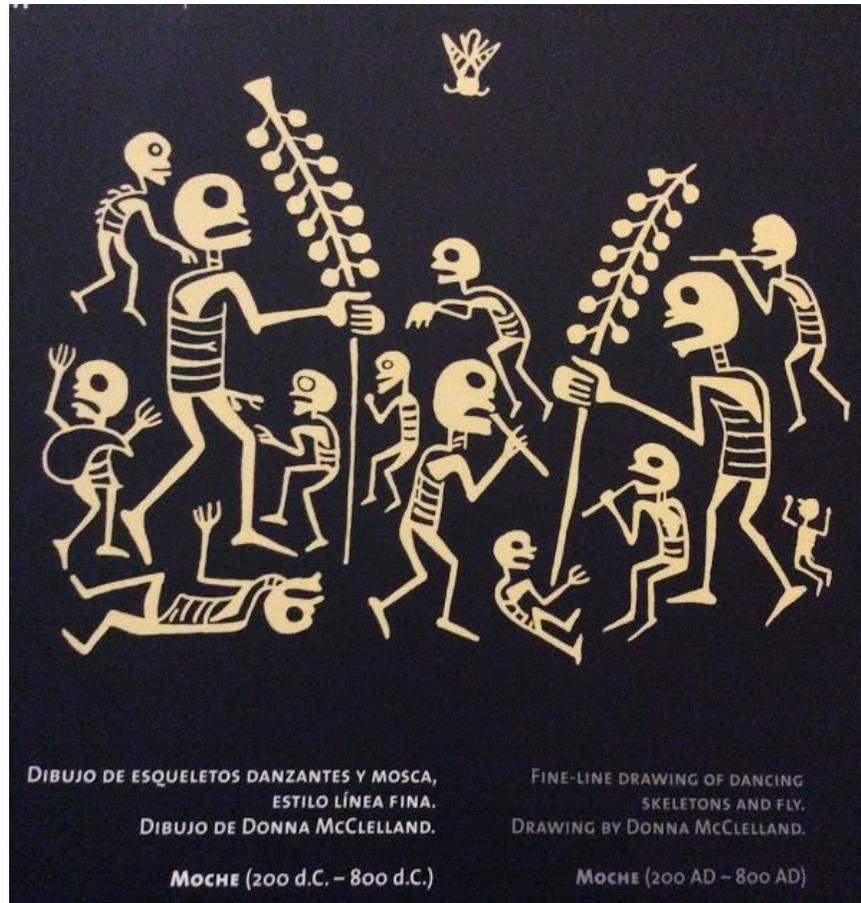


## In Grave Details:

### Burial Rituals Among Ancient and Modern Religious Cultures in Northern Peru



## Introduction

*Dust. All around me, all I see, is dust. Dust. Sand. An ancient soil that has seen the rise and fall of many nations. Of many people. A faint breeze from the west picks up the loose dirt and sand, mixing in the moisture from the misty sea and tossing my stray curls as it carries on its way. Against the sound of the waves crashing against the pier, the rush of the wind is lost, but in my mind's eye, I picture hearing the voices--the whispers, if you will--of those whose feet walked upon its sister sands long ago: "Who*

*will tell my story? In a thousand years from now...will they remember my name?"*

*(unobtrusive observation by Holly Howell, Huanchaco, Peru, June 12, 2018, 11:15 am)*

What can death teach us about life? In Peru, a country with such rich cultural heritage, perhaps the answers lie just below the surface. With intermingling roots of Moche, Chimu, and Inca, the seaside city of Huanchaco and the mountain town of Julcán rest near many great ancestral burial sites of the three most dominant civilizations in Northern Peru during the years of 100-1550 AD. When the Spanish, with their Catholic and Christian ideologies, began the colonization of this region in 1532 AD, it seemed these indigenous religious cultures and their sacred rituals were doomed for potential annihilation. While many aspects of their culture and way of life would change through the influence of Catholicism, one cannot help but wonder how much culture bled through the stringent demands of the imposing society, much of which is still prevalent today.

The aims of this cross cultural research study are threefold: a.) to assess the similarities and differences between ancient and modern religious cultures in Peru, specifically as it relates to burial ritual, b.) to identify what characteristics of ancient burial ritual are still maintained by modern cultures as preserved through cultural heritage, and c.) to ascertain the meaning attached to burial ritual for each individual culture (what beliefs are held in regard to a continued life after death).

The cultures to be studied include but are not limited to: Chimu, Moche, Inca, Catholic, Mormon (*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*), and Seventh Day

Adventists. The research will be held in the coastal city of Huanchaco and the mountain town Julcán, in La Libertad, Peru (see Figure 1).

# LA LIBERTAD, PERU

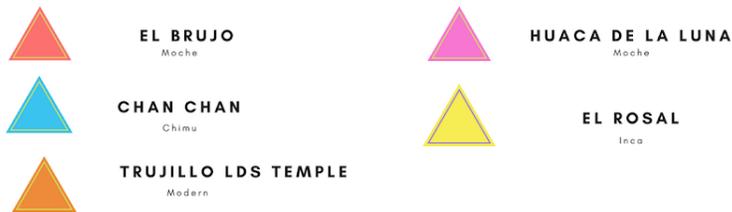


Figure 1: Places visited by the researcher with ancient and modern religious significance regarding burial rituals

## Historic Background

“Peru tiene de todo.” Near any Peruvian with a strong sense of national pride, this phrase is sure to be heard. Peru has everything. The mountains. The jungle. The coast. The desert. And a rich cultural heritage that stirs the curiosity of adventurers and archeologists alike. Large bustling cities are built amongst the ruins of once great nations, a stark contrast between one century and another.

Northern Peru was once home to three ancient civilizations, dating back to 100 AD. The Moche were the first, as their reign began in 100 AD and lasted until 800 AD. They inhabited what is now modern day Trujillo along the coast.

Following them shortly after, and seen as the second wave of the Mochica (Moche), are the Chimu (see Figure 2). From 1100 to 1550 AD, the Chimu society flourished, with their knowledge of the sea, the El Nino phenomena, and adobe architecture allowing them to hold their ground for longer than most against their eventual conquering by the Incas.

The Inca Empire reign began in 1000 AD, their conquering of the Chimu beginning in 1450 AD and ending in 1550 AD (Benson and Cook 2001) . While unique in their formal rituals and ideology, based on the research collected, these ancient religious cultures shared a similar belief in or understanding of a continued life after death.

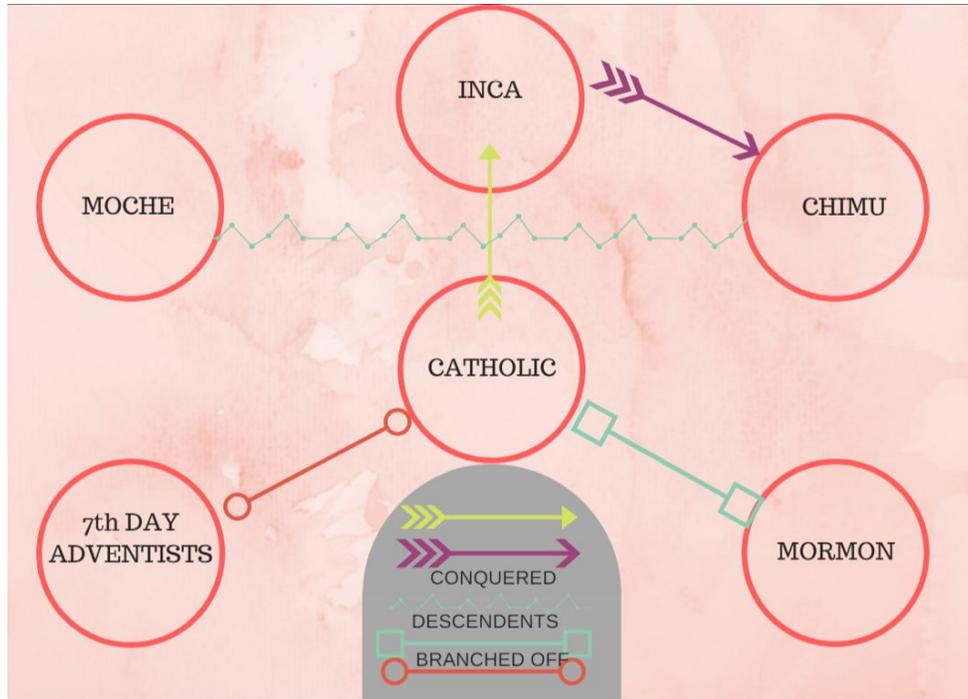


Figure 2: Progressive Timeline of the Religious Cultures observed by the researcher in Northern Peru (100 AD-Present)

## ANCIENT BURIAL RITUALS

### Moche

Of the many Moche archeological sites discovered, two in particular are worthy of note. Firstly, *Huaca de la Luna* and *Huaca del Sol*. *Huaca* means temple, holy sites that represented the religious ideology for the Moche culture. Here, much of the Moche architecture is preserved along with artisanal handywork. These Huacas were said to be the main cultural seat of the Moche civilization.

The second site is *El Brujo*, which translates to “The Witch.”, home to the remains of *Senora de Cao*. The first woman ruler discovered to date, the ruling mother that died in childbirth was found buried within the upper levels of the huaca. Her body was found wrapped in many long fabrics, bundled into the shape of a seed 181

centimeters long. Bathed in seawater and rubbed with cinnabar, a bright red mineral substance, her skin still shows the tattoos of her people, (*The Rise of the Ancestor*).

Upon the wall within the Fundación Wiese El Brujo Archaeological Complex, the description of the rituals of death within the Moche Culture is as follows:

“Within the pyramids, the graves, far from being stagnating spaces or final enclosures, were sacred passages through which the dead passed on to the world of the Ancestors. In the Mochica symbolic system the natural process of death was inverted into the primal foundation and condition for rebirth and regeneration. Death was represented as a carrier of messages of life and fertility; even after the burial ceremonies were over, the living tried to penetrate the circles of the dead. Evidence at Huaca Cao Viejo suggests that during certain funerary rituals the Mochica damaged the pyramid structures and reopened the graves in order to interact with their dead ancestors. Through food and song, death was revitalized and reinvigorated. In the spirited dance of the bones, death left fragments of vitality among the living, as well as the reflection of their itinerant passage to the Beyond,” (*Rituals of Death*).

During a tour of the archeological site, one will learn of the burial processes of the Mochica culture. Victor, tour guide turned informant, discussed with his tour the way in which a Moche royal would be buried. He explained that the body would be stripped naked, just like it came into the world. It would be covered with sacred ointments, much like the amniotic fluid within the womb, and then wrapped in a special cloth. Any ornaments or jewelry that belonged to the person were wrapped in the outer layers of the body covering. Victor continued to explain the sacredness of the burial to the Moche people. They understood that they were in a sense planting a seed, that would then grow and flourish in the other world. For them, the tombs represented channels or tunnels that connected to the spiritual world.

## Chimu

For the Chimu civilization, the now ruins of Chan Chan was then the capital city of their empire. Chimu cosmology tells the story of how their founder, *Tacaynamo*, came from the ocean in a *caballito de totora* (reed boat), landed on shore and nourished the earth, and then returned through the sky. The designs and patterns that remain etched into the adobe walls of Chan Chan echo this belief. In the principle plaza of Chan Chan is found a wide-spread courtyard with a dirt platform dead center. Parallel to this platform across the courtyard to the west is a dirt ramp leading up to an entryway into a seperate room off the plaza. According to the Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección Regional de Cultura La Libertad, "This space was considered sacred and was dedicated to ceremonial celebrations, one of which was an ancestor cult. The Senor Chimo and priest would have been located on the ramped terrace. The additional entrances to the plaza were for the other people who would have participated in the ceremony; the lower ranking priests, musicians, singers, litter bearers, and visitors. During these ceremonies the colorfulness of the attendants and the brilliantly polished metal objects would serve to glorify the Chimu gods," (*Plaza Principal*). (see Figure 3)



*Figure 3: La Plaza Principal, Chan Chan, Trujillo, Peru*

On Saturday June 9, 2018, tour guide for the day and fulltime anthropologist

Rafael Vasquez Guerrero informed the group of fellow anthro-enthusiasts about the unique rituals of post burial ancestral veneration in the Chimu culture. He explained that after one of the Chimu governors died, they would be buried surrounded by their priests, helpers, wives, and concubines. If these people were not already dead, they would sacrifice their own lives to follow their ruler to the grave. This was in respect of the ideology that they would continue living in the next life, and that their people would need to accompany them. Then, every year on the anniversary of the death, the people

would unbury the ancestor and parade them around the plaza, adorning the corpse with gifts and giving them food and drink. Then they would return the body to the ground where it would rest once again.

## **Inca**

In the mountain town of Julcan, if you travel west through the dirt roads and vast fields of potatoes and okra, you may stumble across a steep mountain slope with a large white cross looming at the top, and the words “El Rosal” painted in white along the rock face. The claim to fame to this small town, La Momia de Rosal (*The Mummy of Rosal*), is a rare diamond in the rough. Found in 1987 when Senor Marin Ramirez Zavala was trying to make a pen for his pigs, La Momia de Rosal has become a landmark destination for both curious foreigners and Peruvians alike.

After forming a cultural community (a group of local investors committed to the protection and general upkeep of La Momina), Zavala earned the right to keep the mummy on his own property. He went so far as to create a mini museum in his home where the mummy sits to this day in a lawn chair; the bones of fellow tomb-mates laid on the shelves behind him (see Figure 4). Closest to the body within the tomb was found the skulls and bones of 8 other individual bodies. Again, Zavala suggests here that they were either his servants or the people he conquered.

As guests come to his home, Zavala explains the story of how he came to find the mummy, and the archeologists’ final determinations on the mummy’s origin. About the age of 20, the mummy was found in the fetal position, wrapped in 3 distinct fabrics.

On each of the shins of the mummy's legs can be found still visible tattoos. Given these factors, it was determined that the mummy was a person of high status of Inca or pre-Inca descendance. Regarding the fetal position, Zavala explains that the belief of the ancestors was that the body would be born again. In essence, the body came into the world in the fetal position, and would leave the same way. Each year on May 1st, the mummy is taken from the museum and paraded around the streets of Julcan to pay homage to the ancestor. Given the name of Senor de Kan Kan, the mummy is revered as a saint to the people of Julcan, a reminder of their heritage and sense of identity (Rosario, 19-22).



*Figure 4: Señor de Kan Kan , El Rosal, Julcan, Peru*

## **Catholic**

Beginning in 1532 AD, Spanish conquistadors began the conquest of the Inca Empire, ending in 1572 with full upheaval of the traditional ways of life of one of the greatest empires in South America. The religious culture of the people became Christianity in the form of Catholicism. The pagan ideologies of the past in regards to

burial rituals were dismissed, making way for the modern and traditional burial means we see today.

## **Methods**

In order to gather information on the ancient, pre-Catholic cultures of Moche, Inca, and Chimu, the researcher visited and participated in tours at the following archaeological sites and museums: Chan Chan (Chimu), Huaca de la Luna (Moche), El Brujo/Senora de Cao (Moche), El Rosal/Kan Kan (Inca) (see Figure 5).

Qualitative interviews were held with at least two members of each of the modern cultures, making for a total of 6 interviews. Interviewees were asked to self-identify their ancestral roots, with the assumption that many would share a mix of all the roots. Exact DNA was not considered. Questions were open ended (*i.e. Do you identify with the following...How do you feel your ancestral roots influence your family's burial rituals? How much do you know about the burial rituals of your ancestors? Etc...*)

An unobtrusive observation of a funeral viewing was conducted by the researcher on two occasions, one in Huanchaco, and the other in Julcan. Additional observations took place in the cemeteries in effort to see what is done to respect the dead after they have been buried as a form of continued ritual. For the purpose of this research, religious culture will be defined as the beliefs or ideology of a particular group of people. Burial rituals will be defined as the events leading up to burial, burial itself,

and continued rituales after burial in veneration for the dead.



*Figure 5: El Brujo Archaeological Site, Magdalena de Cao, Peru*

### **Modern Relevance: Veneration of the Dead**

To get an idea of how modern burial rituals occur, the researcher was given the opportunity to be present at two memorial services. One memorial service was held in *El Ramanso*, a modern cemetery in Huanchaco, and the other was held in a humble home in Julcan. Comparison of the two memorial services sheds light on the potential differences of certain burial rituals within modern Peru. The first unobtrusive observation by the researcher was recorded on June 12, 2018 in Huanchaco, Peru:

*I return my eyes to the front where the marble white casket lays atop a stone table about the same length and width as the casket itself, the height at about 3 feet above the ground. The white marble is shining as the lights from the ceiling reflect back on the smooth surface. It is not pure white, as there are etches of blacks and grays enlaced within the marble. On top of the casket on the left side sit two or three bouquets of flowers, a mix of yellows, pinks, and purple. Near the base of the stone table lies another bouquet, this one significantly larger, and contains red and white flowers shrouded with garland and other greenery. The shape of the bouquet is round, like a target you would see an archer aiming for.*

*A fly buzzes around the casket, landing near what appears to be the opening of the marble lid, though the viewing was closed-casket. Like the fly, there is a buzz of communication in the air, and I observe if the people in the room are not talking to each other, they are texting or using their smartphones to communicate. I sit quietly and observe. I do not feel comfortable engaging in conversation and am more aware once again of my outsider position. There are younger girls that appear to be between the ages of 14 and 18 who have their backpacks and wander in and out of the room, checking their phone one time and grabbing a scarf for the nippy weather the next.*

*The young man from earlier begins to enter my row from the opposite side and one by one embraces the women sitting by me and greets them. He stops with the woman next to me but sends a glance of uncertainty in my direction. I am grateful when he begins his retreat out the way he had come. I sit for a moment more and then make my own retreat, standing up from the bench and walking to the back wall and around*

*the pews to the exit. I am conscious that I worry I may make some grand faux-pa for not doing something correctly like walking past the casket. Stepping out of the doors back in to the courtyard again, I glance around for Rafael, presuming he would have joined the men on the benches for a coke...*

Later, on June 21, 2018 in the Julcan Province sometime after 9:00 PM, the researcher records another observation:

*Rafael and I walk the dark streets of Julcan, heading in the general direction Rafael had been told the viewing would take place. We see a young boy listening to the modern-day pop hit song Despacito as he walks up the street towards us. Rafael calls to him, and the boy turns off his music as we approach. Rafael asks if there was a viewing being held, and the boy says yes, and gestures down the hill where the shadowy shapes of several figures can be seen. Rafael asks who has died and if it was a child. The boy says no, and that it was a Senorita, muy jovencita, and that it was his tia. Rafael asks how old she was, and the boy says 95. Rafael asks how long they will “velaban” and the boy says 3 days. Rafael seems surprised and repeats the boy's response, to which the boy says, “Si, tres dias. Hoy, manana, y sabado,” as he counts with his fingers the days. Rafael asks the boy his last name, or the last name of the deceased woman, and I remember it started with a C (see Figure 6).*

*We thank the boy and then continue on down the hill where the shadowy figures become more and more human. Rafael says that they are eating or chewing on coca leaves. We greet them with a “Buenas noches,” and pass the house where the woman lived. Inside are 4 large lamps surrounding the elevated white marble casket that*

*appear to be shaped like a flame at the top. The room is a light minty green and illuminated by the lamps, giving it a soft glow. Rafael asks if I want to go in, and I say yes. He seems a bit nervous, but says that if that is what I want, then we will go in. We return to the doorway and they tell us to go on in. We enter and there are 3 people sitting to the left of the door. The first gentleman wears a sombrero and I notice his eyes are glistening slightly. Next to him is an older woman wearing a blue poncho and another sweater underneath, and the man farthest left is younger, maybe in his late 40s, and wears a baseball cap.*

*Rafael enters and greets them, going one by one and touching them on their right shoulder with his left arm, and they return the gesture by placing their right arm on his outstretched one. I repeat the process as best as I can, though with the woman, I stumble and think perhaps the greeting is the regular, customary side cheek kiss, so the interaction appeared awkward. I follow Rafael as he approached the casket and watch as he touches the white stone box with the fingertips of his right hand, and then reaches down to pick up a red cup with the stems of 3 flowers sticking out, the petals soaking in some form of liquid. He takes the flowers out by the stems and shakes them over top of the casket as if it were a magic wand and he was casting a spell, willing the sleeping beauty to awake once more. Then he turns and hands the cup to me, gesturing that I should do the same. I repeat the process, noting that though the casket is open, a glass pane separates the woman's face and body from the outside air, much like a window.*

*I place the flower cup on top of the prayer altar at the foot of the casket and move to stand by Rafael. He moves slightly forward, removing the cup from where I had*

*placed it and placing it below. We stand for a few moments in silence, and then Rafael asks the people in the room when the woman had passed away. They say early this morning. He asks how long the viewing will go until they bury her, and they say 3 days. He asks the age again, and they say 80 this time. He asks when her burial will be held, and they say 2:00 pm on Saturday. Rafael explains that I am from another country and wanted to see how things were done here. They nod and say "Esta bien."*

*They invite us to sit down and Rafael says just for a bit. The casket is supported by metal saw horses, one in the back, and one in the front. 3 large flower arrangements stand behind the casket and to the right side. Rafael says that they are called coronas, and that the outer edges which are big silver metal petals are called lagrimas, or tears. Behind the coronas and the casket is a large burnt orange curtain draped against the wall, becoming the backdrop for the entire scene.*

*I notice 3 beer bottles at the base of the prayer altar supporting 3 burning candles. I ask Rafael and he says it doesn't mean much, that there could be more candles, but perhaps we could think of them as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. He says that outside the men are eating coca leaves, and will stuff them into one side of their cheek, like a chipmunk with a nut, and chew on them. He says it is a ritual, and in a sense allows them to accompany the deceased spirit to the other world. We sit a while longer, and I see that the prayer altar has a painting of Jesus Christ on it. Rafael says that He, too, accompanies the spirit to the other world.*

*Rafael asks what church she belongs to, and they say a Christian church in Otusco, a neighboring town. 3 more people enter, 2 of which shake the petals over the*

*casket and then go great the others already seated. I tell Rafael I am ready to leave and we bid farewell to the 3 originals, Rafael asking permission again for us to see the burial. They say we can. As we walk back, Rafael tells me more about the coca leaves... (unobtrusive observation by Holly Howell, June 21, 2018, 9:10 pm).*



*(Figure 6) Cemetario de Julcan, Julcan, Peru*

Despite the slight difference in portrayal of these two viewings, modern burial rituals usually consist of preparing the body for burial, attending a viewing, and then a graveside service. In the case of the Huanchaco viewing, family members could attend the cremation ceremony instead. Upon conducting interviews with individuals in Julcan who were practicing Seventh Day Adventists and individuals in Huanchaco who were practicing Catholics, it became clear that regardless of the religion, the burial processes remained similar with little variation. The differences lay in the continued rituals after death.

For Catholics in Peru, *Dia de los Difuntos*, or Day of the Departed, is practiced as a time to pay homage to their deceased loved ones on November 1st and 2nd. Bringing the favorite foods and beverages of their loved ones' graves the night of the 1st, some believe that their ancestors will come back to life that night and join them in the feast and festivities, (Santucci 2011).

The Seventh Day Adventists, having converted from Catholicism, do not participate in these festivities. When someone dies, they do not hold a mass as would the Catholic church in reverence for the deceased person, but instead get together to sing songs and continue to teach the gospel to the living. They do not participate in the chewing of the coca leaves, but believe that the deceased person is merely experiencing a profound sleep, and that they will arise in the resurrection when Jesus Christ comes again.

Similarly, the teachings of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormonism, portray a belief in a resurrection of the dead at the coming of Jesus Christ

again to the earth. Their graves are not, however, marked with a cross as are the other two aforementioned religions. Within Mormon temples, work for the dead ancestors of the members are done in the form of proxy ordinances under the belief that ancestors who have not been taught about the gospel will have the opportunity to be thus taught in the spirit world.

### **Discussions and Conclusions**

The initial research question sought by the researcher was to discover what ancient burial rituals, if any, had been maintained by modern culture. It became apparent through interviews that while some individuals were able to identify their ancestral roots, they identified most with the current religious burial practices of the day. They maintain no religious connection to the ancestral cults of the past, and therefore did not participate in the ancient burial rituals. However, while the ancient burial rituals have been left in the past, one commonality maintained between both ancient and modern religions is a belief in a life after death.

The Moche saw graves as channels to another world. The Chimu priests would follow their ruler to the grave in order to accompany them into the next life. The dead of the Inca were buried in the fetal position so they could be born again. Catholic ancestors are prepared their favorite meals on November 1st when they “come back and visit.” Seventh Day Adventists preach of the deep sleep their loved ones experience until they awake in the resurrection. Mormon temples offer opportunities for deceased family members to learn and accept the gospel while they await the hoped for resurrection as well. Perhaps the belief in a life after death gives those with religious

beliefs a greater sense of purpose in life--a hope that they really are immortal beings living a mortal experience, and will not cease to exist but continue on living. Perhaps that is what death can teach us about life.

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