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Quilts in the Final Rite of Passage A Multicultural Study

Carol Williams Gebel

This study surveys the function of quilts in ceremonial rites and customs related to death, the final rite of passage. It examines quilts in the context of several cultures both historic and contemporary, including European-American, Polynesian, Native American, African, and some Asian groups.

Quilts have been used when "laying out" the deceased; for wrapping the body of the deceased, and for lining the coffin. Some permanently remain in or on the grave, while others have temporary use in funeral or commemorative services. Other quilts are made from funeral fabrics.

In some cultures the role of quilts in death rites is well established, while in others this use of quilts is a personal choice, rather than a societally sanctioned act.

The human life cycle is similar throughout all cultures of the world. Each individual is born, experiences various life events, such as attainment of maturity, marriage, the birth of children, personal accomplishments, and in many instances, old age. The final act of each individual life is death. Most people first experience the death of family members and friends, before they, themselves, die. The death of a loved one awakens emotions that are strong, and grief often is intense.

When confronted with death, people's experience of grief is universal and natural. Death creates a disruption in relationships, in the structure of families, and in the functioning of communities. This rupture needs to be acknowledged in order for the

survivors to continue productively with their lives. Relatives and friends participate in special ceremonies that emphasize the significance of this event. These rites may be religious or secular.

In many areas of the world, quilts and related textiles have been used during the ceremonies surrounding death. In some instances this inclusion of quilts is personal and idiosyncratic. Other cultures have more fully incorporated quilted, appliqued, or pieced textiles into the social and ceremonial activities that accompany death.

Although the use of quilts in funerals may often appear to be simply functional, their significance goes beyond pure function. Quilts have strong emotional values and waken deep emotional responses in people. Their use in ceremonial rituals is a result of these associations.

There are two major reasons why quilts carry emotional connotations. First, quilts are associated with the bed, which itself has a major role in life. In some instances, when furnishings are few or space is limited, the bed is the primary piece of household furniture. The presence of the bed and its furnishings acquires significance because it is in the bed that the major events of life occur: conception, birth, consummation of marriage, and death.

Quilts are not quickly made. Quilters invest time and thought in selecting the design, the colors, the fabrics, and in stitching the thousands of decorative stitches on their quilts. Thus quilts become a statement of both the makers' aesthetic values and their emotional ties to those persons who will use the quilts.

This paper emphasizes the role of quilts in the ceremonies and customs that surround death itself. These events include wakes, funerals, burials, and memorial services. The countries included in this study represent cultures in Europe, North America, Asia, Africa, and Polynesia. For some of these, there exists a large body of documentation; for others, much less is available. For some countries, in which there has not been a long or strong quilting tradition, the ritual use of pieced or applique textiles is examined.

Death as a Rite of Passage

Death is the last of a series of significant events in the lives of all people throughout the world. Many of these events represent a passage from one condition or station of life to another. Often a ceremony celebrates or in some way marks this transition. The anthropologist Arnold van Gennep terms these ceremonially marked transitions "rites of passage."

Rites of passage have elements of separation from one's former status, a transitional period, and final incorporation into one's new status. Burning the possessions or the home of the deceased separates the latter from the living. Self-inflicted wounds, temporary seclusion and dietary rules, and the cessation of all usual social activities may separate mourners from non-mourners.¹ Other means of separation, as demonstrated in this paper, include the use of special mourning clothing, jewelry, and bedding, including quilts.

Both mourners and the deceased may go through transitional phases. The period of mourning may be a fixed length and may involve prescribed activities as among the Ostyak of Salekhard where the female relatives make and care for a doll in the image of the deceased until the end of the mourning period. The deceased themselves may remain in the presence of the living for a short while as in a wake.²

Rites of incorporation serve to reintegrate the mourners into society and the deceased into the realm beyond the world they knew during life. Mourners often share a meal together after a funeral or when mourning is lifted. The Luiseno Indians of California have a ceremonial rite that separates the deceased from earth and sends them into the sky.³

Grief

Although grief is a universal emotion, historically its expression has been assisted or suppressed. Anglo-American society, during the nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twen-

tieth, publicly acknowledged and expressed mourning with elaborate funerals and the wearing of mourning clothes and jewelry, all examples of rites of passage.

In Victorian England, mourners wore black mourning clothes for two years, followed by half mourning colors for six more months. Poems and stories that sentimentalized death at a young age, embroidered mourning pictures, and jewelry made of the hair of the deceased were all popular during this era.⁴

In the United States mourning art reached a peak of popularity with the creation of needlework pictures following the death of President George Washington in 1799. Embroidered mourning art traditionally featured weeping willow trees, urns, and weeping mourners standing beside a tomb or gravestone.⁵ Such art became so stylish between 1790 and 1840 that embroidered mourning pieces were worked for reasons of fashion alone.⁶

Other cultures, such as Native American ones, have ritualized their expressions of grief. Since many Native Americans feared the spirits of the dead, customs invoked upon a death often included quick burials, removal of villages from the site where death occurred, and extravagant, even violent, displays of grief.⁷ Among the Kiowa Apache close relatives of the deceased wailed, tore their clothing, lacerated their bodies, and even cut off a finger at the joint.⁸

While the customs of the Victorians and the Kiowa Apache may seem sentimentalized or overwrought to us today, they did provide needed outlets for grief. The elaborate ceremonies, rituals, and prescribed behaviors of the past performed a service for the bereaved. They allowed expressions of sorrow and provided a series of events, known and followed by all. These actions supplied a sense of support and comfort to the mourners, and they permitted open, even public, handling of one's grief. According to Dr. Elizabeth Harper Neeld, "These rituals directed the thinking and actions of a person who had experienced loss so that mourning could be completed."⁹

In today's Anglo-American society, the bereaved are often expected to recover in a relatively short period of time and to "bear up well," keeping their sorrow private. The rituals which

express grief when a death has occurred have been reduced. Elaborate funerals occur less frequently. They are often replaced with simpler services, sometimes memorial services, without the physical presence of the deceased. The wearing of mourning colors has all but disappeared except for the funeral itself.

Quilts and Mourning

In the past quilters gave expression to their grief by making and using identifiable mourning quilts. The English had a custom, as far back as the seventeenth century, of replacing the usual bed hangings and bed coverings after a death with mourning ones, made of black materials. Since these items were expensive, owners often loaned them to relatives and friends at the appropriate time.¹⁰ This custom has also been documented in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Canada.¹¹ In the United States black and white quilts as well as those in shades of gray served as mourning quilts, particularly after 1850. These quilts often had a black border (see figure 1).¹²

Quiltmaking has proven to be invaluable in the grief recovery process. Countless quilters can testify to the emotional release the process of quilting gave them when a loved family member or a dear friend died. A survey of the Pine Tree Quilters Guild in Maine ranked the therapeutic value of quilting as the second most important reason for quilting.¹³ Detailed accounts of the benefits of quilting during mourning have been made by Gail Andrews Trechsel and by Carolyn H. Krone and Dr. Thomas M. Horner.¹⁴

In some instances, the first quilt made by a person is a mourning quilt. Sometimes it is not until after a quilt has been started or even completed that a quilter realizes that making the quilt had been a part of the grief recovery process.

Recently the medical community has begun to explore the value of quiltmaking at a time of sorrow. Both the Evergreen Cancer Center in Kirkland, Washington, and the Topeka Memorial Hospital, in Topeka, Kansas, have initiated projects in-

Figure 1. Black and white mourning quilt, 76" x 88", made for a widow in Arkansas, c. 1870. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of Arkansas Territorial Restoration, Little Rock, Arkansas.

volving quilting and cancer patients.¹⁵ A quilt made by a mother whose daughter died in an 1890 fire at Bucknell College is on loan to a hospice. There it helps dying patients cope with their feelings about their impending death.¹⁶

Quilts "Lay Out" the Deceased

Quilts are used to shelter the body of the deceased and to keep it warm before burial. The benefit to the deceased is actually minimal. It is the mourners who derive significant emotional comfort from this act, which is an expression of their concern and regard for the deceased.

The primary purpose of quilts is to provide warmth. For humans, physical warmth is necessary for life, and warmth has been imbued with the emotional characteristics of love and caring. A person who demonstrates love and concern for others is described as having a "warm" personality. Covering the deceased with a quilt is a demonstration of the love and respect the mourners feel.

After death, the body of the deceased is often prepared and presented to mourners for their expressions of farewell. On several continents, quilts have performed a central role in this initial mourning period. The Irish, for example, traditionally used white coverlets to lay out the dead.¹⁷ Akemi Kanabe related that in 1960 when her mother died in Japan, neighbors, friends, and family came to bid her a final farewell. During this period the body of Kanabe's mother, dressed in a sleeping kimono, rested on a thick, specially purchased quilt bed or "futon."¹⁸ Although quilts are not a traditional item in Africa, Africans use textiles in many ceremonies. In Ghana mourners place "kente," a finely woven cotton fabric, across the feet of the deceased, who rests upon a bed prior to burial.¹⁹

In the United States relatives and friends have occasionally used quilts to lay out the dead. Opal Lee Taylor commented upon a custom of the past in Arkansas, stating, "In those days . . . caskets were made at home while the deceased was laid out on a cooling board and covered with a quilt . . ." ²⁰ More recently, Jack C. Smith of Georgia made a quilt for Elma, a critically ill friend. After Elma's death, her family used the quilt to drape her body.²¹

Occasionally in the past, Americans of European ancestry made post-mortem photographs. A daguerreotype of a dead

child, c. 1845, which belongs to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, shows a deceased child lying under a quilt.²² The Strong Museum in Rochester, New York has one of the most extensive post-mortem photograph collections in the world. Lynne Poirier-Wilson, Vice President of Collections, reported that the museum has four photographs showing the deceased with a quilt. In one the quilt serves as a backdrop.²³

Native Americans have also used quilts to lay out the deceased. During the quilt documentation project conducted in Oklahoma, researchers learned that in the past the Chickasaw population often made a quilt for a young child. The maker or other relative stored the quilt until needed to keep that person's body "warm" after death and before burial. Serena Guy Carter of Ardmore made a Log Cabin quilt for this purpose before the birth of her son Charles in 1868. Millie McLish of Bethel made a Goose in the Pond quilt in 1907 in anticipation of her grandson Henry Pratt's future death. Both Mrs. Carter and Mrs. McLish were Chickasaw.²⁴

In the Cook Islands, as in other parts of Polynesia, quilts play an important part in the rituals of life, including those surrounding death. Rebecca A. Stephenson, an anthropology professor at the University of Guam, reported that relatives usually place the deceased in his or her bed and cover the body with at least one quilt for a brief mourning period before burial.²⁵

Quilts Wrap the Deceased for Burial and Line Coffins

Wrapping the body of the deceased with a quilt and lining the coffin with one are additional methods of indicating one's love and respect. Often a quilt used for laying out later serves as a burial wrap. Quilts and other textiles function as wrappings for the body or as items the deceased will need in the afterlife.

The use of textiles in a burial is a very old custom. A quilted textile found in the tomb of a Scythian chieftain and dated 100 B.C. to 200 A.D. included cross-hatching and contour quilting. The Academy of Sciences in Russia has identified it as a "funerary

carpet."²⁶ It may have wrapped the deceased or otherwise cushioned the body.

As recently as the 1980s, the Senufo of the northern Ivory Coast have used a white cloth, woven in strips, to wrap the body of the deceased for burial.²⁷ For status, older women among the Okpella of Nigeria wear a shawl called an omada. After the woman's death, her shawl becomes a burial shroud, wrapping her body.²⁸

During the American Overland Trail experience, many travellers died from disease or accident en route to the West. Catherine Haun recorded that a Canadian woman, Mrs. Lamore, died suddenly after childbirth. Fellow travelers wrapped her and her child, who had lived only one hour, together in a bed comforter and buried them in a coffinless grave, with no marker.²⁹ Mrs. D. M. Burbank reported sewing the body of a cholera victim into a sheet and a quilt in preparation for a coffinless burial.³⁰ When cholera-related deaths occurred in the wagon train of the Robbins families, they buried three young sisters together on a mattress and covered them with quilts and blankets.³¹ Doubtless, many more quilts were pressed into service under similar circumstances. This use of quilts may have cushioned the pain felt by survivors.

Even after they were settled, pioneers continued to wrap bodies for burial in quilts. Sarah Leggett of Kountze, Texas, made nine identical black and white quilts for use in the future to wrap the bodies of her children before placement in their caskets. At least one, not used for that purpose, has survived from the nineteenth century.³²

In the 1980s two mothers followed a similar practice. Merry Nader wrapped her stillborn child in its birth quilt.³³ Joyce a'Lora Neal made a wedding quilt for her daughter's approaching marriage but placed it in the young woman's grave after she and her fiance died in an automobile accident.³⁴

Some Native Americans have a tradition of wrapping or covering the bodies of their dead for burial. Indians of the Hopewell Culture at Mound City National Park, Ohio, buried an infant with a beaded textile covering its body.³⁵ Traditionally among

the Pawnee and other Plains tribes, bison robes wrapped men who died, thus accompanying them into their graves.³⁶

The practice continues today. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine reported that the Sioux Indians wrap the deceased in a star quilt, before placing them in their coffins. They trace the Star quilts currently made by many Native American women of the Plains to the ceremonial hide robes that bore a morning star design.³⁷

Florence Pulford related that the Assiniboine share a meal in the presence of the deceased, who lies in his coffin, wrapped in a quilt. Almira Buffalo Bone Jackson, an Assiniboine, used a quilt she had made to celebrate the birth of her great granddaughter to wrap the child's body for burial. Artie Crazy Bull, an Oglala Sioux, made a star quilt to wrap the body of her niece during the wake held for her. Brigit Fast Horse, a Fort Peck Reservation Sioux, is saving a quilt she made to wrap the body of her mother after her death.³⁸

Polynesians have used quilts to wrap the body of the deceased. Before the introduction of woven fabrics, women in Hawaii and other Polynesian islands made cloth from the bark of mulberry trees. This cloth is called "kapa" in Hawaii and "tapa" in other islands. One example of nineteenth-century kapa, probably used as a wrapping for the deceased, was found in a burial cave in the Hawaiian Islands.³⁹

After its introduction in Polynesia, cotton fabric quickly replaced tapa throughout much of the area. Polynesians had used this bark cloth, which disintegrates when it comes in contact with water, for clothing, bedding, and in ceremonial rites. They quickly accepted cotton, which survives many washings, as a substitute.

In Tahiti and other Polynesian islands, quilts, called tifaifai, have replaced tapa in ceremonies. Tifaifai are not quilted. They play an important role in funeral rites in the Cook Islands, the Austral Islands, and occasionally in the Society Islands. In the past bark cloth wrapped the deceased for burial. Presently, in traditional burial ceremonies on these islands, tifaifai wrap the deceased (see figure 2).⁴⁰

Figure 2. Example of a quilt made in Tahiti. Collection of Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City, Utah. Photograph courtesy of Museum.

Stephenson reported that tifaifai are essential to ceremonies surrounding death in the Cook Islands. The mourners place the deceased upon his or her bed, covered with a tifaifai. Soon afterward they place the deceased in a wooden coffin, again covered with tifaifai as if asleep.⁴¹ Joyce Hammond, an anthropologist at the Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington, adds that mourners may also place tifaifai under the body in the coffin.⁴²

The custom of laying a quilt inside a coffin or lining it with a

quilt occasionally occurs in North America. A North Carolina quilter remembered her early twentieth-century childhood in northwestern Arkansas. She recalled two instances in which quilts formed the lining of coffins of neighboring women.⁴³ A quilter living in the Texas-Oklahoma region during the same period described how her mother used her own quilted blue silk fabric to line the coffin of a neighbor's child.⁴⁴

In 1902 the six-year-old grandson of Martha Pettyjohn of Harrison, Arkansas, had to have an arm amputated. His family did not expect him to live. His grandmother quickly made a quilt to line his casket. The boy recovered, however, and his family preserved the quilt.⁴⁵

Anglo-Americans have begun to use quilts formally as a lining for caskets. In its specialty line the Batesville Casket Company of Batesville, Indiana, includes a coffin lined with a Double Wedding Ring quilt.⁴⁶

Although, generally, use of quilts in burials by Americans of European descent appears to be a sporadic and individual choice, some Native American tribes have thoroughly incorporated quilts into their funeral customs. Albers and Medicine reported that although many Plains Indians wrap the bodies of their deceased in quilts in preparation for burial, some Christianized Sioux prefer to lay a quilt alongside the body in its coffin.⁴⁷

Other Permanent Associations of Quilts with Graves

The custom of burying items with the deceased is ancient. Mourners included items in the graves in order to properly honor the deceased, propitiate their spirits, or to provide the deceased with useful items for the afterlife. Sometimes burial goods included the favorite items of the deceased or other items associated with their lives. Women's grave goods found in ancient burials in Central Asia and the Middle East have included sewing needles and woven cloth.⁴⁸

The Pazyryk peoples were stockraising horsemen who lived on the eastern steppes of Russia during the middle of the last

millenium B.C. Excavated burial tombs have yielded both grave goods and remarkably well-preserved individuals. Among the items archeologists retrieved from the underground tombs are wall hangings of felt, decorated with colorful felt applique.⁴⁹

Hmong women of Southeastern Asia have traditionally presented their parents and in-laws with funeral pillows and burial clothing. Women make these funeral items in a style of applique called *dah tshos dhos*, patterns that resemble mazes (see figure 3).⁵⁰

In West Africa, before and during the colonial period, skilled

Figure 3. Example of Hmong *dah tshos dhos* pattern used in burial clothing. Collection of author. Photograph by author.

artisans created applique and patchwork cloth banners for use in burial ceremonies. These funeral cloths resemble a quilt top with applique figures. In Nigeria, mourners displayed these banners on the framework of burial chambers and explained them by song during the ceremony, after which the banners were left to disintegrate.⁵¹

African slaves in the United States practiced a possibly related custom. The memoirs of Telfair Hodgson, the daughter of a plantation owner near Savannah, Georgia, relate the tradition among slaves of placing quilts and other items on graves. Some African-American communities in North Carolina and Georgia continue this custom of decorating graves. An explanation of the custom is that it assists the spirit of the deceased to rest easily by giving it the last items it has used on earth. Researcher John Michael Vlach links this continuing custom to similar ones in Africa.⁵²

As long ago as the seventeenth century, Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries living among the Huron recorded the custom among Native Americans of burying items with their dead.⁵³ The Cahuilla Indians of southern California cremated their dead. After contact with Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American cultures, the Cahuilla began to bury their dead. They included within the coffin items, such as food, clothing, and bedding, that the spirit of the dead might find useful.⁵⁴

After acquiring the knowledge of how to make quilts, the Chickasaw often placed a quilt on top of the coffin as they lowered it into the ground. The presence of the quilt on top of the coffin helped to muffle the sound of soil being placed into the grave. Followers of this procedure explain it as showing compassion for the family members of the deceased.⁵⁵

Sandra Munsey, a quilt researcher, has indicated that traditionally Hawaiians sometimes buried a quilt with its maker.⁵⁶ This practice possibly was part of a custom called "ho'omoe pu" or "put to sleep together," which involved the burial of tangible objects with the dead, either favorite items of the deceased or ones necessary in the afterlife.⁵⁷ Another reason for the burial of a quilt involves "mana," the spirit or power of its maker, which

is transferred to her quilt. If much of the maker's mana remains behind after her burial, she might be restless in the afterlife. Burying a quiltmaker's quilts with her or even burning them ensures eternal rest.⁵⁸

The tradition of burying quilts occurs in other areas of Polynesia—on Tahiti, located in the Society Islands, in the Cook Islands, and in the Austral Islands. It is part of a larger custom in which Polynesians use tifaifai in many different rites of passage. In addition to being used to layout the deceased and to cover the body in its coffin, tifaifai may cover or wrap the coffin itself and line the grave.⁵⁹ Stephenson writes, “the wooden box . . . is covered completely with one or more tivaevae [alternate spelling for tifaifai]. That's the way the wooden box is carried to the grave site, and that's the way it goes into the ground.”⁶⁰

The women of Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji in western Polynesia do not make quilts. Instead they continue to make and use bark cloth for ceremonies, including funerals.⁶¹ Tongans hang permanent decorations including tapa from poles suspended above the grave. By the 1970s fabric had started to replace the fine barkcloth formerly used.⁶²

Quilts as Temporary Ceremonial Items at Funerals

In addition to using quilts as permanent items in a burial, mourners temporarily display quilts in funerals and memorial services. Quilts may serve as palls, covering the coffin, during a funeral. Removal of the quilt occurs before burial of the coffin.

European cultures have documented the use of cloth covers for coffins. Laurann Figg, Curator of Textiles at Vesterheim, the Norwegian-American Museum in Decorah, Iowa, related that a custom existed in Norway of covering coffins with a certain type of woven coverlet. Norwegians who immigrated to the United States, however, did not continue to practice this custom, nor did they substitute quilts for the coverlets.⁶³ Schnuppe von Gwinner reported the use of geometric patchwork in the coffin shields of the Breslau guilds.⁶⁴

British quilt researcher Janet Rae has determined that mort cloths covered coffins in nineteenth-century Scotland. The Gairloch Heritage Museum in Ross-shire owns a quilt, made and used as a mort cloth. This quilt consists of white and red fabric, embroidered with Biblical phrases having to do with rest. A Kirk Session of the Free Church of Scotland made and owned the quilt, renting it out as a coffin cover.⁶⁵

The use of a quilt as a pall has occurred at least on an individual level in North America during the twentieth century. At the beginning of the century, for example, one unknown quilter made an appliqued casket cover featuring four rows of black tombstones set against a red background.⁶⁶ About mid-century a group of black quilters in Moore County, North Carolina, made a small two block quilt of appliqued tulips for use as a coffin cover on a child's casket (see figure 4).⁶⁷

In western North Carolina, Mary Willis made a string star quilt which her family used to cover her casket after her death.⁶⁸ In the same state, Louise Harper and her daughter Joyce Spoon collaborated on a quilt featuring pink embroidered flowers, which they finished in 1983. Six years later, this quilt covered Louise Harper's casket at her funeral.⁶⁹ Bobbi Finley, a California quilter, lost her father in 1992 ("more mourning - more quilts") and used one of her quilts as a pall on his casket.⁷⁰

Recently, church inventories have included quilts made as palls. St. Mark's Church in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada, has a finely quilted white quilt, decorated with gold applique and embroidery, which the parishioners use as a pall during funerals.⁷¹ Pat Gaska has made quilted vestments and altar hangings for her church in Wisconsin. Her pastor, Rev. Peter Knippel, asked that the next project be a funeral pall using the Mariner's Compass design.⁷²

Recently some Anglo-Americans have begun to use quilts as

Figure 4. Quilt, 24" x 52", made to cover a child's casket by African-American quilters in Moore County, North Carolina. Private collection. Photograph by author.



hangings at funerals. Senator Frank Church of Idaho requested that the quilt made for him by members of the Boise Peace Quilt Project be displayed when his body was lying in state at both the capital in Washington, D.C. and in Idaho.⁷³ In 1991 Dawn Wexler's father lost his battle with cancer. Since her father was a very patriotic man, Dawn made a Bow-Tie quilt in red, white, and blue to honor his memory. During the memorial service to mark the first anniversary of his death, the quilt hung in the sanctuary of the church where her father had worshipped.⁷⁴ The 1994 memorial service for Peggy Kitchen, an expert quilter, was "held against a backdrop of . . . [her] quilts."⁷⁵

On many of the islands of Polynesia, particularly the eastern ones, quilts play a primary role during rituals associated with death. Traditionally tifaifai appear at funeral ceremonies on these islands. This custom occurred as long ago as 1866 when mourners spread piecework quilts upon the floor of Our Lady of Peace Cathedral in Hawaii during the celebration of high mass commemorating the death of Spain's King Alphonso.⁷⁶

Some Polynesians who have converted to Mormonism have immigrated to the United States and settled in Utah. The traditions of making quilts and bark cloth tapa have changed among three of the four Polynesian groups living in Utah. Samoan women rarely make quilts wherever they live. In Utah women from Hawaii and the Society Islands make far fewer tifaifai than they made in those islands.⁷⁷ Tongan women in Utah have begun to make pieced quilts called monomono. Although they import bark cloth for traditional ceremonies, their tied quilts are replacing the tapa. They exchange these monomono among family and friends at funerals as well as at other ceremonies.⁷⁸

Quilts in Native American Giveaways

The Native Americans of the Plains have fully integrated quilts into their funeral and memorial services, particularly in the Giveaway. This ceremony, when it is associated with death ceremonies, can be viewed as an extension of the pre-European con-

tact custom of giving away or destroying items that had belonged to the deceased.

In the Great Lakes region, the Delawares, Menominees, Miamis, Shawnees, and Winnebagos, all exchanged gifts as an observance of death.⁷⁹ Traditional Huron funeral customs included the giving of gifts to those attending the funeral.⁸⁰

As suggested by its name, the Giveaway ceremony, currently practiced by Plains tribes, involves the distribution of items among those people attending ceremonial occasions commemorating life's events.⁸¹ When the ceremony is a funeral, mourners drape quilts over the casket and display them as hangings behind it. The Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan of Ft. Berthold Reservation in North Dakota generally hold a Giveaway at the time of the funeral. Among the most prestigious items distributed at these ceremonial rites are quilts, war bonnets, and shawls (see figure 5).⁸²

Among both the Lakota and Oglala Sioux a Giveaway accompanies the memorial service to commemorate the first anniversary of a relative's death. This ceremony has replaced the traditional Keeping of the Soul ceremony which marked the end of formal mourning. Among these Sioux the most prestigious items in a Giveaway are quilts.⁸³ Quilts are the first items given away at a Lakota ceremony.⁸⁴ Of all the quilt patterns made by these Native American women, Star quilts have the highest ranking. If a family does not have any members who can make these and other quilts, then they purchase quilts to give away.⁸⁵

Outside observers of these ceremonies have suggested several reasons for the continued and increasing popularity of Giveaways among Native Americans. Elizabeth S. Grobsmith stressed the social ties that such exchanges represent as they include families, neighbors, and friends in these acts of support.⁸⁶ Mary Jane Schneider, remarking upon the economic characteristics of Giveaways, pointed out that those who live away from the reservation return to participate in these ceremonies. They often contribute items and money earned outside the reservation.⁸⁷ Alice B. Kehoe stated that a major function of Giveaways is emphasis on Native American ethnic affiliation. She believed that the im-

portance of this ceremony increased after European contact in order to distinguish Indian culture from the introduced European-American culture.⁸⁸

Quilts Made from Textiles Used in Funerals

Some quilters have created quilts from textiles used in a funeral or memorial service. The desire to have a tangible reminder of those who are no longer present is a motive for making quilts from funeral fabrics. Memories of the deceased surface when one uses or glances at such a quilt.

Perhaps the most common are quilts composed of funeral ribbons. The making of quilts from funeral ribbons, which decorate wreaths or baskets of flowers sent to funerals, occurs in several Southern states. In North Carolina quilters usually iron and sew the ribbons together in a geometric pattern. Pearl Harris Evans, of Warren County, North Carolina, used the funeral ribbons from her brother-in-law's funeral wreaths to make a quilt top in his memory.⁸⁹ Bessie Alexander of Walker County, Alabama, made a quilt from the funeral ribbons from her mother-in-law's funeral. Although her primary reason for making the quilt was to recycle the ribbons, the quilt does have sentimental value for her.⁹⁰ From her home on Cliff Mountain near Duffield, Virginia, Eliza Bowen Minton could see the family cemetery, burial ground for five generations of Mintons. During the 1940s and 1950s, Eliza collected ribbons from these gravesites and used them to make a Hummingbird quilt.⁹¹

Some southern African-American quilters have also participated in this custom. Laura Lee of Chatham County, North Carolina, has made at least five quilts from funeral wreath ribbons, including one made from her son's funeral ribbons. She made another from the funeral ribbons of a local judge.⁹² Laura Lee's sister-in-law, Bessie Lee, has made a quilt top from funeral ribbons bought by her daughter. This quilt does not seem to have any special associations for her. Jennie Barnett has made only one quilt from funeral ribbons. She bought the ribbons specifi-




Figure 5. Quilt made by Almira Buffalo Bone Jackson, an Assiniboine. Ms. Jackson has made quilts for burials and for Giveaways. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of owner.

cally for the quilt, made in 1971, four years after her husband's death. Jennie embroidered her husband's death date on the quilt along with the date of their marriage.⁹³ In 1966 Minder Pettway Coleman, a member of the black quilting co-operative in Alabama known as the Freedom Quilting Bee, received a commission to make two Liberty Tree quilts from funeral ribbons.⁹⁴

Fabrics produced to line caskets are also incorporated into quilts. Scraps from a casket factory appear in a colorful velvet crazy quilt, made about 1900 in Illinois.⁹⁵ Ingeborg Ronjum Dahl gave her daughter a crazy quilt made from scraps leftover from coffin linings for a wedding gift.⁹⁶ Polly Taylor and her daughter Nancy Taylor Ruff placed a piece of the fabric used for the shroud of Polly's husband as well as a piece of fabric from the casket lining into their crazy quilt, naming it the Shroud Quilt.⁹⁷

Alice Latta and her daughter Mary Latta Merandy used a most unusual fabric in a Log Cabin quilt they made in Indiana between 1865 and 1866. The train carrying the body of President Abraham Lincoln stopped in Indianapolis, Indiana, for mourners to pay their last respects. After the train departed, William Latta, who had known the President, bought some of the black funeral crepe which had draped the state house on this sad occasion. He gave it to his wife and daughter, who used it to make the dark half of their log cabin quilt blocks.⁹⁸

Conclusion

The function of quilts extends beyond warmth and aesthetics. Quilts reach into the emotions and perceptions of the maker, the recipient, and the viewer. In several cultures this deeper significance of quilts leads to their use in rites of passage. Their use in the rituals of death underscores the importance accorded to them by the societies in which they flourish. Quilts may be permanently or temporarily associated with the deceased. They sometimes accompany the deceased from the time they are prepared for burial to their internment in the ground.

The use of quilts in death ceremonies varies from culture to culture. In some, such as certain Native American tribes and some Polynesian peoples, this use is widespread and firmly incorporated into the fabric of these societies. Mourners in these cultures use quilts to lay out and wrap the body in preparation for burial. They place quilts in the gravesite or otherwise display them prominently as well as present them to guests attend-

ing the ceremonies. In both these societies, the use of quilts in death rituals represents a link to an earlier use of a different item.

Before the widespread dispersal of European-Americans in their lands, Plains Indians had used buffalo robes to wrap their dead. As buffalo became scarce, textiles replaced these robes in several functions including ceremonial ones. Just as the buffalo robe had been an integral part of Plains Indian ceremonies, imbued with a high symbolic status, so is the quilt, its replacement.

Among many Polynesians, including Hawaiians, quilts have replaced bark cloth bedding in its ritual uses. This substitution of Western textiles for an indigenous product was not the result of the scarcity of the original item as was the case among Native Americans. The replacement of bark cloth by woven fabrics resulted from the observation by the Polynesians that Western-made cloth could be exposed to water without disintegrating. While all Polynesians embraced such cloth for its practical advantages, some also extended their acceptance of it to their ceremonial rites, including funerals.

Among several other cultures of non-European origin, quilt-related textiles, appliqued or pieced, have been major items in their rituals of death. In Siberia applique felt hangings adorned the walls of burial chambers of the ancient Pazyryk people. In the recent past several West African peoples displayed and interpreted ceremonial applique and pieced banners at funerals. Funeral clothing made of intricate applique patterns is common among traditional Hmong families.

At present the use of quilts in funeral rites among Anglo-American groups is individual and sporadic, rather than well integrated into these ceremonies. Significantly, the use of quilts in funerals and memorial services seems to be increasing as people search for ways to give personal meaning to age-old rites. Currently, in these ceremonies, the most popular uses of quilts among Anglo-Americans are as palls covering the coffin or as hangings displayed during ceremonies.

Relatives and friends experience deep pain and great loss when a loved one dies. The presence of a quilt during the final

rituals of farewell brings a measure of comfort to the survivors and honors the memory of those who have departed this world. Quilts and related textiles function within cultural parameters and play a role, ranging from a small, supporting one to a larger, more dominant one, in our final rite of passage.

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