

Metis Culture: Metis Death Rituals and Ceremonies

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Here is a listing of some historic Metis customs.

Church Bell: In Metis communities, the church bell was rung to signal a death; nine times if a man, seven times if a woman had died.

Coffins: In southern communities, Metis made coffins from one-inch boards. They would wrap them with black material for older people and white material for younger children. There were usually four pallbearers. In northern Metis communities, there was a coffin maker. The coffin was painted in white and blue with Aboriginal markings.

Feasts: It is a Metis custom that during the large holiday meals an extra plate would always be set at the table with the best of everything—foods, cutlery and dinnerware. After the meal, the food was put into the fire for “those who went before us.”

Mourning Period: For the death of a spouse, the mourning period was a year and one-half. It was one year for a sibling. During the mourning period there was no dancing, no listening to music, and family or close relatives wore black. Some Metis people cut their hair as a sacrifice in honour of the one who has died.

- Metis ceremonies have a basis in Roman Catholic and Anglican practices. Some Metis people strictly adhere to Aboriginal practices.
- Some Metis combine Christian with Aboriginal practices
- Church bells are tolled nine times for a man’s death and seven times for the death of a woman.
- A four day wake is common, tobacco is put out beside the body; the family may also place tobacco with the body at burial.
- The wake is an occasion for Elders to tell stories.
- Someone is always with the body over the four days; they say prayers (Hail Mary) and sing hymns regularly during the wake.
- Some build a sacred fire at home of deceased or where the wake is held (the fire is allowed to die by itself after four days).
- Some Metis women collect all their hair from their hairbrushes over their lifetime and this is buried or burned during the funeral rites.
- The pallbearers wear a black ribbon tied with a bow on their free arm; these are placed in the grave after the coffin is lowered.
- Upon leaving the place of burial one does not look back. This shows that they have accepted the person’s death. Otherwise the person’s spirit will not move on.
- Northern lights are said to be the souls of the dead who have come out to dance, never whistle at the northern lights.
- Some Metis do a give-away of personal effects to friends and relatives.

- The spouse used to wear a black arm-band for the year mourning period
- Feasts for the dead are held on the fourth day following death or immediately after burial, and on the anniversary of the death.
- Some people put out food for the deceased and set a place at table for them on feasts such as thanksgiving.
- For those practicing Aboriginal spirituality, dances are held for the dead; really it is to pray for the healing of the living – commonly, the Tea Dance or the Chicken Dance.

References:

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