

Funeral industry overlooks Hispanic culture, Baylor study finds

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WACO—Death research in the United States mostly overlooks bereavement customs of those who are not Anglo-Protestants, a Baylor University researcher believes. She hopes to correct that, beginning with a study of Catholic Latino communities, who often hold overnight wakes and present food to the deceased.

Segregated death industry

Candi Cann, who teaches courses on death and dying at Baylor, took a group of her students in 2015 to a Latino funeral home in a Central Texas city where nearly 30 percent of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics.

“My students—nearly all Anglo—were fascinated,” said Cann, assistant professor in Baylor’s Honors College.

While the Latino population is burgeoning, “this world was entirely foreign to them,” she said. “The idea of eating and serving food at a wake was one that my students found not only foreign, but repelling, and they couldn’t imagine eating in the presence of the dead.

“I realized that these practices reflect a central part of Latina/o identity formation, yet seem invisible to many, because the death industry in the United States remains so segregated.”

Change on the way

But change is coming, Cann predicted. Hispanics are the country's largest minority—about 17 percent of the population—and expected to double to 106 million residents in 2050, according to the Census Bureau. Funeral directors are seeing a need to expand their services, she said.

Cann's study, "Contemporary Death Practices in the Catholic Latina/o Community," is published in the journal *Thanatos*. At the request of the Funeral Service Academy, a national education organization for funeral directors and embalmers, she has prepared training modules about Latino grieving and funeral practices.

Overnight wake

The hallmark of the Latino funeral is the extended wake, which often lasts overnight, Cann said. Mourners bring their children with them, and it is common for families to set up card tables so they can play dominoes and other games and exchange stories about the deceased loved one. Flowers and candles are placed near the body when the visitation begins.

"The wake is not a quiet affair, but often loud and emotional," Cann said. "Generally, from the time the deceased is brought to the funeral home, the person is not left on his or her own."

Family members often help with washing, dressing and applying makeup to the deceased after they are embalmed, she said.

That is in marked contrast to most modern Anglo practices, in which the body usually is taken from the hospital, or much less frequently, the home, and then prepared by the funeral home, not to be seen again until visitation, Cann said.

Sitting up with the dead

In her article, Cann cited a researcher's previous study quoting two Cuban-

American women in Florida—a mother and grandmother—about spending the entire night at a Cuban mortuary, setting up recliners and drinking espresso.

“It’s not like (Anglo) Americans. ... Once the body is there, we would stay with that body until it is buried,” one woman said. When mourners were hungry, “we would go in shifts—like Grandma was going anywhere! But we couldn’t leave her alone. Somebody was always there to keep her company.”

Funeral food

While families sit and eat in the presence of their loved ones, even within the Latino segment of the United States population, practices vary, Cann said.

Catered services for Mexican-American funerals are likely to include enchiladas, burritos, tacos, rice and beans. At Columbian visitations, empanadas and plantains are common.

In funeral homes that are not equipped to offer catering, food will be shared as offerings to the deceased, while others gather for meals at the church after services or at the deceased’s home after burial, Cann said.

Customs include Protestant Latinos

Many U.S. Latinos are Roman Catholic, but even among Protestant Latinos, Catholicism has a cultural influence, Cann said. Each Latin American country tends to favor certain saints, martyrs and icons, and immigrants carry those preferences into the United States and to subsequent generations, Cann said.

Statues and prayer cards with the pictures of these saints often are placed in the room of the deceased, as well as at funerals and anniversary Mass.

The cards often display a picture of the deceased, with birth and death dates, and a written prayer of intercession.

“These cards are portable and meaningful memorials,” Cann said. “They operate as a sort of souvenir—evidence of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased and an assertion of the right of the bereaved to grieve.”

But everyday items, as well as religious ones, play a role in Latino funerals, she said. Many family members and friends also purchase caskets that come with memory drawers or insert panels to hold photos, letters, jewelry and keepsakes.

“The casket, candles, pictures, making a plate and offering it to the dead and saying a prayer. ... Those things recognize the deceased person’s role in your life and continuing your bond. But they are also a way of saying, ‘We’ll continue without you,’” Cann said.

Need for ethnic awareness

In her research, Cann found that while the need for ethnic funeral services is growing, many funeral homes are not familiar with other cultures.

“The industry wants to serve this community, but it doesn’t know how,” she said.

Establishment of ethnic funeral homes with bilingual staff is on the rise, and some traditional funeral homes actively are recruiting bilingual staff, Cann said. Some also are making adjustments so catered food can be served during wakes.

Cann views her research is introductory.

“There is much more work to be done,” she said. “Death practices in the contemporary United States are one of the few remaining places in which

ethnic identity is emphasized and even solidified.

“I wanted to at least attempt to counter the myth of death in the United States as uniform and analogous.”