

AFRICAN RELIGIOUS SURVIVALS IN DEATH RITUALS

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In Guyana, the practice of holding a wake, an all night vigil for someone who has died, is very old and while aspects of it may be traced to African origins, other aspects of it may be considered to be universal, because every social group must find ways of coming to terms with death. The practice therefore emerges as trans-cultural. The traditional practice in Guyana, especially in rural villages, is to hold a wake every night until the burial of the deceased, but sometimes this varies. The data collected by the present researcher reveal that while wakes are still often held in Suriname and rural Guyana, in Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica the practice is in danger of disappearance, and where the practice is still alive, the evidence shows that it is waning and often becoming superficial. Scarcely is any attention given to the African religious aspect of the wake since such traditions continue to be disparaged. As a result of the loss of such culturally significant practices, communities are much poorer since these rituals function as coping strategies and are powerful mechanisms that validate ancestral wisdom. Death rituals - wakes, wake plays, soirées, folk songs and speech making - serve as mediation processes. They are compensatory rites that function as systems of social control for communities. This paper examines the immeasurable importance of what may be irretrievably lost.

This paper which is part of a larger research project entitled “Wake rituals in fiction and culture” presents findings that are specifically related to cultural anthropology. Information was gathered during 2008-2009 from participant observations and interviews. Where necessary, findings are corroborated with information gleaned from books and journals. To obtain a wider perspective, information on wake practices within the last sixty years was collected from Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados and Jamaica.

Participant observation of a wake held at Hope Town in Guyana in 2008 reveals that the following features are characteristic of modern day wakes there. There was the singing of ‘sangkeys’ or hymns, the pulsating beating of African drums, the consolatory reading of specific passages from the Bible, a short exhortation by a preacher, and the sharing of sweets, coffee, tea, bread, biscuits, and drinks. After the preacher left, the wake progressed to another phase involving drinking rum and

playing cards and dominoes, all interspersed with laughter and jokes about the life of the deceased. This vigil continued until the next ‘fore-day-morning’.

Similar wake ceremonies are held in Suriname, and some areas of Trinidad, Tobago, and Jamaica. However in the towns, a more ‘modern day’ ceremony is the norm. The visit from a preacher is optional and so is the singing of ‘old-time’ hymns or sankeys. Instead, Gospel music blares from an electronic speaker as relatives and friends arrive, spend some time with the bereaved and then leave, but the playing of cards and dominoes along with the drinking of liquor remains an important part of the meeting. While in the countryside there may be a nine-night wake and a fortieth night wake corresponding to the stages of ‘sending-off’ the dead person’s spirit, in urban areas, it is more common to have a less solemn one-night wake on the eve of the burial. These rural-urban differences may be attributed to a desire for upward social mobility which requires that persons distance themselves from the practices of the ‘country people’. But Rawle Titus of Tobago, in his work entitled *Wake People Wake* (2008: 17) acknowledges that, “[our ancestors’] belief in spirits, ghosts or jumbies . . . was a belief that did not exist in a vacuum. In fact, their beliefs were normal and sacred and provided them with a means of dealing with the death condition and transition from this world to the next.”

What remains alive and where? While in Suriname a certain degree of respect is accorded the ‘Winty Religion’ in the other territories under study here, the traditional wake ritual seems to be dying out, since persons below the age of thirty-five, both in the country and in town, could not provide me with any information about traditional wakes. In Barbados, the tradition is practically non-existent. No wakes are held for the dead but information gleaned from a poster in the Barbados Museum acknowledges that death rituals were once practiced there. As in the other territories included in the present study, a common option in Barbados is just to have a party after the burial.

Nine-night or forty-night wakes, though becoming rare phenomena, are still held in some communities to ‘send off’ the spirit of the dead, thus preventing it from roaming among the living. As one of my Jamaican informants told me: “The nine-night is to send the spirit off – sometimes the spirit of the dead is responsible for things happening in the community, so the spirit is roaming and they have to send it off”. Audiovisual material obtained from the Jamaican Memory Bank (2009) provides further information on this theme:

On the fortieth night you cook one pot and set food fuh de spirit first . . . no salt. Yuh set food on table . . . go an talk and beg them to satisfy wid wha dem can manage. The family ha fe talk . . . seh yuh give yuh best . . . if dem no accept it . . . get up an bless dem . . . ask dem to have good behavior. If it don’t suit yuh . . . get up and go on yuh way. Den we throw the rum.

In 2008, similar practices were described to me by a woman who cleanses corpses in preparation for burial in Suriname, who notes that:

For seven days, inside the house, we set meals for the spirits. No other person is allowed to eat what is set. The remains of the meals are buried. On the ninth night, the wake is kept outdoors, in the yard. Relatives, neighbours and friends visit and some stay throughout the night until the break of day. There is eating, drinking, dancing.

Such rituals are practiced by most black people in Suriname whether in the town or the countryside and with an informal invitation any individual may visit these ceremonies. In Jamaica and Guyana such rituals are practiced by a sub-group within the general black community, namely, those who follow African based religions.

Our research strongly suggests that there is little transmission of African derived cultural practices to the younger generations. One informant from Guyana reports that: "Dem young people in church, especially the Pentecostal church against these things like 'Queh Queh' and traditional wake. The church give against African culture". This kind of intolerance and censorship on the part of churches is directly responsible for much of the non-participation by young people in wake ceremonies in particular, as well as for much of the non-transmission of African culture and spirituality in general. For this reason, African religious practices have all but disappeared today in Christianized communities and urban areas. As Rawle Titus notes, "The European influence sought to establish itself as the only accepted, civilized way of life" (2008: 16). All cultures find ways of dealing with death and many practice some form of spirit worship, spirit possession or communication with the dead. From her point-of-view, of an ordinary person, one of my Guyanese informants observed that: "Deh believe that the dead person spirit does roam on earth for forty days and forty nights and then yuh go wherever yuh got to go... whether to heaven, to hell or elsewhere."

What this informant says is clarified for us by John Mbiti, who is Kenyan by birth and a professor of Religious Studies. In his text entitled *African Religions and Philosophy* he says that; "Belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies ... But this belief does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. There... is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared in the hereafter." (1989: 4)

Wakes at times function as venues for spiritual communication to 'determine' the cause of the death at hand. Several of my informants revealed that often wakes are meetings of a profoundly spiritual nature involving divination. A Jamaican informant said that "Sometimes they ask the Obeah man to find out why the person died . . . if it was not natural causes." To some extent this still happens especially if relatives are members of the spiritualist church. During participant observation at Paradise village

in Guyana, relatives of a sick woman 'found out' that her husband's mistress was responsible for the wife's illness. Subsequently she died and on the first night of the wake, relatives were speaking of their efforts to 'find out' whether the husband had a hand in the death of his wife. After the 'finding out', the husband was determined not entirely guilty. Nevertheless, he was turned out of his home by his children. (This information was only divulged in the presence of the researcher because she is a relative of the dead woman).

Divination practiced in Africa to determine the cause of an illness or death was described to me in 2008 by a Nigerian informant, who said:

[W]hen someone gets ill, relatives may consult oracles. They may consult with those who practice the art of divination - what some may call the fortune teller - or they may consult with the herbalist; most of these are male. They use cowries, shells, seven of them, to do the divination. Sometimes they use the kola nut which has four compartments. The nut is broken and a reading is done based on how the pieces fall.

When I asked him if this is a common practice, he said that: "Christianity is widely practiced in Nigeria but African Traditional Religion, called Juju, practiced by the Yoruba people, is equated Christianity. It is equally recognized." This position is corroborated in the writings of John Mbiti (1989: 146) who tells us that among the Ndebele:

When a person falls seriously ill, relatives keep watch by his bedside. These relatives must include at least one brother and the eldest son of the sick man because the two are the ones who investigate the cause of the illness, which is generally magic and witchcraft and take preventative measures against it.

Mbiti also tells us that among the Abaluyia: "The living-dead are present at the death of their human relative and may be asked . . . to hasten the death of the sick in order to terminate pain or suffering."

In studying the African heritage in the Caribbean, determining the difference between religious survivals as different from non-religious survivals is a difficult task since religion cannot be separated from the day-to-day life of those who practice African derived religions. Mbiti (1989) explains that:

Every dance, every song, every action is but a particle of the whole, each gesture a prayer for the survival of the entire community. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it . . . There is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life" (pp. 1-2).

Brackette Williams (1984) in her work entitled *Ef me naa bin come me naa been know: Informal social control and the Afro-Guyanese wake, 1900-1948* finds that fifty to sixty years ago, in the rural villages of Guyana a wake served as an informal court where problems were vented and solved. Justice was meted out through a system of punishments, including shaming and beating. Complaints could be lodged by playing the game called “Who Say”. Those found guilty could show ‘shame face’, ‘bold face’/ ‘brass face’, or ‘two face’ – depending on their guilt – to help restore the solidarity of the community. The guilty could be punished by playing another game called the “Ring Game” described by several of my informants, as well as by the Ithaca Folk Group of Guyana, in the following passage.

And then yuh does get ‘Ring’, ‘Missy Loss he Gold Ring’. . . Fine am, Fine am, Fine am leh me see. . . Leh we seh, yuh go an pick Cynthy hand, but sometimes nah dah person got de ring . . . so dem beat yuh. Singing “Done baby don’t cry, no room fuh you tonight. . . . Dem a beat yuh so till you find it.”

Such wake related games are of both material and spiritual value to the community. In closely knit communities, communal informal courts often function more effectively than formal legal institutions. To strengthen the solidarity of the group, ‘judicial’ bodies punish those who break the codes of society, and sanctions are applied. Beating during wakes also functions as a spiritual catharsis. If evil spiritual forces are determined as being responsible for transgressions, then the wake becomes an act of spiritual warfare; restless spirits are appeased or exorcised, since the living and vulnerable need to be protected.

Our data strongly suggest that while certain aspects of West African derived culture are dead, others are under severe threat, and this downward spiral has accelerated over the last fifty years. During the process of interviewing the informants for this study, I was surprised by the fact that several persons were reluctant to admit the extensive knowledge that they had of the spiritual aspects of wake rituals. In a few cases, persons refused to discuss such aspects at all. Ironically, one informant began his response to my questions with the disclaimer: “A never really like wakes but . . .” and then went on to provide one of the most informative and substantive accounts of African derived spiritual practices associated with traditional wakes in our entire sample.

This kind of reluctance to value and share traditional knowledge is widespread and almost automatic, to the extent that it has played a major role in the non-transmission of African cultural traditions in the Caribbean. Al Creighton (2001) in his article entitled *Heritage in Guyana* makes the point that, “[M]any blacks came to regard their own culture as inferior and degrading; as something to be ashamed of. As a result, they themselves suppressed it, severely reducing its passage down to succeeding

generations.” Creighton however goes on to note that not one factor, but several are responsible for this decline. He says that “successive combinations of legislation, criminalization, political suppression, natural processes of language change, language death and acculturation” have caused, several traditions to disappear. This supports the point made by members of the Ithaca Folk Group that Christianity has had a profound influence on the breakdown in the intergenerational transmission of African religious practices, which are often shunned because they are regarded as the working of *Obeah*.

Commenting on the effects of non-transmission, cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell (1988: 8-9) asserts that the loss of traditional community rituals can have a devastating impact on the individual and society, when he says that:

These bits of information from ancient times. . . [which] built civilizations, and informed religions over the millennia, have to do with deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage, and if you don't know what are the guide-signs along the way, you have to work it out yourself.

Campbell further argues that young people commit violent and destructive acts because “Society has provided them no rituals by which they become members of a tribe, of the community.” (1988: 2)

However, all is not lost. Some African descended writers have attempted to capture and re-articulate African influenced cultural practices, assuming some responsibility for the task of dissemination and transmission of our threatened heritage. Toni Morrison, black writer and Nobel Prize winner, fosters this kind of transmission in her novels and arguing that since we no longer have the places and spaces where young people can hear the stories and myths that informed previous generations, this information must be made available and the novel is one medium to accomplish this. In the Caribbean some of our novelists produce literature that validates our African influenced religious culture. To name only a few of the novels that perform this function, we have Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; Wilson Harris' *The Whole Armour*; Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John*; and Erna Brodber's *Myal* and *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. Wake ceremonies in fiction allow for a dispassionate, objective analysis of how these rituals function as coping mechanisms and mediation processes that have fostered healing and restore solidarity in communities across the Caribbean for centuries.

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