

Moche

Practices

The funerary practices of the Moche reflected their highly stratified society. The elite funeral practices were the most elaborate and spectacular of the ancient Americas. These traditions grew out of a rich coastal tradition that grew to extend and unify polities.

Moche deceased were typically buried under-ground, in a fully extended position with their head to the South, on their back, with the hands alongside the body or placed on the pelvis. This position is believed to be symbolically associated with concepts of rest and sleep.¹

The Moche who were poor and of low status were buried in shallow trenches with their faces painted red, and unspun cotton placed over their faces or put under the heads like a pillow. Sometimes a shallow gourd plate was placed under the head of the deceased. Wool yam was usually wrapped around the head, wrists, hands, ankles and feet. Sometimes a lump of copper was placed in the hand.

Grave goods for tradesmen also included tools of their trade.

A wealthy, high-status individual was wrapped in several cloths or in a cane bundle that formed a tube tied together and closed at the ends with shallow gourd plates. A very important person was placed in a cane box-like coffin that was buried in a room-like chamber lined with stone or mud bricks. These tombs were roofed with cane or wood and sometimes they had small alcoves on the side walls where ceramic pots were placed. Some elaborate graves have been found with more than 75 pots. They sometimes contained jewelry of shell, stone, gold or silver.

Additionally foods were often included in the graves.

In the richest Moche burials, the people were buried with other individuals. These people may have been sacrificed to accompany and/or serve the wealthy person in the afterlife.²

Moche funerals had four phases, and while we cannot be sure of the sequence it is clear that the burial was the most significant of these. The four phases are as follows:

- **Burial**
The lowering of a horizontal casket into the grave shaft, typically using ropes. Sometimes a grave mask made of copper was attached to the casket. Additionally grave goods including food and tools were added to the grave.
- **Assembly**
A group of people dressed holding a staff like object, most likely a rattle. Each person is dressed similarly in long, netlike shirts wearing headdresses made of clipped feathers projecting from a headband. Each person also wears a tiered item of attire extending down the back. The assembly engages in ritual activities
- **Conch shell Transfer**
conducted under the gabled roof of a large and very elaborate structure that is approached by stairs. A person wearing a headdress with a crest shaped ornament kneels and was either given or gives a

¹ Death and Religion in the Southern Moche Periphery: Funerary Practices at Huambacho, Nepeña Valley, Peru. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2014.

http://www.academia.edu/1131248/Death_and_Religion_in_the_Southern_Moche_Periphery_Funerary_Practices_at_Huambacho_Nepeña_Valley_Peru

² Lesson 8: Burial Traditions – Toward a Greater Understanding of the Moche | Fowler Museum at UCLA. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2014 <http://www.fowler.ucla.edu/curriculum/royal-tombs-of-sipan/lesson-8>

conch-shell to the representatives of the deities (it is unclear if the conch-shell was being received or given.)

- **Sacrifice**
Human sacrifice was performed for very important members of society. Pictures show the gods holding a knife and a rope of birds. The birds are sometimes shown on a rack, and there is evidence that some people were sacrificed by being pecked to death by birds.³

Deities and Important Concepts

- **"Supreme Deity"**
The Creator from whom all Moche people came. Believed to have lived in either the mountains or sky- always isolated from the people.
- **Wiracocha – the staff god**
This Wari god controlled life and death. Wiracocha was commonly shown with a rod in each hand and rays growing from his head. These rays often ended in stylized portrayals of animals such as pumas, condors, and sometimes in illustrations of maize.
- **The Decapitator**
God associated with human sacrifice. He is shown as having humans sacrificed to him. The Moche believed that sacrifice helped new life and growth. The kings were responsible for gathering the sacrifice, much as a farmer would be for gathering seeds.

Modern Adaptations

Follow the four traditional steps of the burial as follows.

1. Burial

Paint the forehead of the deceased with red paint or makeup then wrap wool yarn around the deceased wrist (and/or the head, hands, ankles and feet). Next take some unspun cotton or cotton balls and place under the head of the deceased.

Symbolically lower a pot with food into the grave via the use of ropes or offer a pot of food at the grave site. Also include a tool that represents what the person did in life in the coffin.

2. Assembly

Pass out rattles and staffs. Have a group walk around the coffin, rattling the rattles and praying for the deceased.

3. Conch shell Transfer

Have a person represent Wiracocha by holding a special staff. Give him a conch shell asking him to guide the deceased to an honored place. Have the person give the shell back assuring you that he will keep the deceased in his care as long as the person's memory is also well tended.

4. Sacrifice

Offer some food or drink or something valued by the deceased to the gods. The item should be destroyed in some ritual way.

³ Donnan, Christopher B., and Donna McClelland. "The Burial Theme in Moche Iconography." N.p., n.d. Web. <http://www.doaks.org/resources/publications/doaks-online-publications/the-burial-theme-in-moche-iconography/moche.pdf>

Sample Readings

No writings exist from the Moche civilization.

Resources

Death and Religion in the Southern Moche Periphery:Funerary Practices at Huambacho, Nepeña Valley, Peru
http://www.academia.edu/1131248/Death_and_Religion_in_the_Southern_Moche_Periphery_Funerary_Practices_at_Huambacho_Nepena_Valley_Peru