

# Cultural Perspectives on End-of-Life Planning: Traditions, Taboos, and Practical Considerations

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The United States is an ever-changing cultural landscape. As a nation of immigrants, we are a complex patchwork of individuals from diverse backgrounds, each bringing distinct ethnic, cultural and religious beliefs. Estate planning attorneys must recognize and respect these differences, as they are deeply embedded in our social structure. To be culturally competent attorneys, we must view each client as a unique individual whose background may influence decisions regarding estate distribution, end-of-life planning and burial arrangements.

## Cultural Influences on End-of-Life Planning

End-of-life planning involves some of the most intimate decisions a person may make, often shaped by religious and cultural beliefs. Attorneys cannot assume a client's preferences regarding burial, cremation or body donation. Additionally, alternative burial practices such as green burials or organic reduction are gaining popularity, though they may be restricted in certain states or prohibited by specific cultural or religious traditions. Despite the discomfort these discussions may bring, engaging in frank and honest conversations with clients is essential to ensure their final wishes are honored.

## Religious and Cultural Funeral Practices

### Islam

Islamic law emphasizes minimizing harm. When making end-of-life medical decisions, Muslims are encouraged to pursue treatments that preserve life while avoiding those that may cause unnecessary suffering. As death approaches, a Muslim may lie on their right side, facing Mecca. Upon passing, the deceased's eyes and mouth are closed, and family members recite a final prayer.

Islamic funeral customs require that the body be washed, shrouded, and buried as soon as possible. Embalming is generally prohibited, and cremation is strictly forbidden. The deceased is placed on their right side in the grave, facing Mecca, often with a layer of rocks covering the gravesite to prevent direct contact with the soil.

### Judaism

Judaism also emphasizes the sanctity of life and minimizing suffering. Aggressive medical intervention is encouraged only when it does not prolong suffering. After death, mourners traditionally tear their clothing as a sign of grief.

The body is cleansed, groomed, and wrapped in a simple white shroud. A designated "shomer" (guardian) remains with the body until burial, which should occur within 24 hours. Traditional Jewish burials use plain wooden caskets with no metal fastenings. Embalming and cremation are discouraged, and mourners may take part in filling the grave with soil as a final act

of respect.

## **Buddhism**

Buddhist traditions focus on facilitating a peaceful transition to the next life. Burning incense during a person's final moments may be customary. After death, the body is often left undisturbed for a period, typically up to a week, to allow the soul to transition peacefully.

Buddhist funeral customs vary by region, but cremation is the preferred method of disposition, as it is believed to free the soul. In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a high-altitude burial, where the body is offered to vultures, is customary, though this practice is not permitted in the United States.

## **Catholicism**

Catholics receive three sacraments at the end of life: anointing of the sick, confession, and Holy Communion. These sacraments provide spiritual comfort, forgiveness, and preparation for the afterlife. The anointing of the sick involves a priest blessing the individual with sacred oil, confession allows for absolution, and Holy Communion serves as spiritual nourishment.

A Catholic funeral typically includes a vigil, a Funeral Mass and a Rite of Committal. While cremation is allowed, traditional burial is preferred, and cremated remains must be buried rather than scattered or kept at home.

## **Eastern Orthodox Christianity**

Eastern Orthodox Christians emphasize sacraments at the end of life. A priest administers the final confession and Holy Communion, and individuals are encouraged to avoid medications that may cloud their consciousness during these sacred moments.

After death, the family washes and clothes the body in the presence of a priest. Embalming is optional. A wake is held before the funeral, and hymns, such as the Trisagion, are sung during the procession from the funeral home to the church and then to the cemetery. Cremation is not permitted, as the body is considered sacred even after the soul has departed.

## **Chinese Funeral Customs**

Chinese funerals are deeply rooted in tradition, with customs varying based on geography and religious beliefs. However, certain elements remain consistent across different communities.

Before the funeral, families often consult a feng shui master to determine an auspicious date and time for the funeral and burial. In some cases, the master may also select the grave's location, which is traditionally on a hillside but never beneath a tree.

The deceased is typically dressed in white, though individuals who lived to be 80 or older may be clothed in colorful garments to celebrate the long life. Family members customarily hold a three-day visitation period, during which they spend time with their loved ones before the funeral. When the casket is sealed, all family members turn their backs to avoid the belief that their souls could be trapped inside. Similarly, they avert their gaze when the casket is lowered into the grave.

Incense is often burned throughout the funeral service and at the gravesite as a sign of respect. Families may also burn spirit money, known as "joss paper," to ensure their loved one's comfort in the afterlife. While cremation is permitted, it is customary for family members to witness their loved one being placed in the cremation chamber.

## **Hindu Funeral Customs**

Hindu funeral rites are deeply intertwined with the belief in reincarnation. Since the physical body is no longer needed after death, cremation is considered the most effective way to release the soul and facilitate its journey toward rebirth.

Before cremation, the body undergoes a sacred cleansing ritual, during which it is washed with ghee, honey, milk, and yogurt. The head is anointed with oil, the hands are placed in a prayer position, and the big toes are tied together. The deceased is traditionally wrapped in a white sheet, adorned with a garland of flowers and rice balls. A lamp is placed near the head as part of the ritual.

Hindu tradition emphasizes a swift cremation, usually within 24 hours of death. Until then, the body remains at home, allowing family members to pay their respects and participate in final rites.

## **Unique Cultural Funeral Practices**

### **South Korea: Burial Beads**

In 2000, South Korea enacted a law requiring the removal of remains from burial sites after 60 years due to limited space. As an alternative, many South Koreans now transform their loved ones' cremated remains into colorful beads, which are displayed in homes. This practice has also gained popularity among South Koreans who live in the United States.

### **Ghana: Fantasy Coffins**

In Ghana, elaborate, custom-made coffins celebrate the deceased's personality, profession or passions. These artistic coffins, crafted in shapes such as animals, airplanes, or everyday objects, serve as tributes and works of art, ensuring a vibrant and meaningful send-off for loved ones.

## **Conclusion**

These are only a short list of the different cultural and religious traditions influencing end-of-life planning. Estate planning professionals must be sensitive to these diverse perspectives to ensure that the clients' wishes are properly honored. By fostering open discussions and respecting cultural practices, attorneys can provide thoughtful, personalized guidance that aligns with their clients' values, beliefs and traditions.