

# The Diversity of Indigenous Wisdom on Grief: Exploring Social Work Approaches to Bereavement

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## Key Words

Grief, Bereavement, Indigenous wisdom, Cultural diversity, Social work, Japan, Malaysia, Sweden, Religions, Secularization, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity,

## Summary

The aim of our study was twofold: 1) to describe the diversity of indigenous wisdom on grief and maintaining relationships with the deceased by exploring Buddhists in Japan, Muslims in Malaysia and Christians in Sweden; and 2) to discuss social work approaches for bereaved families based on their indigenous wisdom.

Background: The International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work established the Global Definition of The Social Work Profession in 2014, which considers indigenous knowledge as a main underpinning of social work and encourages social workers to develop approaches that accommodate local values and traditions. However, in some societies, such as Japan, psychotherapeutic bereavement interventions for bereaved families are becoming more common. Theories supporting such interventions are considered applicable to all peoples, irrespective of cultural differences.

Method: Using literature reviews, the authors describe their respective society's indigenous rituals and spiritual values concerning grief and death. They also critically examine bereavement interventions used in their respective societies.

Findings and discussion: Psychological theories underpinning bereavement interventions tend to reflect Western or Christian values. This can lead to bereaved people in societies that do not share these values (such as Buddhist Japanese and Islamic Malaysians) being considered maladjusted or pathological, and ultimately to their disempowerment. Also, the rapid process of secularisation is depriving Japanese and Swedish people of the chance to utilise their indigenous wisdom. This is forcing them to depend more on Western bereavement interventions, some of the concepts of which they do not agree with.

## Two Approaches to Bereavement

We found two different approaches to bereavement: one is to accept grief as part of life (Approach A) and the other is to pathologize it (Approach B). Each has different perceptions on relationships with the deceased, which can be summarized as "continuing bonds" or "ties to be severed," respectively. These perceptions are greatly influenced by religions: Japanese Buddhism encourages continuing bonds with the deceased, while Christian and Muslim doctrines may encourage people to sever ties. Boosted by the modern trend of medicalization and the "Grief Work Hypothesis," Approach B is now spreading in some countries disguised as "science" and some professional bereavement workers treat mourners as "patients," which can disempower people. On the other hand, Approach A is congruent with the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession in the sense that taking grief as a normal part of human life helps to empower mourners.

Table 1: Two Approaches to Bereavement

	Perceptions on grief	Relationships with the deceased	People orientation	Major theories, knowledge, framework
Approach A	Normal part of life	Continuing bonds	Empowerment	Indigenous wisdom, The Global Definition of the Social Work Profession
Approach B	Pathologized grief	Ties to be severed	Disempowerment, patientization	The Grief Work Hypothesis

**The Global Definition of the Social Work Profession** (Approved by the IFSW General Meeting and the IASSW General Assembly in July 2014)  
"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the **empowerment and liberation** of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and **indigenous knowledge**, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing." (emphasis added)

## Indigenous Wisdom in Three Cultures

	Japanese Buddhist Culture	Malaysian Muslim Culture	Swedish Christian Culture
<b>Religious/secular</b> "Would you say you are a religious person?" (Inglehart, 2010)	 Secular society 24% (2006)	 Religious society 89% (2006)	 Secular society 33% (2006)
<b>Relationships with the deceased</b>	The relationships are perceived as "continuing bonds." The ancestor worship of Japanese Buddhism helps the relationships with the deceased continue.	Continuing bonds are maintained through religious activities. For example, people invite friends and relatives to pray for the deceased during a feast ceremony.	A discourse that the bonds to the deceased should be definitively ended is dominant in this secular society with a historically Christian culture.
<b>Indigenous wisdom for dealing with grief</b>	Buddhist memorial services are offered for deceased members of families on anniversaries of their death. Buddhist home altars work as a site of their souls.	Religious-based activities, rituals and narrations from previous prophets help Malay Muslims to find wisdom after their loss.	People use the Internet to share their loss experiences with others, and try to communicate with the deceased (e.g., in memorial blogs).
<b>Popularized bereavement care</b>	The Grief Work Hypothesis and its varieties prevail among bereavement care givers, most of who are not fully trained. Their theoretical orientation is not congruent with indigenous wisdom.	Bereavement care highlights the importance of incorporating religious belief with spirituality. Muslims are told to accept the situation as a part of God's plan.	Little bereavement care is offered, and problems related to loss and mourning tend to be constructed as individualistic mental issues in need of psychiatric healthcare.
<b>Social taboo or religious doctrines</b>	<i>Shintô</i> is another major religion of Japan and its syncretism with Buddhism has been developed through the ages. <i>Shintô</i> 's abhorrence of "impurities of death" leads to a social taboo of death.	Talking about death is considered a social taboo among Malay Muslims because talking about it or expressing their grief may reflect distrust of God's plan.	Death is a social taboo, and mourners tend to interpret the silence of their family and social networks as expectations to "move on" in life rather than to "dwell on" the experience of loss.
<b>Challenge of social work</b>	Buddhist customs are on the decrease, and indigenous wisdom is falling into oblivion. Pathological models of grief are spreading and bereaved families' social issues are neglected.	Social workers face challenges in helping bereaved Malay Muslims understand that questioning their loss may facilitate the process of meaning-making to adapt themselves to the loss.	Social workers need to help develop a knowledge base about loss and grieving that is grounded in mourners' own telling of their experience.
	 Japanese Buddhist Culture	 Malaysian Muslim Culture	 Swedish Christian Culture

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## Acknowledgements & Contact

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