basically everybody sharing this experience knows what to do or at least what it is expected to look like:

Through past experience these strategies have been embodied in the participants throughout their lives, and people simply have a sense of what a 'decent' burial is.

---

<sup>10</sup> This practice also applies in the *ritualization* of previous mundane actions, i.e. shared experience with the deceased- in short: memories - are kept alive (and therefore the social presence of the deceased) while incorporating them into mundane actions. (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, pp. 180-185)

The ritual practices are learned, but often so deeply rooted in culture that they are taken for granted and non-negotiable. (Nilsson Stutz, 2010, p. 36)

However, there is opportunity for change as well, because every time a ritual takes place, the cosmology is re-shaped and can be changed, and changes get incorporated into the basic (“naturalized”) structure (Nilsson Stutz, 2010, pp. 35-36). According to Nilsson Stutz, this plays a significant part in relation to the concept of identity as well. The way things are done, define individuals or groups of people as either different or similar and “ritual practice is likely to be particularly effective at reinforcing a sense of shared identity and community”, and according to Anne Swidler (2001) in some situations even “anchoring the social and cultural structure, by reinforcing constructive rules” (Nilsson Stutz, 2010, p. 36). Burial practice communicates the common understanding of “a good death and proper burial” within a given society or ethnic group, defining thereby in a sense its identity (Reimers, 1999, pp. 152-154). Rituals connect past, present and future (p. 148). Reimers also says, referring to Durkheim (1915/1995), that: “ritual should not primarily be viewed as expressions and communications of religious experiences and notions, but expressions of social experiences, i.e. of communal life and common ideas” (p. 162). Deviations within a general frame may be seen as supporting the “norm” but can express “social negotiations” as well (Nilsson Stutz, 2010, p. 37). This thought is followed later in this essay in the context of colliding cultural identities in the light of globalization.



Figure 1: Interacting with the dead through objects. Offering certain kinds of fruits to the deceased has particular symbolic meaning in Chinese cultural context, seen at Gufunes churchyard, Iceland.

### 3.2 The corpse

The corpse is “regarded as material manifestation of death, a body devoid of a self and individuality, but for the short time allowed for the relatives to remain in contact with it, the body is 'staged' and presented in an approximation of embodied 'life'” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 132).

Death has a transforming effect in many aspects and because societies’ specific conceptualization of death the corpse requires particular treatment. While in many societies this treatment is performed as ritualized actions, thereby focused on for example guiding the 'soul' to the right destination and prevent it from dwelling in the

world of the living in form of haunting ghosts. While these activities were mainly reserved for spiritual specialists and the family in earlier times (as it is still in other parts of the world), in contemporary Western societies the task of treating the corpse has widely moved completely into the hands of specialist of another kind: the undertaker. However, the belief in ghosts, for example has as it seems never fallen by the wayside<sup>11</sup> and in fact, in Iceland the belief in ghosts has been retained for quite long and treatment was applied accordingly when necessary. Jónas Jónasson (1934/1961) has collected a wide range of folklore material and has the following to say: “[f]olkbelief has been divided from religious faith regarding where the souls of the departed go after death. Long time after they are dead, they keep connection with the world, relatives and the corpse while it is still rotting”<sup>12</sup> (Jónas Jónasson 1934/61, p. 427). This falls remarkable in line with Hertz’s theory about the connection between “the soul and the period of mourning to the state of the corpse” (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 52). Even though Jónas Jónsson does not mention any mourning period here, the “wet” period of the body (Hertz) clearly is of some significance to both, the soul of the deceased and the bereaved. As mentioned before, the notion of 'sleep' as a metaphor for death is very old and here also ritual actions, as for example prayers, were done to prevent the dead from waking up (and vice versa<sup>13</sup>)

The connection between the corpse and the soul is even clearer when it comes to dealing with revenants (Icelandic: *afturganga*): the corpse has to be treated in particular ways, as for example decapitation, putting nails into the sole of the foot,

---

<sup>11</sup> The belief in ghostly beings is still very much alive in Iceland when considering the results of a study conducted in 2006 and 2007, saying that more than 70%, at least don't deny the existence of such supernatural beings like elves and ghosts. Though, whether this is still in its essence connected to the old folkloristic beliefs or encouraged by Hollywood movies, is another question, Terry Gunnell admits (Iceland still believes in elves and ghosts, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> “...[þ]jóðtrúin hefur staðið fjarri kirkju trúnni með það, hvar sálir framliðinna héldu til eftir dauðann. Lengi eftir að þeir eru dánir, standa þeir í samband við heiminn, við ættingjar sína og við líkið á meðan það er ekki rotnað”

<sup>13</sup> For example in Iceland the phrase *að vekja upp draug* (engl. to wake up a ghost) and *uppvakningur* (engl. animated corpse) are strong indicators for the connection between death and sleep. It also suggests that some sort of spiritual existence may keep on lingering around the corpse for an undefined period of time. That seems to be a cross-religious phenomenon (Ariés, 1977/1983, p. 605).



arranging the corpse in a certain way, burning it and so on (Jónas Jónasson, 1934/61, p.429). Examples of special treatments and mutilation of corpses can be found in many societies. Finding such graves can puzzle archeologists and others. The reasons for deviant graves are by far not always obvious but they can help to recognize the norm. On the other hand, they can also give clues regarding changes in burial practices, external cultural influences or local habits and so on (Nilsson Stutz, 2010; Gardela. 2013), Deviant graves do not have to be that “deviant” at all in the end.

However, in general people seek to shun a corpse for various reasons:

Death, in fact, by striking the individual, has given him a new character; his body, which (except in certain abnormal cases) was in the realm of the ordinary, suddenly leaves it; it can no longer be touched without danger, it is an object of horror and dread. (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 37)

In a newly published article published on the Icelandic national news website (Fólk hræðist orðið “líknarmeðferð”, 2013), Valgerður Sigurðardóttir (medical director of the department of palliative care), says, that people, especially younger ones, are somewhat afraid of the word *líknarmeðferð* (en. palliative care) and in particular the word *líkn* which is very similar to the word *lík* (engl. corpse). This reaction is a beautiful example of how a word is a symbol for a concept (here the corpse) knotted with particular, social shaped, ideas and revealing a certain general attitude and coursing a particular reaction. In this case obviously rejecting (whether due to fear or simply disgust is open to question).

Robert Hertz made an interesting observation during his fieldwork amongst Indonesian people, how bad spirits surround the dead body after death occurred:

The 'impure cloud' which, according to the Olo Ngaju, surrounds the deceased, pollutes everything it touches; i.e. not only the people and objects that have been in physical contact with the corpse, but also everything that is intimately connected, in the minds of the survivors, with the image of the deceased. His belongings may no longer be used for profane purposes; they must be destroyed or dedicated to the deceased, or at least stripped, by appropriate rites, of the harmful quality they have acquired. (Hertz, 1907/1960, p. 38)

Hertz describes the contagious state of the corpse from the hour of death and during the process of decomposition, as *intermediary period*, the first (temporary) burial (Hertz, 1907/1960, pp. 29-53). Worth mention here is, that at least within this period, memory about the deceased is not wanted. In some societies even the family and especially the closest kin are excluded from the normal life and tabooed for a certain period of time (pp. 38-40). The bereaved basically co-experience the transition of the deceased and also Liv Nilsson Stutz, states that “the human cadaver is not neutral” and she emphasizes the link between the biological process of decay and cultural response to it (Nilsson Stutz, 2010, pp. 34-35).

However, according to Hallam and Hockey, “in contemporary Western contexts the corpse is predominantly regarded as inert matter, or bodily substance without sensation” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 133); still, the way the corpse is treated plays a significant role for the survivors, not least in the shaping of the memory of the *experience* of the death of the beloved one. The display of the body in a small ceremony amongst the closest friends and family is still very common in Iceland. This presentation of the corpse in life-like appearance (i.e. make up, groomed and dressed, ect.) is consolidating a last image of the body that once was filled with life. Post mortem photography serves as similar purpose and was popular from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on and is still (or again) practiced today, especially in events of stillbirths.

### **3.3 Memories and immortality**

The 13<sup>th</sup>- 14<sup>th</sup> century North European *Transi tombs* showed both: the deceased person in all their splendid garments, displaying its stabilized social status as timeless presentation of the *social body* in form of effigies; the decaying corpse, *biological body* was positioned under the effigy in a transparent coffin or container; presented this way, the tomb expresses the transitional character of death and the fact that no matter what social position one holds or where in life an individual is situated (see *memento mori*), earthly life fades away equally to the *biological body* (Hallam & Hockey, 2001: 51-56) - the memory, i.e. the *social body* on the other hand lives on.

To take away the finiteness of death, in a sense, humans have shaped various notions of immortality; as Michael Jackson (2005/2008, p. 182) states:

Though one may not be able to act directly against alienating conditions, one can always act indirectly, through the resources of the imagination, thought and language, and thereby change one's *experience* of one's relationship to the external forces that bear so heavily upon one. (Emphasis in the original).

Lee Garth Vigilant (2003) wrote an essay concerning symbolic immortality and social theory where he explores different forms of immortality, drawing thereby on Robert J. Lifton (1974, 1976 and 1979). Lifton, stating that near everybody seeks life continuity in some sense, identifies five modes of immortality (i.e. symbolic connectedness): 1. *biological*, 2. *creative*, 3. *transcendental*, 4. *natural* and 5. *experiential transcendence* (Vigilant, 2003, p. 3). The *biological mode* is connecting to the future as well as to the past and the present, i.e. genetically but also socially manifested family ties; even in the broadest sense of our species. *The second mode* of immortality is expressed in creative achievements in various forms. However, also achievements in forms of buildings (e.g. a house) can be seen as tools for immortality of this kind. According to Lifton, also scientists and scholars also live on through their work and are a part of cumulative knowledge. He also sees deep interpersonal relationships having potential for creative immortality (Vigilant, 2003, p. 4).

*The third mode* deals with the idea of the existence of a life power that overcomes death, e.g. soul, spirit, love, and so on. This and the idea of another world waiting for us, is an essential part in most religions and spiritual belief systems. *The fourth mode* focuses on our connection to the natural world around us and the idea that though we die, the world will remain. However, the most important mode according to Lifton is *the fifth*, the experience of transcendence. This mode is very different from the others and is referred to as a psychic state in which time and death do not exist. It is achieved through various ways, for example through psychedelic substances and other drugs, spiritual rapture as well as ecstatic experience through orgasm. These experiences are so intense that people think they can overcome death.

Vigilant continues, still referring to Lifton, that these modes are basically a mechanism to "reduce death-anxieties by achieving a sense of mastery over mortality and this mastery is essential for psychological wellness" (Vigilant, 2003, p. 4), just as Jackson argued, mentioned above.

Michel Foucault, who sees that wish of immortality in connection to cemeteries, as a relatively recent idea, puts it like this: “[t]he cemetery is a highly heterotopian place<sup>14</sup> in that it begins with that strange heterochronism that is, for a human being, the loss of life and of that quasi-eternity in which, however, he does not cease to dissolve and be erased” (Foucault, 1997, p. 334). Tombs, gravestones and other memory laden objects help the survivors interact with the dead, shape and re-shape their relationship with the departed and keep their social presence alive. Furthermore, “ordinary” public or private spaces can be filled with shared memory and therefore be of great significance (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 5).

However, memories can also be intentionally produced as part of the recovering process of the survivors. In this way, the experience during the funeral is integrated into the process of remembrance of the beloved one and the death event in general, as Hallam and Hockey argue, thereby drawing on Wertheimer (1991):

Strategies aimed at the eradication or control of unwanted, disturbing memories in this context (tragic events like e.g. sudden death) are also drawn from collectively approved funerary rituals- and here we find materialized language of the replacement and transformation of memories. In the narratives of those suffering from the onslaught of 'ugly' memories instilled through experiences violent suicide, Wertheimer notes attempts to produce meaningful counter-memories that are considered beautiful and welcome (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 112).

Therefore, the performance of the funeral can serve as a significant event for the survivors in regard to the process of recovery; as individuals or a group, not only by remembering and celebrating the life of the deceased but also coping with the experienced event 'death' as well.

### **3.4 Forms of disposal**

Sending the deceased on his last journey can be carried out in various ways. For many societies, the process of decay, that period of transition, is of considerable

---

<sup>14</sup> This concept is understood as a space that combines mental and physical aspects at the same time.

importance. It may be seen as an essential part of the “first burial”, and according to Hertz, people seek to manipulate the decomposition process for various reasons (Hertz, 1907/1961, 42 ff.). Sometimes decomposition is prevented or at least delayed (e.g. embalming), sometimes accelerated (e.g. cremating), sometimes the flesh is consumed (e.g. endocannibalism) in other cases the corpse is exposed for the vultures (e.g. sky burials in Tibet), only to highlight some methods. All these treatments have a purpose and meaning within their context; sometimes spiritual, sometimes rational, sometimes simply depending on the present circumstances, medical reasons, matter of space and so on. A Tibetan sky burial, for example, practiced in the Icelandic highlands would most likely be considered as disgusting and immoral by the majority of the people but would make perfect sense within a particular belief system. The localization may thereby play a minor role- the belief system or worldview is essential.

Inhumation has been practiced for ages in wide range of variations. Evidence for cremation reaches back at least to the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC (Roman Empire) (Meyers, 2013), and its popularity varied over time and region. In Christian areas it was mainly used for special purpose, e.g. as punishment; especially after the conception of hell had been well established. In other areas, in contrast, cremation was (and still is) the traditional way of treating the corpse. Anyway, cremation was reintroduced into Western societies 1873 by the Italian Professor Brunetty and it met the new medical wave and the concerns about health and hygiene perfectly, and according to Katy Meyers, cremation was more popular amongst educated and wealthy population.

While in contemporary days elsewhere in Western societies cremation has gained enormous popularity (more than 70%); in Iceland, too, there is a rising number of cremations, mostly in Reykjavík. However, this form of treatment has never been very popular in Icelandic burial culture (Kristján Eldjárn, 1956, pp. 227-228, Ágúst Ólafur Georgsson, 2006, p. 12); in the end the only crematorium in Iceland is located in Reykjavík (Edda Kristjánsdóttir, 1996, p. 84). Yet, in recent years changes can be noticed and cremations are gaining popularity. In 2010, cremations were about 40% of the burials in Reykjavík and 22, 3% in the whole country (Útfarasíðir breytast, 2011).

In recent years a broad variety of funeral options are gaining more interest in Western societies and at the same time, certain aspects, such as limited options in burial matters through funeral business keep that diversity somewhat in check

(Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 208). Funeral business is not the only factor manipulating burial culture, as one will see in the following chapters. However, one of these popular forms of burials is the so-called “green burial” or “natural burial”. According to the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) in the United States, that means the corpse is buried in a casket, urn or simply a shroud which must be biodegradable and non-toxic. A green burial has the purpose of causing as minimal environmental impact and in general is understood to enable the deceased to actually take part in the natural eco-system ([nfda.com/green-burials](http://nfda.com/green-burials)); an attractive option and by no means exclusively for environmentally conscious people. The grave markers should also be natural, i.e. flat stone, plants, tree and so on, or simply nothing at all but registered Global Positioning System (GPS) data. The burial is preferably in a natural setting but this is not necessary. About two years ago, Ómar Ragnarsson (2012), an Icelandic environmentalist and media personality, proposed a very similar idea regarding new burial options in Iceland.

According to *Bautasteinn* (2011), a few politicians proposed legitimating the method of freeze-drying the corpse (*þurrfy sting*); another ecological beneficial option of disposal (Wiik-Mäsak, 2011, as cited in Zyga, 2011). Still, although recognizing the call for more funeral options, this method was not endorsed by the management of churchyards (*Kirkjugarðaráð*) and dismissed anyway. Some interesting note was added by the author of this brief notification: “[p]arliament members, as it seems, don’t need to discuss that with the people”<sup>15</sup> (*Þurrfy sting á Íslandi?*, 2011). It somehow gives the impression that the *kirkjugarðsráð* assumes that the people would not be open for this kind disposal; probably due to moral or ethical issues, because the ethical aspect is the first point stated by the *KGSÍ* (*Kirkjugarðssamband Íslands*) to be considered in matters of disposal; other points were economical and environmental aspects.

“The new is either offensive to human, natural or divine orders-which is to say, the world one is already familiar with-or it promises salvation-a way of magically replacing the old world with the new” (Jackson, 2005/2008, p. 113)

In a recent article, anthropologist Barbara J. King (2013) considered the question

---

<sup>15</sup> “[p]ingmennirnir þurfa greinilega ekkert að ræða þetta við þjóðina”

of burial rights and ownership of the dead. Based on a case from Alabama, United States, in which a man buried his wife in his front yard, according to her own wish. Nothing, as it seems, spoke legally against it but the town denied the man's application and a legal dispute arose over years to come. For consulting purposes, King asked for the opinion of anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, and she responded with the following: "Who owns the dead body? The grieving relatives? The state? The Public Health Department? The Church?". Scheper-Hughes points out, that in Northern California "various "home death" movements are spreading", emphasizing that "birth and death are deeply private matters." On the other hand she continues:

Alternatively, there are organizations promoting communal parks where the dead bodies are returned to the earth as quickly as possible, without fuss or fanfare, no use of toxic embalming fluids, no caskets, and the smallest footprint type markers or no markers at all. Some envision communal gardens and parks, others a nature sanctuary, but all want the dead to share space with the living, so that nature trails, concerts, children's parks can use the space where bodies are laid to rest.

Scheper-Hughes closes her e-mail with the words: "Who owns the body? The closest next of kin, at least in my humble anthropological and therefore naturally iconoclastic view" (as cited in King, 2013).

### **3.5 Death and identity**

In many cultures gravesides represent, amongst other, a reference to cultural heritage. Tombs and other memorials have been used for marking land, connecting it to the ancestors and used as symbols for nationality (Bloch, 1996/2007, p. 149; Björn Th. Björnsson, 2006, p. 8). Also it is for many cultures very important to be buried in the ground of their ancestors or as Reimers puts it: "repatriate" the remains (Reimers, 1999, p. 152). But this is not always possible or not longer wished for due to various reasons. However, there are other ways to keep the connection to the home country

or ethnic group<sup>16</sup>. According to Eva Reimers (1999), graves can serve as a medium for cultural communication. Reimers conducted a research in Sweden focusing on symbolic communication of ethnic identities on headstones (and burial rituals) of immigrants. For Sweden is becoming more multicultural and multi-religious, it is expected to reflect in mortuary practice as well.

Ethnic and cultural identity can be expressed in both ways individual and collective through for example inscriptions in different languages and characters, symbols that can be related to religion or culture or both. Michael Parker Pearson also points out that: “the deceased is given a set of representations of his or her various social and identities or roles when alive so that their status or social position may be given material form after death (e.g. gravegoods, monuments, place of burial etc.)” (Parker Pearson, 1982, p. 99).

Reimers finds that it would be quite sound for “immigrant groups experiencing the dominant culture as a threat to their own heritage and traditions” (Reimers, 1999, p. 149). But this can entirely be experienced the other way around (Valdimar Tr. Hafsteinsson, 2006). However, Reimers argues that funerary rites offer an opportunity to emphasize an ethnic identity or heritage that may be “under pressure” by the dominant culture (Reimers, 1999, p. 149). Enhancing ethnicity can have the function to signalize “membership or exclusion” (Barth, 1994, as cited in Reimers, 1999), but these kind of boundaries, in ritual or on the grave, appear not always that clear or they are purposely fused to express compromises or fusion of two or more identities; in other words “boundary-reducing” and “boundary-fusing”(Reimers, 1999, p. 149). At a funeral, values and meanings can be reaffirmed, just as mentioned before in chapter 3.1 regarding the cosmology produced and reconstructed through participation in rituals. Reimers states that there is no need for the majority, the dominant culture to enhance its cultural identity and values at the graveyard simply because it is the norm. Others, those who seek to mark off their identity against the majority, do that through various ways (1999, p. 152). But there are certain limits doing so, on the grounds of for example laws and regulations, funeral industry and services and bureaucracy (Reimers, 1999, p. 163).

---

<sup>16</sup> groups of people who are connected through ancestral, social or national experience



Reimers inspected multicultural cemeteries in Sweden, focusing on the communications of boundary-reducing, boundary-fusing and boundary-maintaining symbols in the context of ethnicity. In Iceland there is one churchyard with separate sections for different ethnic groups, the *Gufunes* churchyard; and especially here it is interesting to consider multicultural aspects Reimers has observed in her study. The *Gufunes* churchyard is an attempt to give people an opportunity to bury their dead in a culturally defining way but still within a clear frame set by the dominant culture as a response to Iceland's changing society.



Figure 2: Boundary-maintaining display of materialized memory referring to specific cultural background within the dominant Icelandic "norm" at *Gufunes* churchyard; symbolizing simultaneously membership and exclusion

#### **4 Burial practice in contemporary Iceland: tradition and conflict**

After the conversion at 1000 AD, Iceland's mortuary culture has been influenced and (more or less) somewhat consistent with those in Europe (see Ariés, 1977/1983). The Nordic island was not that isolated at all, though the common people living there certainly were, wealthier class, including priests, on the contrary did study abroad and Germany and Denmark were particularly popular. Therefore it is not unlikely, that

the knowledge and ideas brought back home to Iceland, had a share in shaping the Icelandic culture, not least burial culture. Also not unimportant is the fact that in Iceland urban areas did not emerge before the 1900s (Sigurlaug Brynleifsson, 1970, as cited in Gísli Pálsson, 1978/1982, p. 79) and there was no aristocracy and bourgeois in the same way as in Europe, but certainly some kind of ruling class composed of the church, chieftains and landowners. Also, death was a fact Icelanders had constantly to cope with, especially due to disease, harsh life conditions (Hastrup, 1990, p. 234) and severe lack of knowledge about the benefit of hygiene (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 1996, pp. 128-134), additionally, superstition was very pervasive long into the 20<sup>th</sup> century- an observation that seems significant enough to be mentioned by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon in the context of death and burial practice and could indicate how slowly change occurs in particular subjects. In Iceland the Church had a very secure position and significant power. Moreover, the Icelandic ruling class was from medieval times onwards directly connected to the Church<sup>17</sup>.

However, it is suggested that religion has come to be as an attempt to cope with the phenomenon 'death'; as for example Malinowski proposed: “[d]eath, which of all human events is the most upsetting and disorganizing to man’s calculation, is perhaps the main source of religious belief” (Malinowski, 1962, p. 97, as quoted in Walter, 1993, p. 273). Walter (and others) concludes that the process of secularization might have been boosted because people lose the fear of death (and the notion of hell), due to a longer life span and “marginalizing” of death (Walter, 1993, p. 273). Yet another interesting statement by Brian Wilson (1982) was made: death is still relatively untouched by rationality<sup>18</sup> and that might be the reason that religion continues to exist (as cited in Walter, 1993, p. 273). Taking the consideration

---

<sup>17</sup> Politics and the Church were welded for a long period of time, and in Iceland till this day the National Church enjoys significant support from the state (e.g. besides immense financial support and the to the law bounded superior position, the annual ritual, marking the beginning of the office term of the parliament, *þingsetning*, includes a special mass, *hugvekja*). Also when precisely this is publically criticized, the contemporary situation is in general justified through the statement that the policy of the Icelandic state and government is based on Christian thought as guideline.

<sup>18</sup> We do see that in the discussion about possible alternative method of disposal (freeze-dry method) in chapter 3.4.

of the general process of secularization still further Walter, thereby drawing on Jupp (1993), mentions the following: “[t]he extent which various national churches have retained control of burial has affected the extent and nature of secularization in each country” (Walter, 1993, p. 273). If that is true, then keeping control over mortuary matters on behalf of the church is important for sustaining and justifying its position within society!

Today, mortuary culture in Iceland is framed by the law and to the most extent regulated and shaped through the National Church<sup>19</sup> (Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, 2009, 46 pp.) and the services offer by the funeral director companies (see also Reimers, 1999, p. 163<sup>20</sup>). A certain standard procedure is expected for a 'proper' and 'traditional' funeral (as discussed in chapter 3.1) and that has hardly changed over time besides it being more and more pushed into the domain of business making. Death is 'expensive' in many parts of the world but in a different way: In Western societies beneficial effect is shifted from the community (e.g. regulations of social alliances and relationships) into the hands of traders and institutions. Despite the fact that many new options of disposal are available, very has little changed regarding funeral culture in Iceland (Edda Kristjánsdóttir, 1996, p. 84).

The results of a survey regarding the Christian faith of Icelanders, conducted in 2004/2005 (Sigurhanna Kristinsdóttir, 2005), were harshly criticized and Pétur Pétursson (PhD in science of religions) admits that it is difficult to interpret the result of the survey and may not be possible to gain any authentic results with the methods employed. After revising the results, he states that far more Icelanders affirm to Christianity than are actual believers. The bottom line is that in general Icelanders seem to be Christians in name only; i.e. not for the religion's sake but for traditional reasons. Still, the National Church's dominant position in mortuary matters is deeply rooted and seems to be non-negotiable - it is “naturalized”.

Iceland's population has grown rapidly in the last century and has become more

---

<sup>19</sup> *Þjóðkirkjan*

<sup>20</sup> Reimers argues, the need for keeping in mind limitations for cultural specific funerals: “[t]he public funeral system, the bureaucracy, the production of necessary artifacts, and services offered by funeral homes delimit the available possibilities” (Reimers, 1999, p. 163).

diverse in many aspects. Newly arrived religions and worldviews have changed the spiritual landscape of Iceland and that, of course is reflected in Icelandic graveyards as well, even if only in a limited manner. Churchyards are in general the only legal burial grounds. It is possible to provide plots in unhallowed ground but they still belong to a churchyard.

An interesting suggestion, concerning this matter, was made by Hallam and Hockey; namely by allowing other forms of funerals, in regard of other worldviews and religious thought, on “shared death space”, is in fact helping to “maintain the Christian funeral an important ritual site”; thereby referring to a study conducted by Hockey (1992) where “an Anglo-Catholic minister said he would admit contributions from almost anyone but insisted on having ‘the last word’” (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 95). Drawing on that thought, a quite similar pattern in Icelandic mortuary politics concerning the National Church could be considered as valid. The shared death space would be the churchyard, the only legal burial place in Iceland (with some view exceptions as mentioned before).

The recently released Icelandic documentary “Dauðans alvara” (engl. deadly serious) (2013, Áslaug Baldurdóttir) gives an inside look into the work of the funeral director; and it mirrors very clearly the expected image of the “traditional” treatment of the dead. The (film) poster was simply black; no picture or symbols; only information about the film, underlining the dark character surrounding death. The male dominance in the documentation was striking. The music in the background, men choirs, soloists and organ music added to the whole documentary a heavy, dark and religious flair. Rúnar Geirmundsson, the funeral director and his co-workers (it is a family business) as well as the musicians were neatly dressed the entire time - near exclusively wearing dark suits; strengthening the heavy mood even more. However, regarding the male dominance in the area, Tony Walter (1993), and others (see Jónas Jónasson, 1934/1961), point out that “in the early modern period, care and control of the dying and the corpse were substantially in the hands of women” (Walter, 1993, p. 277) as was the work of mourning (Hallam & Hockey, 2001, p. 69). During the 18<sup>th</sup> century started a process of “de-feminizing”, although the role of the caretaker for the dying remains in the hands of women. It is noteworthy, that Walter points out that several studies have shown that in death rituals in basically all societies men and women have a significant (but very different) role to play, hence the rituals require both genders (Walter 1993, p. 277). In the United States and in

Europe, female funeral directors are increasing in number. In Iceland the profession seems to be still near exclusively in the hands of men.

In Iceland, as in modern day Western countries, the process from death to burial is in general hidden<sup>21</sup>; not a sacred matter at all but left in the hands of specialists (Neegard, 2008, pp. 126-127; Mellor, 1993, p. 20). Thomas Lynch, an American undertaker about his experience:

The dead are simply disappeared by functionaries like me, often without witness or rubric or participation by family or the community, who may or may not gather later at a convenient time and uplifting place to 'remember' and to 'celebrate' in the name of the departed [...] The corpse has been banished to a hinterland of private and efficient disposition. (Lynch, 2013)

However, after the body is prepared, follows the *kistulagning* (comparable perhaps to the Catholic wake), a specific Icelandic custom usually attended only by the closest relatives and most likely succeeded the earlier common tradition of the *húskveðjur* (Ágúst Ólafur Georgsson, 2006)

In the film an organ player stated that it is, according to him, important to hold on to the old tradition regarding funeral rites, basically protecting the “traditional” way, the cultural heritage from past times. In the general public discourse, a clear tendency to state nationalism is apparent; that is the focus of the mediation for the idea of a unified nation, regardless of the actual ethnic diversity. Terms like: “the nation wants”, “the nation has spoken”, “the nation says”, “national heritage” (*þjóðarmening*) and so on are strikingly popular in official statements and discussions.

Throughout the whole documentation not one mentioned immigrants, other religions, or civil funeral (taking place without religious representative) or alternative burials; beside the possibility of cremation and the option to request permission for scattering ashes at (limited) locations.

Jóhanna G. Harðardóttir (2012), Deputy High Priest of the *Ásatruárfélagið* (Icelandic Ásatrú Association), criticizes the “traditional” form of funerals, especially

---

<sup>21</sup> This is consistent with Aries' notion of the *invisible death*.

the limited options when it comes to more individual shaped ideas. She says: “[a]s it turns out traditional burial is not only an insurmountable expense for many, but could act against the will and conviction of the deceased and the bereaved as well”<sup>22</sup>.

Furthermore she also argues that, naturally, everybody wants to give their beloved ones the most respectful farewell, but this often results in high financial debts for the family for many years to come.

Another problem Jóhanna G. Harðardóttir points out, is that sometimes there appears to be a conflict between the will of the deceased and the bereaved, especially if there has been no lead up to the end of life and no decision been made beforehand<sup>23</sup>. Additionally she underlines the materialism, wastefulness and artificial needs regarding “traditional” funerals; as for example, if somebody is to be cremated, there still has to be a coffin which is going to be burned, and then an urn has to be purchased as well for the ashes. Jóhanna G. Harðardóttir (2012) asks: “[w]hy do we burn highly expensive coffins during cremation? Wouldn’t it be sufficient to burn just the base, and re-use the cover and the side panels?”<sup>24</sup>. It has to be said that ideas in that direction are already implemented to some extent. According to Auður Alfífa Ketilsdóttir (2014): a coffin can be rented, basically functioning as an outer shell (costs about 10,000 ISK) and another, simpler casket (suitable for both cremation and inhumation) can be placed inside (costs about 70,000 ISK). This can reduce the costs somewhat; a general price for a coffin is approximately about 120,000 up to 325,000 ISK<sup>25</sup> (Auður Alfífa Ketilsdóttir, 2014).

But this is not Jóhanna G. Harðardóttir’s only criticism regarding materialism and expenditure; another point is the “tradition” to buy food and service, often in large quantities as an expected part of funerals and she questions the necessity and

---

<sup>22</sup> “[þ]að gefur auga að hefðbundin útför er ekki aðeins óyfirstíganlegur kostnaður fyrir marga, heldur getur einnig strítt gegn vilja og sannfæringu hins látna og eftirlifenda hans.”

<sup>23</sup> Example given: the deceased has been a very active member of the *Ásatrúarfélagið* but the family performs the funeral ceremony in Christian tradition after the person in question unexpectedly died.

<sup>24</sup> “[h]vers vegna brennum við rándýrar kistur við líkbrennslur? Væri ekki nóg að brenna botninn, en endurnýta lok og hliðar hennar?”

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, in an article from 2000 is mentioned that a general coffin would cost about 50,000 ISK (Mikill verðmunur á einstaka þjónustuliðum, 2000).

purpose of such “tradition” in contemporary times. However, the most important question according to Jóhanna G. Harðardóttir is, in the end, what is it that matters most in this last good bye?



Figure 3: The Icelandic “norm” regarding burial practice is incorporated and fixed in future architecture projects; here at Gufunes churchyard (incl. chapel, church, crematorium, facility for funeral feasts) - all together in one place: the churchyard.

#### 4.1 Laws and regulations

Laws and regulations keep a society organized and when they are written down, easy to look up and refer to - and they are in a sense agents of power. Iceland’s burial culture is framed by determined laws. There are specified regulations regarding places of burial, containers (coffins, urns), measures and depth of the grave, registration, storage of the body or ashes, time of protection (Icelandic: *friðunartími*), behavior in churchyards, exceptions (e.g. home burials/family graves not within churchyard, disposing of ashes elsewhere than in the churchyard) and so on (Lög um kirkjugarðar, greftrun og líkbrennslu, 1993/36). The churchyards management on the other hand can make further regulations (in general organizational matters, the order and look of head stones and behavior). According to the law, the dead can only be buried in legal churchyards. For “good” Christians it



has been this way since 1275 (Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, 2009, p. 43). Others (children who have not been baptized, heathens, suicides, felons, ect.) would have been buried outside the churchyard at first (not only in Iceland), and there still are references to this old order: as for example, quite recently the German war criminal Erich Priebke died in Rome (previously lived in Argentina but was surrendered to Italy 1995) but based on his identity and reputation, no one, not even his birth town, is ready to take care of his body and the Vatican imposed a ban on burying him in a Catholic churchyard (Priebke jarðsettur í fangelsisgrafreit, 2013). In Iceland, another example from recent news is a phrase Kári Stefánsson used during a dispute regarding his company where he states: “[t]he fact is, that RÚV as an institution has already formed an opinion on ÍE and me, and it obviously considers its role to be to kill us and bury outside the graveyard<sup>26 27</sup>” (Kári æfur út í RÚV, 2013). Within this context an interesting formulation appears on the website of the *Útfararstofa Íslands*: “[m]embers of any religious organization or people standing outside any religious organization have *the right* (my emphases) of a plot in the churchyard<sup>28</sup>” (Útfararstofa Íslands).

In Iceland there are about 255 churchyards (Gardur.is). The management of churchyards is in the hands of sup-independent organization (*Kirkjugarðarráð*) under the administration of provosts and the bishop’s office (Garður.is). The government is not directly involved in the management, apart from providing financial supply (Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, 2009, p. 47). The financial supply comes in general from tax money every citizen (16 years of age and older) pays (somewhat unclear, but most likely it is part of the so-called “*nefskattur*”<sup>29</sup>, meaning basically everybody already pays for their last resting place). Since 2004, the amount is annually calculated; an

---

<sup>26</sup> “[þ]að er nefnilega þannig að RÚV sem stofnun hefur myndað sér skoðun á ÍE (Íslensk Erfðagreining) og mér og lítur greinilega á það sem sitt hlutverk að ganga af okkur dauðum og grafa okkur utan garðs”

<sup>27</sup> Even though later everybody would be buried in the churchyard, there were still certain rules, who were granted permission to be carried through the gate of mercy (Icelandic: *sáluhlíð*) and who had be transported otherwise into the churchyard, also regarding when the ringing of the bell was permitted and when it was not.

<sup>28</sup> “Fólk í öllum trúfélögum og utan á rétt á legstað í kirkjugarði.”

<sup>29</sup> engl. capitation tax



average is taken from number of deaths in the previous year and occupied burial area<sup>30</sup> (Lög um kirkjugarðar, greftrun og líkbrennslu, 1993/36).

Sólveig Ólafsdóttir (2009) noticed that: “In this country, burials are nearly exclusively in the custody of the National Church and the access by other religious associations in this area is still very limited<sup>31</sup>” (Sólveig Ólafsdóttir, 2009: 46 pp.). She also points out, that, according to fairly recent proposal for law changes (*þingskjal* 585, 2007-2008), religious organization with at least 1.500 paying members have the right to constitute a representative and a surrogate into the churchyard management organization (Icelandic: *kirkjugarðsstjórn*) for a period of four years (Lög um kirkjugarðar, greftrun og líkbrennslu, 1993/36) and also that a registered religious organization who has a recognized leading figure (Icelandic: *forstöðumaður*) has the right to manage a separate burial ground (Icelandic: *grafreit*) but there is no comment about whether it has to be within a churchyard (1993/36). On the other hand the first paragraph says that everybody shall be buried in a legal churchyard (1993/36), i.e. according to this, it must be within the area of a churchyard; nevertheless, some regulations have the potential for different interpretation. Another interesting point is, a proposal for changes of the bill *Lög um kirkjugarðar, greftrun og líkbrennslu* (1993/36), made in 2007/2008 that presents a change in the first paragraph (place of burial), including the term “legal burial ground” instead of churchyard only (see above) and an additional paragraph dealing with the treatment of the body; defining the term “útför” as ritual (*helgiathöfn*) following the tradition of the relevant spiritual organization (*þingsjal* 585, 2007-2008; *þingsjal* 38, 2008-2009). That would definitely grant more freedom regarding burial rights. However, these two points have not been approved so far nor have they been rejected. The last traceable attempt to get these changes on the agenda was in 2011.

---

<sup>30</sup> *úthlutunarregla*

<sup>31</sup> “[g]reftranir (eru) nær eingöngu á forræði Þjóðkirkjunnar hér á landi og er aðgangur annarra trúfélaga að málum er tengjast greftrun mjög takmarkaður enn sem komið er.”

## 4.2 Business of death

At the end of the Middle Ages, Gerson candidly accepted the right to purchase "a safe and honorable place for one's grave" in church. In so doing, the deceased was demonstrating "pious foresight... and a good heart". The only effect of the canonical prohibitions, besides maintaining a principle, was to make the customary practice of burial in church subject to the payment of fee.

Burial, like the sacraments and sacramentals, could not be sold. But exceptions to the general rule could be purchased. This is more or less the origin of the burial fees collected by priests... (Ariés, 1977/1981, p. 50)

What according to Ariés started out as bribe to secure a popular burial place, has developed over time into a whole business with various branches. In Iceland, as in many countries the funeral costs are high they have probably been this way for centuries in many parts of the world; though they have taken different form (Metcalf, 1981, p. 563). Since in Iceland (and other Western societies as well) near everything concerning death is basically part of the free market business, death is then following the laws of the market just as any other business branch. Near all required equipment has to be purchased from third parties and the funeral companies are in general privately operated.

An attempt to find out the total amount for a common burial is quite challenging. Even though the basic costs are listed on the websites of most funeral companies (not all), it shows an average only, that is about half of the overall sum. Guðrun Þórunn Sveinsdóttir recently lost her newborn child and she argues, that this time of grief and shock is exploited by the funeral companies, and it is extremely hard to deal with all these financial matters and comparing the costs. As it seems, there are severe differences between funeral services (depending on the administrative district) when it comes for instance to infant burials (Þórhildur Þorkelsdóttir, 2013).

A news article published 2013 highlights the increased costs around burial service after the impact of the financial crisis in 2008 in comparing the given numbers from the *Útfararstofu kirkjugarðanna* between 2007 and 2013. Samples were taken from three available common service packages, and according to the article, the price increase was between 48-62 %. The author compares these numbers with the average increase of the wages (35%) of the general working public and states that the burial costs may be three times the amount of the monthly minimum wage

(Símon Örn Reynisson, 2013). The highest fees are charged for the coffin, the service and the choir; noteworthy is that the costumer is also charged a fee for copyrights (*STEF-gjald*) for *all* the music performed at a funeral (*STEF-gjald af allri tónlist við jarðarfirir*, 2010). Interestingly, Rúnar Geirmundsson, director of the Icelandic funeral director's society, already in 2008 (very shortly after the Icelandic financial crises was official) points out that the costs are increasing and end up on the shoulders of the family of the deceased (*Kreppan kemur við syrgjendur*, 2008).

However, in case the family cannot afford the funeral and the sale of the bequeathed properties do not suffice the funeral costs; it is possible to apply for financial support (*útfararstyrk*) by the local government. How much this would be, depends on the council in question. But also insurance companies and unions offer some financial support (*dánarbætur*) for the bereaved spouse (*Tryggingastofnun*).

Besides all these fees around the funeral ceremony only, other industry branches also profit from death: e.g. flower shops, particular gift shops that offer all kinds of objects around death and bereavement, sympathy cards and, of course, stonemasons and memorial businesses, just to name a few. In the end, considering all these financial concerns attached to the funeral: do they influence the quality of the mourning process in respect to the overall meaning of the costs?

Regarding fees of another kind, a dispute came up recently between funeral director companies (Icelandic: *útfararstofur*) and the churchyard management in the area of Reykjavík (*Kirkjugarðar Reykjavíkurprófastdæma*) (*Mótmælir nýju gjaldi á útfarir*, 2012/2013). The problem was that the latter started to invoice a special fee (*kistulagningargjald*) from the customers through the funeral companies as third party. This was done due to financial cutbacks on behalf of the state to the National Church but is not justified on legal ground. Though the case was ruled in favor of the funeral companies, i.e. the fee is illegal; some churches seem to continue invoicing it (*Garðar Örn Úlfarsson*, 2013; *Sóknarkirkjur innheimtar ólöglegt gjald*, 2013).

However, criticisms on materialism and pretentiousness around funerals, comparable to those stated by Jóhanna G. Harðardóttir and Ragnar Ómarsson, are not new. As a reaction to news from Denmark regarding a forthcoming fashion trend of expensive burial ceremonies, already in 1931 there appeared an article in the *Alþýðublaðið*, criticizing with a sense of rationalism and functionalism thought the contemporary Icelandic burial practice with all its unnecessary "fuss" and lavishness around it (*Alþýðublaðið*, 1931). Also, according to the author(s), pompous funerals

were common to affirm social status and underline class differences in earlier times and especially in the United States, but educated people in other foreign Western countries (here in particular refer to Denmark) started to prefer simpler, near invisible ceremonies; hiding both: death and status; thereby again Aries' idea of "invisible death" appears to be confirmed in a way. Furthermore, the article not only criticizes the materialistic aspect but some of the "old traditions" as well, such as the "un-aesthetic" *húskveðjur*<sup>32</sup>, funeral speeches (Icelandic: *líkræður*) and even the convention of drawing flags to half-mast. In short, in keeping with "healthy taste", Icelandic funeral practice should be "improved" by moving the whole ceremony out of sight, keeping it small and aesthetic, reducing social class boundaries, thereby taking the pressure of "traditional" and expensive funerals off the shoulders of the poorer society members. The idea of a reusable coffin was already mentioned there- more than eighty years earlier than it was eventually introduced in practice 2013 (see chapter 4).

Although admitting that changes in that matter will probably occur slowly, the author(s) of the article argue(s) that some changes "for the better" have already taken place, for example there is not as much chanting over graves as was commonly done before. One way to motivate change is, according to the article, is to talk about funerals and make end of life decisions beforehand. Interestingly, there are no emotional concerns or cultural meanings considered in the article, whatsoever.

### 4.3 Changing society

Globalization and migration does not leave Iceland's cultural landscape untouched. The demography of the still rather homogeneous appearing society is changing; the cultural, social, religious and spiritual composition is becoming more diverse and other issues may influence the general thought of the people as well.

Today, there are about 40 legally registered religious organizations from which are 38 active in the year 2013. In a total population of about 320,000, the number of the members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland (*þjóðkirkjan*) has

---

<sup>32</sup> In the article the term *smekkláusu húskveðjur* is used.

declined in recent years and is today about 245,180 or 76% (252,400 members in 2007, or 82%) which is still the largest Christian organization in Iceland. The largest non-Christian religious organization is the Asatru Association (*Ásatrúarfélagið*) with contemporary 2,140 members (1,040 members in 2007). The Buddhist Association (*Búddistafélag Íslands*) organization has 962 members (652 members in 2007); just to name some examples indicating clear changes in the religious landscape in Iceland. People registered outside any religious organization are currently about 16,600<sup>33</sup>.

The National Church of Iceland has noticed these changes, of course, and has taken a few steps in form of some research work, advising the personnel (*Ólíkir siðir við andlát og útför*, 2001) and publishing written material (e.g. *Menningarheimar mættast*, 2001) or translated books concerned with similar issues (e.g. *Trúarbrögð og útfararsíðir*, Neegaard, 2008) as well as made some adaptations to relevant laws (*Lög um kirkjugarða, greftrun og líkbrennslu 36/1993*; *Óskir annarra trú- eða lífsskoðunarfélaga verið virtar við útför*, 2006). It is notable is, that this kind of educational material is primarily aimed at specialized sectors (e.g. hospitals, the Church).

The Gufunes churchyard in Reykjavík may be considered as an example for observable “multiculturalism” in burial culture. Here there are a few marked off burial plots for different religions- but still, it is a “shared death space” under the control of the National Church as discussed in chapter 4 and 4.3.

As seen in chapter 3.4, 4 and 4.2, people are interested in changes regarding burial matters in Iceland but not necessarily out of spiritual or philosophical ideas but practical ones, that is to say, that financial concerns are weighing quite heavily and here and there considerations about nature are voiced. On the other hand, thoughts about different religions in this context, are hardly to find in public discourse but here would be empirical research useful to clarify the general thought on changes in burial matters within the population and minority groups in Iceland.

In the spring 2013, Ingólfur Júlíusson (journalistic photographer and musician) lost his fight with leukemia. Many people knew about his illness due to some public

---

<sup>33</sup> All numbers are based on statistics of the *Hagstofa Íslands* (Statistics Iceland).

charity events and projects, organized to support his family during his forlorn fight. Ingólfur Júlíusson was a member of the *Ásatrúarfélagið* and his funeral ceremony was conducted publically in *Harpa*, the biggest concert and conference hall available. According to Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, high priest of the *Ásatrúarfélagið*, this was an epoch-making event for Icelandic burial culture (speech at the *Allsherjafing*, 02. November, 2013). For the first time ever since pre-Christian period, slightly more than a thousand years ago, a funeral based on “the old way” was performed; grandiose and publicly.



Figure 4: The burial plot of the *Ásatrúarfélagið* within shared death space at Gufunes churchyard.

#### **4.4 Openness and closeness: the individual and the community**

In Aries' book “The hour of our death” (1977/1981), a somewhat gradual transformation of attitude towards death is noticed in Western societies; that is to say, death as a communal event has transformed into an “invisible”, private, even institutionalized or medical matter (Mellor, 1993, p. 20). Needless to say, in smaller communities these changes may not appear in the same manner as in more crowded areas; that is to say, a smaller society may experience an overall stronger consensus and social cohesion. However, parallel to this development, the need for showing and communicating bereavement within a community, i.e. seeking the community's

moral support, is 'no longer required'. Collective reactions to death are rather exceptional and mainly reserved for particular death events (i.e. public figures, particularly tragic crimes or accidents, death events experienced as threatening to the community as a whole- e.g. hate crimes). As Phillip A Mellor (1993) puts it:

The more diverse are the approaches to death in modern societies, the more difficult it becomes to contain it within a communally-accepted framework, and thus limit the existential anxiety it potentially offers to the individual. The apparent cultural diversity and flexibility in modern approaches to death can therefore be explained as being consistent with the sequestration of death from public space into the realm of the personal. (Mellor, 1993, p. 19)

Glimpsing over to Great Britain, the following consideration might point to *emotional isolation* and certain “closeness” towards death. Since death is no longer a communal issue in most high modern societies in the sense as it was in earlier times, the individual (often) has to cope with death in its own way to recover *ontological security* (Anthony Giddens, 1990/1991, as cited in Mellor, 1993, p. 12), i.e. having a sense of order and continuity in day-to-day life in relation to people’s experiences through their own actions as well as what acts upon them (e.g. the experience of a death of beloved ones) and that, according to Mellor, “depends upon persons being able to find meaning in their lives (Mellor, 1993, p. 12) . Katherine Butler, an Irish woman living in London, shares her death experience regarding the loss of her mother in an article, and by comparing Irish and British funeral culture, reaches the following conclusion:

Perhaps there is a connection with it also being a society where even a natural, peaceful death is a medical event which few ever witness, and where the old and chronically ill are hidden away. Would attitudes to aging be more compassionate and attitudes to life itself more fulfilling if funerals were not regarded as necessarily ghastly and mortality as something that happens only to other, less lucky people? (Butler, 2013)

Butler experienced a clear difference between the English attitude towards death and the Irish. According to her, the latter is much more community oriented, while in London, where she lives and works, she noticed that death is rather a very private matter and handled in a fairly reserved way: “[t]he Irish are not known for being any

less emotionally repressed than their British neighbors but they do death very well“. She wonders how many of her colleges may have lost somebody without her knowing about it. It confuses her because in her own culture “passing on the news quickly, is considered an important part of the response to death and this is not just in villages and in small towns”. Butler also concludes that keeping quiet about death, as it seems to be common in the UK, could cause considerable psychological problems and instead of seeking help within the family or close friends, the person affected eventually pays quite an amount for professional help. Geoffrey Gorer (1965) already noticed a certain 'British attitude' towards death; also Tony Walter confirms:

Within Britain, I concluded that approaches to mourning in the UK can be broadly divided into English versus Celtic, the one placing great importance on emotional privacy, the other on communal ritual [...]. Certainly many people have identified the English funerals and bereavement as ghastly because of the English stiff upper lip. (Walter, 1993, p. 279)<sup>34</sup>

Palgi and Abramovitch (1984) write that, referring to Gorer (1976), death and the process of decay has become something disgusting, drawing on a similar view to birth giving and copulation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result “the British people are today without adequate guidance as how to treat death and bereavement...” and Gorer further suggests a possible connection between the lack of social supported death work (and even the denial of mourning) and psychological pressure expressed through for instance “rising vandalism and irrational preoccupation with fear of death” (Palgi & Abramovitch, 1984, pp. 412-413). A very similar idea Katherine Butler proposed based on her own experience and Mellor, too, points out that “increasing behavioral insecurity and psychological confusion” within this context, thereby referring to Gehlen (1957) and Zjiderweld (1986), here, however, based on the

---

<sup>34</sup> In her article Katherine Butler confirms Walters’ observation: “In Ireland, it is considered unsupportive not to show up if you know either the dead person or their family. This has much more to do with community, and perhaps psychology, than with faith. Many Irish people are now Catholics in name only but the rituals that have evolved endure and are, in my view, worth hanging on to. Such rituals equip people with perhaps formulaic but extremely useful things to say and ways in which to act. They don't need to ask, "Is there anything I can do?" – they know what the routine is so they just do it.” (Butler, 2013)



“deconstruction of tradition” (Mellor, 1993, p. 20).

After all, 'ghastly' might not necessarily be the right word of choice in regards to Icelandic thought about funerals but a particular heaviness and melancholy certainly describes the general attitude towards death as seen for instance in the discussion about the Icelandic documentary “Dauðans alvara” above. Though, some idea of disgust regarding the corpse does shine through in the article from 1931 mentioned above in chapter 4.2, and in the reaction to the word *líknarmeðferð* and *líkn*, chapter 3.2. The documentary either shows the general image of death and how the dead are treated, or at least how it is *expected* to be done. Further, empirical research is needed to provide a more precise picture.

The Icelandic movie “Málmhaus” (2013, Ragnar Bragason) is about a young girl who witnesses the death of her beloved brother caused by a tragic accident. She has great difficulties moving on after this dreadful event, as do the parents. Even though they live under the same roof, everybody is somehow isolated with their grief for years. The girl finds some sort of comfort through the music her brother loved so much but still, she is behaving antisocially, rejecting and rebelliously (again, psychological stress caused by *emotional isolation* in regards to mourning practices just as Butler, Gorer and others suggest). It is not unlikely that this film reflects a particular problem in Iceland for urban legends do indeed incorporate issues and anxieties that occupy society in one way or another (Koven, 2008, pp. 83 ff.). This 'closeness' is by no means a sign of grief being absent; this kind of mourning is just different. People have to find their own way.

Elín M. Hallgrímsdóttir (1996, p. 63) points to a research conducted in 1995 that shows this kind of isolation during the mourning period in Iceland: two women said that short after the loss of their beloved ones; many showed sympathy at first but after the funeral only very few had contacted them and they felt very isolated in their grief. They felt great need to talk about their lost spouses (p. 63). People in general seem to avoid talking about the dead with the bereaved and possibly others too; but why? One answer might lie in insecurity, meaning people just don't know what to do or say and on the other hand, Palgi and Abramovich, mention a “natural reluctance to intrude in people's lives at times of anguish” (1984, p. 385) but is that *natural* or is it cultural shaped? Just by reconsidering Katherine Butler's article and the findings of Gorer, this reluctance cannot be seen as natural but it is culturally specific shaped.

A notable point regarding the lack of intensive mourning work in Iceland is made

by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon (1996). In 19th century Iceland (and most likely from much earlier times on), death was constantly around due to disease and the harsh living conditions in general. Work had to continue and the seasonal schedule kept; therefore people could not afford to show their sorrow openly (Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, 1996, p. 139) but at the same time, a possible connection can be made to Protestant thought (the Icelandic national church is evangelic-Lutheran) which, according to Max Weber emphasizes hard work and “the valuation of the fulfillment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume” (Weber, 1930/2005, p. 40). It is quite conceivable that there was no space for 'emotional fuss'.

#### 4.5 Icelandic tradition

The tendency to hold on to traditions for the sake of these traditions (especially when they are experienced and promoted as “typical Icelandic”<sup>35</sup>) may play some role in the cause for the lack of alternative burial options. The concept of “tradition” appears sometimes to have a magical effect in Iceland, which is possibly a distance echo of the independence movement and enhancing of national identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Especially concerning national or ethnic identity per se, traditions are often experienced as being under threat and have to be protected or kept alive. According to Valdimar Tr. Hafsteinsson, the idea of cultural heritage is something that an imagined society can refer to, and demand - as long as the members acknowledge that matter as a cultural heritage (Valdimar Tr. Hafsteinsson, 2006, p. 323). This particular image of cultural heritage can be formed and influenced through targeted discourse; forging thereby a certain awareness of history and ethnicity to which the members of the society tune their general posture (p. 322); in short traditions have a cultural meaning. In this context, it could be useful to consider the concept of *cultural hegemony*. The term *hegemony* was introduced by Antonio Gramsci (1971) and is

---

<sup>35</sup> Many 'authentic' traditions arose or were particularly emphasized or revived in the 19th century in the struggle for independence and national identity. Other conventions are seen as 'deep rooted' traditions in Icelandic culture because they were intentionally promoted as such but are in fact very young (e.g. agents of the National Church visit preschool children).

understood as “any kind of domination” whereby Gramsci specifies that further: “the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12; as cited in Lewellen, 2003, p. 182).

Considering Iceland as a rather small and still relatively homogenous society, together with its history and fight for national identity and independence, it is comprehensible that change occurs slowly, especially in matters touching such “traditional” issues as burial culture.

However, a general 'closeness' towards death and mourning and the understanding of the contemporary burial practice as tradition, may have a say in the lack of interest in public discourse in these matters. By considering the chapter above about the benefits of tradition especially during a crises such as death, a certain 'closeness' towards changes regarding traditions may appear as reasonable reaction at first. Yet, including the fact that society is becoming demographically increasingly diverse, this may lead to conflict. Traditions of minority groups collide at some point with the dominant culture and that could be equally true for persons with individual persuasion and worldview.

## **5 Conclusions**

Death has different meanings for different groups of people as well as for individuals. According to that diversity of meaning and experience, cultural and individual response varies enormously; as for example in treating the body in particular ways, respecting taboos, performing rituals, mourning work, place and form of burial, and so on. In general, every society has certain expectations about what a “proper” burial looks like- an ideology that can be justified through history and is in general in consensus with the majority, that is to say, society agrees on how certain rituals should be performed. This, on the other hand can turn out to be an issue when a number of different cultural values collide within one society.

In what form the response to death appears, is significant in various aspects for the survivors; in the end, they have to regenerate the social and individual imbalance caused by death. An essential aspect in the process of recovery is remembrance. For once life has left the biological body, a replacement has to be found to store and communicate memory and identity and keep the social body of the deceased

present. This can be achieved through material culture, i.e. objects of memory as well as incorporating memory into actions- whether through public (or private) ritual or by transforming mundane actions into sacred ones, or through spaces (marked or not visible marked) which are charged with shared memory.

Funerals in general are seen as the final farewell to the deceased, whereby the life and memory of the departed is celebrated and displayed. One aspect of funerals is generally neglected: the funeral as a part of the recovering process and a tool for coping with the event 'death' as such. Therefore, funerals are special opportunities for forging counter-memories to the experience of the event 'death'. On the grounds of increasing cultural diversity, as well as the general moving away from communal framework regarding death, individuals have to find their own way to reach *ontological security* (chapter 4.4) once again after being confronted with the event of loss. Therefore limitations in form of laws and regulations can take away that opportunity, or at least to a certain extent.

In Iceland, the National Church has kept its dominant position in burial matters despite the fact of a changing demography in Iceland's society and therefore reserves a significant branch for itself. It is conceivable that additionally through allowing some different cultural and religious exceptions within a shared death space (e.g. Gufunes churchyard) and facilities, the Christian ideal is affirmed as the norm and therefore the National Church maintains its dominant position; thereby simultaneously conducting the justification of its status within the organization of society with all the benefits from certain advantages from the state.

How much limitations regarding minority ethnic and religious groups in this context are, is open to question and needs further research. General change within society is reflected in Iceland's burial culture in a limited way, such as for example the introduction of the reusable coffin, the increasing popularity of cremation and of course the Gufunes churchyard with its clear separated burial plots for different religions.

Another aspect of shaping and maintaining a certain ideal, and at the same time limiting alternative options, is achieved through the offers in funeral industry. By entering the free market economy, funeral industry underlies its rules of the market and behaves as any other business. In the whole picture, more and more business branches get involved. In Iceland there are still near no alternative burial options, such as for example natural burial, possibly because of the lack of demand (partly

caused by factors mentioned above) and limiting laws. It is for example not possible to run a marked off natural burial ground which is operating absolutely independent from any churchyard and the National Church.

Also, a certain discourse and use of symbolism keeps a particular ideology in burial matters present (as seen in the documentary “Dauðans alvara”). Additionally, the general tendency to hold on to “traditions” and a natural aversion to novelties and change (Jacksson, 2005/2008), is not supporting change as well.

There are voices within the Icelandic society calling for changes in funeral matters but these voices are not loud enough, or are being ignored, or the issue is not significant enough to enter the general discourse. There might also be some interconnection between the “invisibility” of death and dying in general that prevents a public discussion concerning death and burial. Therefore, a certain 'closeness' regarding both, death as such, inasmuch as that people in general avoid talking about it (e.g. out of fear, disgust, denial, ect.), but also 'closeness' in respect of maintaining some idea of “tradition” – an ideal “typical Icelandic funeral” in the light of globalization as well.

However, an opening up for a wider range of burial options can only enrich the burial landscape and provide a better use of funeral rites in respect to the process of recovery, whether based on religious beliefs, cultural grounds or other persuasion. Total freedom in burial practice in Iceland is doubtless an utopist idea but in the end, it is about finding a compromise with as much freedom as possible with the most conceivable benefit to the survivors in respect to coping with their loss; rather than pursue a certain political agenda or the pursuit of profit.

## 6 Bibliography

### 6.1 Pimary sources

Ariés, P. (1983). *The hour of our death*. Aylesbury: Penguin Books.

Baldursdóttir, Á. (Writer). (2013). *Dauðans alvara*.

Bloch, M., & Perry, J. (1982). *Death and the regeneration of life* (M. Bloch & J. Perry Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bragason, R. (Writer). (2013). *Málmhaus*

Butler, K. (2013, 03. september). At that hour: dealing with death, *The Independent*. Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/at-that-hour-dealing-with-death-8795121.html>

Eldjárn, K. (1956). *Kuml og haugfé: úr heiðnum sið á Íslandi*. Reykjavík: Bókaútgáfan Norðri

Foucault, M. (1997). Of other spaces: utopias and heterotopias. In N. Leach (Ed.), *Rethinking architecture: a reader in cultural theory* (pp. 330-336). New York: Routledge.

Frumvarp til laga um breyting á lögum um kirkjugarða, greftrun og líkbrennslu, nr. 36/1993, með síðari breytingum, 585 (2007-2008).

Frumvarp til laga um breyting á lögum um kirkjugarða, greftrun og líkbrennslu, nr. 36/1993, með síðari breytingum., 38 (2008-2009).

Fólk hræðist orðið „líknarmeðferð“. (2013, 12. october). *RÚV*. Retrieved from <http://ruv.is/frett/folk-hraedist-ordid-%E2%80%9Eliknarmedferd%E2%80%9C>

Gardur.is. Upplýsingar. Retrieved from <http://gardur.is/upplýsingar.php>

Harðardóttir, J. G. (2012). „Hefðbundin“ útför, *Morgunblaðið*. Retrieved from [http://asatru.is/hefdbundin\\_utfor](http://asatru.is/hefdbundin_utfor)

Hastrup, K. (1990). *Island of anthropology: studies in past and present Iceland*. Odense: Odense University Press.

Hertz, R. (1960). *Death and the right hand*. Illinois: The Free Press Glencoe.

Jackson, M. (2008). *Existential Anthropology: events, exigencies and effects*. Oxford: Berghan Books.

Jónasson, J. (1961). *Íslenzkir Þjóðhættir*. Reykjavík: Ísafoldarprentsmiðja h.f.

- Ketilsdóttir, A. A. (2014, 28. february). Margnóta líkkista helmingi ódýrari. *Mbl.is*. Retrieved from <https://www.dv.is/neytendur/2014/2/28/odyrari-utfor-D73ASN/>
- Kreppan kemur við syrgjendur. (2008, 26. november). Retrieved from <http://www.dv.is/consumer/2008/11/26/kreppan-kemur-vid-syrgjendur/>
- Kristinsdóttir, S. (2005, 27. october). Kristin trú er ekki á undanhaldi samkvæmt nýrri skoðanakönnun IMG Gallup. Retrieved from <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1046049/>
- Kári æfur út í RÚV: Ætlar að ganga af okkur dauðum og grafa okkur utan garðs. (2013, 09. november). *Pressan*. Retrieved from <http://eyjan.pressan.is/frettir/2013/11/09/kari-aefur-ut-i-ruv-aetlar-ad-ganga-af-okkur-daudum-og-grafa-okkur-utan-gards/>
- Lög um kirkjugarða, greftrun og líkbrennslu, 36 (1993).
- Lög um stöðu, stjórn og starfshætti þjóðkirkjunnar, 78 (1997).
- Mikill verðmunur á einstaka þjónustuliðum. (2000, 29. january). *Mbl.is*. Retrieved from <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/515906/>
- Mótmælir nýju gjaldi á útfarir. (2012, 05. june/ 2013, 23. august). *RÚV*. Retrieved from <http://www.ruv.is/frett/motmaela-nyju-gjaldi-a-utfarir-0>
- National Funeral Directors Association. Green funerals. Retrieved from <http://nfda.org/green-funerals.html>
- Priebke jarðsettur í fangelsisgrafreit. (2013, 07. november). *RÚV*. Retrieved from <http://www.ruv.is/frett/priebke-jardsettur-i-fangelsisgrafreit>
- Pétursson, P. (2005, 12. november). Að játa en trúa ekki, *Mbl.is*. Retrieved from <http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/1049132/>
- Ragnarsson, Ó. (2012, 21. december 2012). Nýjir greftrunarsiðir? Retrieved from <http://omarragnarsson.blog.is/blog/omarragnarsson/entry/1273829/>
- Reynisson, S. Ö. (2013, 21. february). Sligandi útfararkostnaður hefur stórhækkað. *DV*. Retrieved from <https://www.dv.is/neytendur/2013/2/21/sligandi-utfararkostnadur-hefur-storhaekkad/>
- Statistics Iceland. Religious organizations. Retrieved from <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Religious-organizations>
- STEF-gjald af allri tónlist við jarðarfarir. (2010, 09. november). *Mbl.is*. Retrieved from [http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2010/11/09/stef\\_gjald\\_af\\_allri\\_tonlist\\_vid\\_jarda\\_rfarir/](http://www.mbl.is/frettir/innlent/2010/11/09/stef_gjald_af_allri_tonlist_vid_jarda_rfarir/)
- Sóknarkirkjur innheimtar ólöglegt gjald. (2013, 16. june/ 23. august). *RÚV*. Retrieved from <http://www.ruv.is/frett/soknarkirkjur-innheimta-ologlegt-gjald>

Tryggingastofnun. Andlát. Retrieved from <http://www.tr.is/almenn-rettindi/andlat/>

University of Bath. Centre for death and society. Retrieved from <http://www.bath.ac.uk/cdas/>

Weber, M. (2005). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (T. Parsons, Trans.). London: Routledge.

Zyga, L. (2011, 8. march). Ecological burial involves freeze-drying, composting the corpse. Retrieved from <http://phys.org/news/2011-03-ecological-burial-involves-freeze-drying-composting.html>

Ólíkir siðir við andlát og útför. (2001, 25. march). *Mbl.is*. Retrieved from [http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/596809/?item\\_num=147&dags=2001-03-25](http://www.mbl.is/greinasafn/grein/596809/?item_num=147&dags=2001-03-25)

Óskir annarra trú- eða lífsskoðunarfélaga verið virtar við útför. (2006, 25. october). *Vísir.is*. Retrieved from <http://www.visir.is/oskir-annarra-tru--eda-lifsskodunarfelaga-verid-virtar-vid-utfor/article/200661025125>

Úlfarsson, G. Ö. (2013, 30. april). Þarf ekki að rukka kistulagningargjald, *Fréttablaðið*. Retrieved from <http://www.visir.is/tharf-ekki-ad-rukka-kistulagningargjald/article/2013704309950>

Útfarasíðir breytast. (2011). *Bautasteinn*, pp. 18-19. Retrieved from [http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn\\_2011/bautasteinn\\_2011.pdf](http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn_2011/bautasteinn_2011.pdf)

Útfarir og yfirlæti. (1931, 8. september). *Alþýðublaðið*, p. 3. Retrieved from [http://timarit.is/view\\_page\\_init.jsp?pageld=15760](http://timarit.is/view_page_init.jsp?pageld=15760)

Útfararstofa Íslands. Athafnir. Retrieved from [www.urforin.is/athafnir](http://www.urforin.is/athafnir)

Þorkelds dóttir, Ó. (2013, 18. october). Gríðarlegur munur á útfararkostnaði ungbarna, *Vísir.is*. Retrieved from <http://www.visir.is/gridarlegur-munur-a-utfararkostnadi-ungbarna/article/2013131018925>

Þurrfrýsing á Íslandi?. (2011). *Bautasteinn*, p. 22. Retrieved from [http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn\\_2011/bautasteinn\\_2011.pdf](http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn_2011/bautasteinn_2011.pdf)

## 6.2 Secondary sources

Björnsson, B. T. (2006). Þjóðreisn og þjóðhvöt í kirkjugarði. *Bautasteinn*, p. 8. Retrieved from [http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn\\_2006.pdf](http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn_2006.pdf)

Gardela, L. (2013). The dangerous dead? Rethinking Viking-Age deviant burials. In R. Simek (Ed.), *Conversions: looking for ideological change in the early Middle Ages* (Vol. 23, pp. 99-136). Vienna: Fassbaender.



- Georgsson, Á. Ó. (2006). Hvenær sem kallið kemur: útfararsíði fyrr en nú. *Bautasteinn*, pp. 12-15. Retrieved from [http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn\\_2006.pdf](http://www.kgsi.is/bautasteinn_2006.pdf)
- Hallam, E., & Hockey, J. (2001). *Death, memory and material culture*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hallgrímsdóttir, E. M. (1993). Þegar ástvinur deyr In H. Sigurðsson (Ed.), *Eitt sinn skal hver deyja* (pp. 60-66). Reykjavík: Mokka-Press.
- Iceland Still Believes in Elves and Ghosts. (2007, 24. september). *Iceland Review Online*. Retrieved from [http://www.icelandreview.com/icelandreview/daily\\_news/?cat\\_id=40764&ew\\_0\\_a\\_id=290137](http://www.icelandreview.com/icelandreview/daily_news/?cat_id=40764&ew_0_a_id=290137)
- King, B. J. (2013, 31. october). Burial rights: who owns the dead bodies, anyway?, *Cosmos and Culture: commentary on science and society*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/13.7/2013/10/31/241840354/burial-rights-who-owns-dead-bodies-anyway>
- Kristjánsdóttir, E. (1996). Hinsta hvílurúmið. In H. Sigurðsson (Ed.), *Eitt sinn skal hver deyja* (pp. 77-85). Reykjavík: Mokka-Press.
- Metcalf, P. (1981). Meaning and materialism: the ritual economy of death. *Man, New Series*, 16(4), 563-578.
- Koven, M. J. (2007). *Film, folklore and urban legends*. Washington: Scarecrow Press
- Magnússon, S. G. (1996). „Dauðinn er lækur, en lífið er strá.“ Líf og dauði á níttjándu öld. In H. Sigurðsson (Ed.), *Eitt sinn skal hver deyja* (pp. 128-142). Reykjavík: Mokka-Press.
- Metcalf, P., & Huntington, R. (1999). *Celebrations of death: the anthropology of mortuary ritual*. United States: Cambridge University Press.
- Meyers, K. (2013, 21. may). Cremation: the hot burial trend. Retrieved from <http://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/2013/05/21/cremation-the-hot-burial-trend/>
- Mellor, Ph. A. (1993). Death in high modernity: the contemporary presence and absence of death (D. Clark Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/ The Social Review.
- Nilsson Stutz, L. (2010). The way we bury our dead. Reflections on mortuary ritual, community and identity at the time of the Mesolithic-Neolithic transition. *Documenta Praehistorica XXXVII*, 37, 33-42.
- Palgi, P., & Abramovitch, H. (1984). Death: a cross-cultural perspective. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, 385-417.

- Parker Pearson, M. (1982). Mortuary practices, society and ideology: an ethnoarcheological study. In I. Hodder (Ed.), *Symbolic and structural archeology* (pp. 99- 113). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pálsson, G. (1982). *Samfélagsfræði: samhengi félagslegra fyrirbæra*. Reykjavík: Mál og menning.
- Reimers, E. (1999). Death and identity: graves and funerals as cultural communication. *Mortality*, 4(2), 147-166.
- Statistics Iceland. from <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Religious-organizations>
- Toelken, B. (1996). *The dynamics of folklore*. Logan: Utah State University Press.
- Vigilant, L. G. (2003). *Symbolic immortality and social theory: the relevance of an underutilized concept* (C. D. Bryant Ed.). Newbury Park: Sage.
- Walter, T. (1993). *The sociology of death: theory, culture, practice* (D. Clark Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/ The Social Review.
- Árnason, V. (1996). Vitundin um dauðann. In H. Sigurðsson (Ed.), *Eitt sinn skal hver deyja* (pp. 53-59). Reykjavík: Mokka-Press.
- Ólafsdóttir, S. (2009). *Hólavallagarður, gamli kirkjugarðurinn við Suðurgötu*. (Master), Háskólinn á Bifröst, Reykjavík. Retrieved from [http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/4431/12927/1/solveig\\_olafsdottir\\_fixed.pdf](http://skemman.is/stream/get/1946/4431/12927/1/solveig_olafsdottir_fixed.pdf)

### 6.3 Graphics

Figure 1: Photographer: Silke Schurack

Figure 2: Photographer: Silke Schurack

Figure 3: Photographer: Silke Schurack

Figure 4: Photographer: Silke Schurack