Toward the end of 2019, people in the city of Wuhan, China, started to fall ill in large numbers, affected by a respiratory disease we all soon came to know as COVID-19. Caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, the illness spread quickly around the world, and in March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic—a disease that was global in scope. In the United States, states and cities began to take measures to prevent the spread of the virus, shutting down public venues, requiring social distancing and masks, as the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) promoted national guidelines based on epidemiological investigation.

As museums began to recognize the enormity of the crisis, they began to implement programs to document the pandemic moment for the future. One of the earliest was the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, which started to make a collection there of pandemic-related material culture (Wainwright 2020).

The Field Museum also joined the effort and created a small task-force within the Science and Education Division to establish a collection of material culture that reflected the social and cultural responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In part, this effort was spurred by the curiosity that there was virtually no representation of the material culture of previous pandemics, such as the 1918 influenza pandemic. In part, it was also part of a broader conversation in museums about future directions for collecting and representing practices (cf. Thorner 2022; Rotenberg and Wali 2014). By the early summer of 2020, it became clear that the pandemic was unfolding in tandem with other social and cultural events that represented significant shifts in the public manifestation of underlying tensions created by rising inequality (cf. Caduff 2020; Wahlberg, Burke, and Manderson 2021). The task force—social scientists from the Keller Science Action Center and the Negauene Integrated Research Center (including scientific affiliates), together with anthropology collections staff—determined that the Field Museum collection should include documentation of the broader social circumstances.

Additionally, because scientific staff were working in venues across the world, the collection could reflect a global perspective on the pandemic. As of May 2022, the collection of objects numbers over 100 and includes: masks, visual art, song and poetry, educational materials, plant medicines, digital media, and more. The collection also includes over 60 interviews with cultural producers and community members. Our team is working with community partners in the Chicago, northwest Amazon, and south Philippines regions to identify creative cultural responses that give meaning to widespread suffering, and to support efforts to repair social well-being. From movements for racial, gender, medical, and environmental justice, to reflections on how to communicate with neighbors and strangers about the things that matter most, the stories and materials collected here demonstrate that even our most challenging moments invite us to connect and remake our world anew.

To find out more about the collection, please see the website: https://www.pandemic-collection.fieldmuseum.org.

One object in the current collection, displayed in the exhibition, encapsulates several themes emerging from the collection and ethnographic documentation. This is a textile made by Andrea Martinez, a life-long Chicagana, and donated to the museum in 2021. Ms. Martinez is a neighbor of a Field Museum staff member, who happened to see the textile hanging from the fence in front of the house. It is a cotton fabric banner with hand-stitched letters cut out from other fabric scraps to spell out “Thank You Essential Workers.” Ms. Martinez kindly donated the piece to the museum when she was contacted by the staff member. Subsequently, she agreed to be interviewed virtually (see Horton 2021 for an interesting perspective on doing remote ethnography during the pandemic) and narrated the story of the banner. She had been furloughed from her job and, with little to do, decided to sew the banner as her contribution to helping neighbors and family, some of whom were continuing to work. The banner stayed on the fence for several months, was photographed and shared on social media. Ms. Martinez was a self-taught seamstress, had a sewing machine, had saved fabric scraps, and obtained the blue cotton cloth for the banner from a neighborhood Facebook group set up as a barter site. The forced absence from her job inspired the creative response of making the banner. As stated in the interview, she “felt bad” that she couldn’t do anything, that she wasn’t “doing her part.” Making the banner and hanging it connected her to her working relatives and friends. She also did a lot of baking and taking care of others. During the pandemic, she and her husband invited a close friend who lived alone to stay with them.

Ms. Martinez’s account of her experience of the pandemic was similar to others we heard during ethnographic interviews. There were frustrations because plans had to be changed (her wedding was cancelled and instead became a small ceremony in her family’s yard), but also the forging of closer connections to neighbors. Neighbors shared resources and, as the strict lockdowns faded, convened in their yards for shared meals. The experience of time also changed. To replace the routine of work, Ms. Martinez created a “to do” list every day that provided structure and prevented her from feeling idle. She brought a Kindle” and read more than she had in years. Sewing also occupied her time. Ms. Martinez and her husband wanted to spend more time on their front porch so they could chat with neighbors and passers-by so they purchased outdoor
Use of advanced non-destructive visualization techniques has greatly facilitated investigation of prehistoric human skeletons, leading to notable advances in the study of causes of death and how ancient people dealt with death itself (see chapters 4 and 6 in this volume). Although classical X-rays have long been used to examine skeletal specimens, notably permitting more detailed examination of dentitions, the restriction to two dimensions limits their utility. The advent of CT scanners and three-dimensional reconstructions based on the information recorded, initially developed for medical diagnostics and subsequently applied to archaeological specimens, has literally transformed the study of preserved human remains and, with that, of human corporeality. The non-invasive nature of these techniques has been a particular advantage for renewed investigation of mummies. In this case, much can be learned about the procedures involved in natural or contrived mumification of human remains. Furthermore, much useful information can be extracted from the three-dimensional reconstructions obtained. In addition to permitting non-invasive inference of sex, age at death, and pathological conditions from the skeleton, such reconstructions yield additional information on non-skeletal features, such as preserved hair, wrappings, inclusion of artifacts, and the construction of a sarcophagus.

Mention of sarcophagus construction brings us to the issue of burial and associated funeral rites, as described
in other contributions in this book—undoubtedly a unique feature of human societies. They directly indicate that the death of an individual is a recognizable event that evokes strong responses from fellow members of a social group. Such recognition suggests, in turn, that individuals have become aware that they themselves are mortal and will die at some future time. As far as we know, such awareness of death is restricted to humans (see contribution by Martin et al. in this volume), although some primates occasionally show attachment to dead individuals. For instance, for chimpanzees and certain monkeys there have been sporadic reports of a mother carrying the body of a dead infant around for a while—usually just a few days—before abandoning it. As infant chimpanzees and monkeys can actively cling to their mothers from birth onward, carriage by a mother after death indicates her continued active attachment. However, nothing even vaguely similar to burial has been observed in any extant species other than *Homo sapiens*.

Archaeological evidence for human burial (interment) has become increasingly abundant since settled communities associated with domestication of plants and animals began to appear around 12,000 years ago (Gurven and Kaplan 2007). Indeed, over that period skeletal remains derived from archaeological sites have provided some of the most direct information that is available regarding past human life-histories, especially during prehistoric times. Deliberate burial accompanied by ritual is clearly evident over those ten millennia, although it is best documented after the end of the Neolithic era, starting at about 5000 years ago. Graves are often specially marked, notably with small and/or large stones, and bodies are often positioned in a special way. For instance, the legs are frequently bent, with the knees close to the chest in the well-known “fetal position,” and the arms may be specially arranged. Moreover, recognizable grave goods such as stone tools or seashells and red ocher (the earliest documented natural earth pigment, often associated with burials) may be found on or near a skeleton. As a rule, a grave contains only one individual, but occasionally two or more individuals are buried together. In rare cases, for instance, an adult female skeleton is found buried with the fragile skeletal remains of a late-term or newborn baby, probably indicating the death of both during childbirth. The question that arises in this context is to what extent practices of burial among early groups were conditioned to a specific way of perceiving the physicality of the body, its progressive deterioration and aging, and its subsequent decay.

Given that burial practices are universal among human societies today, it is a reasonable inference that they are deeply rooted in our lineage. However, evidence older than 12,000 years is sparse. As far as *Homo sapiens* is concerned the earliest known potential examples are from the sites of Qafzeh and Skuhl in Israel, dated at about 100,000 years ago. At Qafzeh, two skeletons were found together in a single apparent burial—one from an individual in late adolescence and one from a young child. A more recent example is the skeleton of a human child found at the site of Taramsa 1 in Egypt, dated at around 55,000 years ago. The child’s body was found in a sitting posture, with the legs and arms seemingly positioned specially. Several stone blades and flakes were found near the skeleton, but it is unclear whether they were intentionally deposited grave goods. More recently still, in a grave at the site of Nazlet Khater—also in Egypt and dated as about 30,000 years old—the body had evidently been placed on its back, with the knees bent, one arm resting on the pelvis and the other extended lengthwise, suggesting that a sense of orientartion and positionality of the body was already developed. A stone axe had been left in the grave close to the individual’s head.

Humans shared a common ancestor with Neanderthals (our closest relatives in the hominid evolutionary tree) somewhere between 500,000 and a million years ago. So it is of particular interest to know whether Neanderthals also practiced deliberate burial (see Martin et al. in this volume, and also Monsó 2022). It has often been claimed that this was indeed the case, a prime example being a skeleton found in Kebbara Cave, Israel, and dated as about 60,000 years old. Several features indicated that deliberate burial was involved. The skeleton was located in a shallow pit that showed signs of excavation and the body had been positioned on its back, pressed against the sides of the pit. The preserved bones of the fairly complete skeleton were still in their articulated positions and showed no signs of disturbance, indicating that the pit had been covered with vegetation and/or hides. Several Neanderthal skeletons discovered in a cluster of apparent graves in a cave in Shanidar in Iraq, dated at about 70,000 years old, provided additional indications of deliberate burial. One of the graves contained pollen from flowers that occur on a nearby mountain range, indicating carriage from some distance away.

Several other cases of apparent Neanderthal burials have been reported from Eurasia. Indeed, the relatively frequent discovery of fairly complete skeletons in anatomically appropriate configurations has been taken as an indication that protection by intentional burial had been provided. Examples of such burials are La Chapelle-aux-Saints, La Ferrassie, and Regourdou in France, and Teshik-Tash in Uzbekistan. Documentation of apparent burials began in 1908 with the renowned discovery of a skeleton in a cave in La Chapelle-aux-Saints (southwestern France), dated at around 50,000 years ago. The best-preserved Neanderthal skeleton ever
found was subsequently discovered at the French site of La Ferrassie, for which an approximate age of 40,000–70,000 years ago has been determined. Here, too, the bones of the skeleton were still in their articulated positions and it was concluded that all of the bodies at La Ferrassie had been intentionally buried.

It must be noted that all reports of deliberate burial at Neanderthal sites have been challenged, so it is still uncertain whether our sister species did indeed engage in this practice. Furthermore, the earliest proposed evidence for Neanderthal burials dates back only 70,000 years. This leaves a considerable gap lasting hundreds of thousands of years between the common ancestor of Neanderthals and modern humans and the earliest evidence for burials in either lineage. So, if late Neanderthals did actually bury the dead, we do not know whether this practice developed independently in the two sister lineages or whether it was already present at the common ancestral stage. Whatever the case may be, this leaves us with many intriguing questions about the origins of awareness of death and notions of an afterlife, as well as how perceptions of our own corporeality and our hope to avoid its progressive degeneration played a role in the emergence of an early funerary behavior. Aging is, ultimately, part of the natural process of life, of mammals and other animals, but the contradictory reactions and particular responses that it evokes in humans are perhaps what make us truly unique as species.

References


Soul and Vital Force: Vibrant Life Matters and Mortuary Arts in Africana Religions and Beyond

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Abstract: Religious devotees all over the world pray for long and healthy life, one hopefully filled with prosperity and purpose. However, the search for immortality is not a universal quest of humankind. In African and African Diaspora religious communities, few rituals aim to prolong life indefinitely, as this would disrupt the cosmic flow of new and returning souls journeying to earth. Instead, African-derived communities emphasize the quality of a vibrant and well-balanced life, one lived with integrity and intention to fulfill the destiny of the soul(s). This thematic essay highlights core principles of longevity, livity, and the vibrancy of life within Black Atlantic religions. These insights ultimately reveal how life’s vital force is sustained through balance, ritual, and the fortification of souls and divine energies. Case studies explore other religious traditions with similar characteristics in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

Resumen: Los devotos religiosos de todo el mundo oran por una vida prolongada y saludable, llena de prosperidad y propósito. Sin embargo, la búsqueda de la inmortalidad no es una búsqueda universal de la humanidad. En las comunidades religiosas africanas y de la diáspora africana, pocos rituales tienen como objetivo prolongar la vida indefinidamente, pues esto interrumpiría el flujo cósmico de las nuevas almas y de aquellas almas viajeras que retornan a la tierra. Más bien, las comunidades de origen africano enfatizan la calidad de una “vida vibrante” y bien equilibrada, vivida con integridad, y con una intención de cumplir aquel destino del alma. Este ensayo destaca los principios fundamentales de la longevidad, la vitalidad, y el dinamismo de la vida dentro de las religiones del Atlántico Negro. Estas perspectivas, finalmente, revelan cómo la fuerza vital de la vida se sostiene a través del equilibrio, el ritual, y la fortificación de las almas y su energía divina. Los artículos que este ensayo contiene exploran otras tradiciones religiosas con características similares en América Latina, África y Asia.

Death as Initiation

Crouched comfortably before a black-and-white tombstone, the Haitian hwa (spirit) Gede Nibo balances on his heels in the cemetery and casts a knowing glance toward the viewer. While the spirit Bawon Samdi is officially regarded as Haiti’s lord of the cemetery in the Vodou pantheon, all divinities hailing from the Gede and Bawon spiritual families reside between their spiritual home of Afrik-Ginen (an African realm of ancestors and spirits) and the liminal realm of the graveyard (Figures 3.1–3.4). Such is the case for Gede Nibo, a renowned healer and elder in the Gede family. A wide-brimmed purple hat with a tapered green ribbon dons the spirit’s head, and against the backdrop of his full black beard, a curved tobacco pipe emerges from his lips. Ever the dapper dresser, Gede (Guede in French) sports a pressed white dress shirt with purple cufflinks, and a polka-dotted handkerchief peeking out from his breast pocket matches the pattern of his purple pantaloons. A diagonally striped tie incorporates all three of his primary colors—white, black, and purple—symbolizing his dominion over the various stages of life, death, and rebirth.

The tombstone that is often represented behind Gede Nibo in many drapo flags features a prominent black cross with white diamonds and an inverted heart in the very center, both emblems from the Haitian Vodou system of divination cards. While the cross is most commonly identified as the iconic symbol of Christianity in a nation such as Haiti colonized by French Catholics, the motif also has deep historical roots as dikenga, an Indigenous symbol of the ancient Kongo Kingdom. In Central Africa, the Kongo cross or dikenga signified the cosmic crossroads between mortal and spiritual realms, a cosmogram that represented dimensions of both time and space in the mystic encounter between worlds (Thompson and Cornet 1981; Martínez-Ruiz 2013). Kongoese citizens Africanized the Catholic tradition between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and claimed the cross as their own religious symbol (Thornton [1992] 1998; Fromont 2014). Similarly today in Haiti, the cross represents the nation’s plural religious realities, simultaneously embodying the presence of Jesus Christ for Christians as readily as the Gede spirits for Vodouizan, devotees of the African-derived tradition Vodou. And an analogous process of religious mestiçaje becomes evident in other communities from the Caribbean and Central America (see Wali in this volume, on Guna Christianity).

In the same type of drapo flags, the silhouette of a white candle sits on the first step of the tombstone, an