

Traditional Burials Are Dying Out

Forest burial sites are taking the place of cemeteries, urns replacing oak coffins, headstones are now “Made in India” – over the past two decades funerals in Germany have become much more multifaceted; the stolid dignity of old-style interments is out of fashion. These are the findings of a study headed by **Dominic Akyel** of the **Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies** in Cologne.

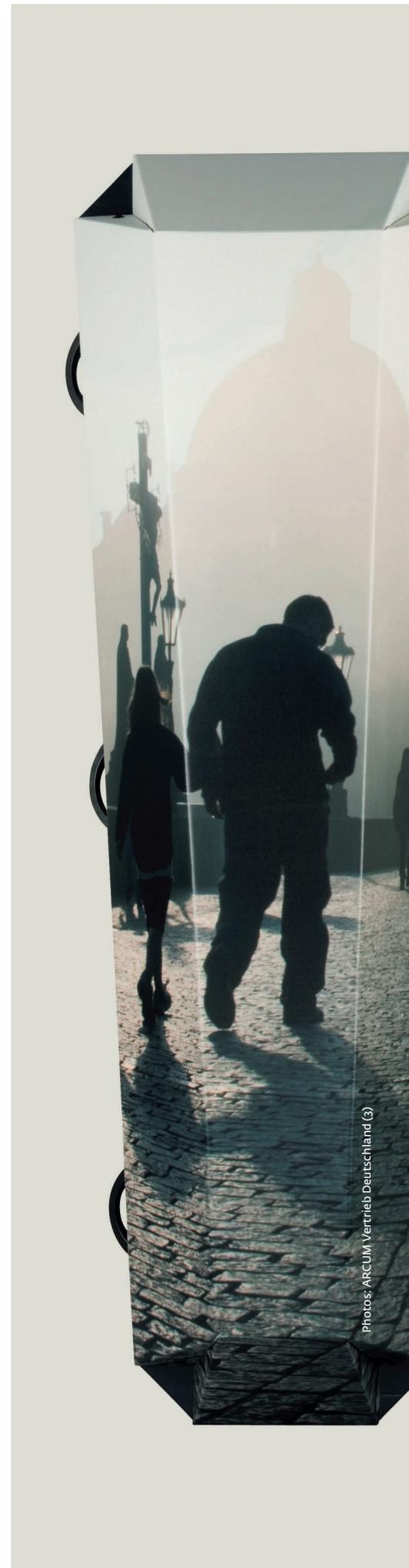
TEXT **BIRGIT FENZEL**

The trend is toward individualized funerals or cheap special offers,” says Dominic Akyel, summing up the changing economics and mores of the German funeral market. The 32-year-old is one of a group, headed by sociologist Wolfgang Streeck at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, that is researching the relations between the economy, politics, and society. One of their focuses is on the diffusion of market logics and the process of commercialization.

For the purpose of his study, developed in cooperation with the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Rostock, Akyel chose the funeral market in Germany as an example of just such a development. He was particularly interested in the factors that have reanimated every aspect of sepulchral culture in a market that has been resting in peace for centuries.

For the empirical part of his work, the researcher gathered official statistical data, conducted interviews with experts, analyzed documents and took a hands-on look at the business. “I did my field work in funeral parlors,” explains Akyel. Not only did he ride in the hearse to pick up the deceased, but he also had to physically lend a hand. Recalling his first trip to the mortuary with the undertakers, he adds: “My first encounter with death was courtesy of a corpse that had been in water for three weeks.” That takes some getting used to. But he also noticed that he could deal with it.

“In this way, I learned the individual stages of the job – from collecting the corpse and washing it, to the cosmetic touches to the deceased and arranging the funeral ceremony. At times like this, science becomes a personal journey, because afterward, you see many things quite differently,” says Akyel, describing the strong im-



Photos: ARCUJUM Vertrieb Deutschland (3)



The final eye-catcher: Simple wooden coffins are no longer in fashion. Some undertakers offer individual designs – made of low-cost cellulose.

pression this look behind the funeral parlor scene made on him.

From a scientific perspective, however, the funeral business in Germany offered some exciting insights into the dialectic of market and morality. After all, many things that are considered entirely normal in other areas of the economy are taboo in this industry.

“For example, it shouldn’t be too obvious that you’re making a profit,” says Dominic Akyel. Other commercial aspects, such as advertising, price comparisons and sales negotiations, are also delicate issues when they are juxtaposed with death, bereavement and the arrangement of that last journey.

Nevertheless, for long stretches of the 20th century, this was by no means an unprofitable industry. “For many West German undertakers, the decades after World War II were a golden age,” Akyel reports. One of the reasons was the broad acceptance of the traditional Christian funerary ritual; there was a societal consensus as to what form a decent funeral should take. Those who could afford it didn’t stint on either the coffin or the ceremony.

PROTECTING OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

For reasons of piety, it was looked down upon to haggle over the price of coffins or other services to the deceased. Explaining the behavioral norms that were widespread in both rural and urban areas, Akyel remarks that “It was expected that the relatives would be generous – also so as not to detract from the social standing of the deceased.” It was usually the local funeral director who was called upon, though of course his reputation was an important consideration. Provided they were of high repute, undertakers could look forward to steady demand, and over decades,

they discreetly and serenely pocketed large profits to offset their comparatively low expenses.

Since the start of the 1990s, however, the industry has cast off this veil of modesty. “As a result of the interplay between a variety of social forces, the industry experienced a new awakening,” says Akyel, summing up the results of his research. One of the causes lay in changes in the law, the terms of which in most federal states dated back in part to before World War II. Some individual aspects had, from time to time, been updated in line with changing circumstances; but until that time, there had been no root and branch reform.

It wasn’t until the 1990s that a trend emerged toward revising the relevant legislation. “There were roughly as many reform projects initiated between 1992 and 2001 as in the whole of the 1970s and 1980s. And since the turn of the millennium, more than half of Germany’s federal states have revised their laws on funerals.” On the other hand, there have been numerous differences between churches, local authorities and industry representatives. “One particular bone of contention was whether or not market forces should be accorded greater influence in the funeral business,” says the Cologne-based researcher.

One of the main arguments voiced by the opponents of deregulation – many of whom, interestingly, were drawn from the ranks of the funeral industry itself – was that a funeral is an important cultural heritage that should be protected from unscrupulous entrepreneurs. “The concern among undertakers about the risks of deregulation evidently outweighs the associated business opportunities,” Akyel believes.

Yet despite the opposition, individual legal reforms over the past 20 years have ushered in a moderate degree of

deregulation of the German funeral market. As an example, Dominic Akyel cites the use of coffins, which were once obligatory throughout Germany. Although their use has been vehemently defended by churches and undertakers, most states have since relaxed or repealed the laws that made them mandatory. One of the first to do so was North Rhine-Westphalia, where the requirement to be buried in a wooden box was abolished in 2003. Schleswig-Holstein followed at least in part in 2004, and in Lower Saxony, the requirement was abolished in 2005.

PRIVATIZATION LEADS TO PROFIT ORIENTATION

In Baden-Württemberg it has been permissible since 2009 for the coffin lid to be laid in the grave beside the coffin. With the introduction of its new Participation and Integration Act, the state of Berlin also abolished the mandatory requirement for coffins. Since then, it has been possible in certain cemeteries for the deceased to be buried in a shroud without a coffin – if there are religious reasons for doing so. In many large cities, there are now funeral parlors that focus on Muslims as their target group.

There have been similar developments in commercial participation in what were once the duties of the state. Here, too, the legislative changes have broadened the range of services on offer. For example, the privatization of cemeteries and funeral services has led to the establishment of private crematoria that are often more economical and more customer-oriented than the local alternatives. With privatization, an orientation toward profit has also come to the fore – in a sector in which business interests and commercialism are considered indecent. “Around one third of the crematoria in Germany are now private-



It was a funeral parlor rather than a designer store in which Dominic Akyel conducted his research. Today's range of coffins (top) and urns (bottom left) come in many designs and colors. Those who wish to keep the deceased with them forever can even have an artificial diamond made from the ashes (bottom right).



Der preiswerte Bestatter



Change is sweeping through the industry: While discounters offer cheap cremations (above), the last resting place for some is in an idyllic woodland (below).

ly owned,” says Akyel, describing the new market structure that increased legal freedoms have engendered.

In addition, new kinds of burial places have taken hold, such as natural forest cemeteries or columbaria, where urns are interred beneath trees or placed in wall niches. Although German undertakers have thus far succeeded in keeping their foreign competitors at bay, the market in Germany now has far more international connections than it did 20 years ago. Today, when a customer orders an oak casket, it is by no means certain that it will be crafted in Germany using German timber. “Most coffins and memorials are imported from abroad,” as Akyel’s research has shown.

DISCOUNT FUNERAL OPERATORS MAKE LIFE HARD

From the perspective of the economic sociologist, the increased diversity of services available reflects the increase in competition facing particularly traditional service providers. The industry is under pressure, not only as a result of falling mortality rates in recent decades, but also due to the influx of new companies that are spoiling the business opportunities that their established rivals once regarded as a dead certain business. “In some cities, there are now discount funeral operators whose aggressive pricing is making it difficult for old established businesses to survive,” the Max Planck researcher has observed.

Some individual undertakers are gaining a competitive advantage by exporting bodies across the border to Dutch crematoria, which offer their services at a lower cost. As Akyel observed in his field studies, this funeral tourism is now in full swing. The industry is



also concerned about the attempts by international service providers to gain a foothold in the German market: “Our domestic businesses have thus far succeeded in thwarting these attempts, but competition in the industry is still much fiercer than in the comfortable days before German reunification.”

The mechanisms of supply and demand have evidently taken hold in a sector that, in the past, preferred to cast a veil over the links between sacred rites and commercial profits. In fact, the

study shows that customers, too, are motivated by economic considerations in their choice of service provider and their interment preferences. Akyel has the impression that “The surviving dependents make different decisions these days.” Faced with a choice between the traditional option of an exclusive individual funeral or a cheap deal ordered via the Internet, an increasing number are opting for the low-cost alternative. Their reasons vary. “Because funerals are losing their significance as social

events, many people no longer consider an extravagant and expensive interment to be necessary.”

Sometimes parsimony is a consequence of a lack of money. Since health insurance companies have ceased to pay death benefits, many relatives simply don't have the funds to pay for a traditional funeral, which can easily cost several thousand euros – maintenance costs for the grave not included. Akyel sees the changing behavior patterns among customers as a consequence of changing social values: “In the past 20 years, the proportion of people in Germany who don't identify with Christian norms and values has risen substantially. As a result, the traditional Christian funeral customs and perceptions have declined in significance.”

Another reason lies in the changes in family structures and lifestyles. Particularly young people today move around far more frequently than they did two decades ago, and they often live far away from their parents. Accordingly, family graves are far less frequently visited. Akyel has also observed a trend toward smaller, more intimate ceremonies, and an increasing emphasis on ensuring that the funeral matches the life and personality of the deceased. This applies particularly to the purchase of coffins and memorials, but also to the choice of undertaker.

It is also increasingly common for people to arrange their own funerals during their lifetime. Many seek out precise information and obtain estimates of cost. This, too, is an innovation in the funeral market. Businesses have been compelled to tailor their services more closely to the wishes of their customers. “There are even bus excursions to crematoria in Holland and the Czech Republic.”

In the course of the empirical part of his study, Dominic Akyel not only visited a morticians' trade fair and worked at a funeral parlor, but he even took part in such an excursion. Recalling the unusual journey across the border, he remarks that it was a mixed bunch on board the bus. Describing the varying motives of his fellow travelers, he explains: “Some wanted to see for themselves how such a funeral works, while others had already had their loved ones cremated in the same place and wanted to pay a visit.”

AN OUTING TO THE CREMATORIUM

The mood was by no means downbeat. Not that the organizers – German undertakers – would have allowed gloom to descend. “Entertainment was provided for,” says the researcher. “First there was a detour to a shopping mall, and at the crematorium a big table had been set up with coffee and cake.” Describing the commercial purpose of the journey, Akyel explains that the whole thing was a marketing strategy by the organizers to promote customer loyalty and boost their image. “It was also a matter of shedding light on a taboo subject.”

The bottom line is that many companies still earn good profits, but annual turnover per funeral parlor has nevertheless declined by a quarter since the 1990s. Hardest hit are the old established businesses in the cities without a specialty to fall back on. “In order to survive in the funeral business, you need to respond to this development with new products and business models,” says Akyel, based on his experience. For him, as an economic sociologist, the unfolding situation is a source of excitement. “You can see here precisely how market

mechanisms work, how taboos cease to be so powerful, and how the illegitimate becomes legitimate.”

For most people, billboard advertising, discount offers and event marketing have long since ceased to conflict with their feelings of piety. Brightly colored coffins and diamond mementos made by high-pressure treatment of the ashes of the deceased are still the exception. However, the sharper business minds in the industry are coming up with something more than just dressing their windows with the latest collection of urns.

Recently, the trade association Kuratorium Deutsche Bestattungskultur organized a contest to find striking, strikingly subtle or emphatically simple poster designs to advertise funeral insurance. The slogan was: “Advertise or die.” As Dominic Akyel puts it, “It has brought commercialism in the funeral market somewhat closer to the ideal of capitalist business practice.” Morality, it seems, has not been left behind by this development. The study shows that, even when it comes to funerals, our morals keep pace with social and economic changes, and aren't carved in stone. ◀

GLOSSARY

Columbaria

Walls with niches in which urns are placed. This is an ancient form of burial practiced in antiquity. The name derives from the similarity between the tiers of niches and a dovecote (*columbarium*).

Sepulchral culture

A term that encompasses cultural attitudes toward death, the dead and those left behind. The word derives from the Latin for grave (*sepulcrum*).