INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI®

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

COMMUNICATION ECOLOGIES AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN
FAMILIES: A STUDY OF BLACK FAMILY DEATH RITUALS

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

CHARLTON D. MCILWAIN
Norman, Oklahoma
2001

UMI Number: 3004877

UMI®
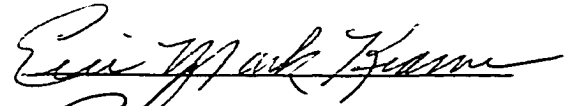
COMMUNICATION ECOLOGIES AND CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN
FAMILIES: A STUDY OF BLACK FAMILY DEATH RITUALS

A Dissertation APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

BY

Acknowledgements

There are many people I wish to thank for making the completion of this dissertation and degree possible.
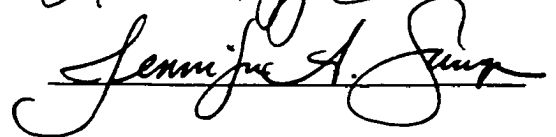
First, I want to thank Dr. Dorscine Spigner-Littles for encouraging me as a Master's student to pursue a doctoral degree and gave me the beginning academic resources I needed to thrive in a Ph.D. program.

I certainly want to thank my advisor and Chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Eric Kramer for giving me the tools I need throughout my graduate career to be well grounded as a scholar, enhance my ability to think critically and approach my studies and research with rigor. I also want to thank him for encouraging me to conduct research for this dissertation that would be meaningful to the discipline of communication, the community of scholars, and most of all, to myself personally. I thank him for allowing me the freedom to explore things that are of great interest to me as a scholar foremost and for providing

Table of Contents

Abstract

Research in family communication has three current limitations: a). The lack of a general theory explaining contemporary family interaction; b). The focus on the family unit as the primary object of study; and c). A lack of consideration of cultural/ethnic variations in family communication patterns. This study seeks to fill this void by studying the death rituals of African American families.

This study takes an ecological approach to the study of family interaction utilizing Kramer's theory of dimensional accrual/dissociation to describe and explain family communication patterns in the death ritual process. The study also compares the ritual process of African American and white families and how death rituals helps shape African American family identity.

The study finds great similarity among black and white families in the death ritual process, differing in the freedom of emotional expression expressed more by black families. The study also finds that dissociation is evidenced in the death ritual process which is identity-seeking, expressed in myth and entangled in the capitalist process of commodification and commercialization.

African American families are shown to include an extended group as family during the death ritual process, with a primary relationship among the family, church and funeral directors.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) establish
communication as the basis of all family identity and
interaction. They contend that all behavior is
communication and that, "Just as one cannot not
behave, so one cannot not communicate" (In Goldberg &
Goldberg, 1980). Thus the family is constructed
through communicative interaction with its members and
the larger contexts or ecologies in which the family
is surrounded (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993).

Family rituals are important family practices
that provide occasions for family communication, thus
working to shape family identity (Werner, Altman,
Brown & Ginat, 1993; Wolin and Bennett, 1984).
Certainly there are many types of rituals performed by
families that could provide insight into the dynamics
of family interaction. Birth rituals, various rites
of passage, initiations, marriages and other
activities which are performed to signify different

1

life transitions could all shed some light on social interaction in family systems.

This study seeks to look at rituals at the time of an individual's death. According to Bowman (1988) rituals that occur at the time of death seem to be generally more intimate rituals with greater possibilities for outward display of emotion because of the attachment of one to another that is now physically gone. This is also the case because death rituals generally signal physical finality and an exit of the deceased from the social contexts of the family and larger community.

According to Kramer (1997), both the nature of the family and, consequently, family ritual practices, in many ways express itself in a highly dissociative manner. Our contemporary definitions of the family, which foregrounds the nuclear family over a once more expansive family, is evidence of such emotional distancing in our present social world. Family rituals express magical, one-dimensional communication, mythic/symbolic communication

2

regarding, among other things, how one should interpret such rituals and signalic-codal communication, which expresses extreme dissociation between symbols and concrete expression. In the death ritual process, this takes the form of the changing spaces in which death rituals take place, what family members are told about what death is and the current state of a deceased loved one, as well as how families relate to the deceased. Increased emotional detachment can be seen in the performance of the ritual in these and other aspects.

Little research has been done in communication that focuses on death rituals in the context of the family. As well, communication scholars acknowledge that little research has been done that focuses on African American or other non-white, ethnic families in America (Socha & Diggs, 1999). Not only is there a lack of research regarding black families, but on the death ritual behaviors of African American families. Even the literature in fields such as sociology and anthropology lack considerable discussion of

contemporary death ritual practices of African Americans.

Some would ask, "Why study 'black' families and 'black' death rituals?" I would argue that one could expect to find differences between black families and white families and corresponding death rituals simply because the two have been shaped by very different origins, and experiences.

The origins of contemporary black families and those of white Americans go back to Africa and Europe, respectively, and existed in very different contexts and cultures expressing very different spatio-temporal manifolds. The context in which the black family has operated in has been influenced by colonization, American slavery, emancipation, enlightenment philosophy, christianization, family atomization and legalized American hypocrisy. The meeting of these groups with different origins resulted in a fusion of horizons (Kramer, 2000) which shaped and reshaped each of them. Thus, since we neither completely lose aspects of our cultural origins, nor completely adopt

new practices, we can assume that what we end up with is a certain blending which leaves both groups similar in some ways and different in others. Thus, one could expect to find that, with respect to their cosmology of death and dying and performance of death rituals, American blacks and whites would both differ and display some degree of sameness.

Purpose & Objectives

This study seeks to explore death ritual processes of both white and black families, in order to ascertain those elements that are uniquely African American and explain what bearing it has on the definition and meaning of family for African Americans.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1:

How can we describe social interaction occurring in the death ritual process of African Americans?

RQ2:

How does this process differ among whites?

RQ3:

What communication networks (ecologies) shape the
death ritual process for African Americans?

RQ4:

How is the dissociative nature of communication
evidenced in the death ritual process of African
Americans?

RQ5:

How do the answers to these questions shape
family meaning and identity for African
Americans?

Outline of the Study

This study proceeds in the following manner.
Chapter two provides a detailed review of important
literature in the following areas: (a) family
communication, including family definitions used in
family communication research, dominant approaches to
the study of family communication and a discussion of
family rituals and communication; (b) the family
ecology approach used in the current project; and (c)

the cosmology of death and funeral practices among whites and blacks.

Chapter three details the guiding theory for this project, Kramer's theory of dimensional accrual/dissociation. It also present the general methods used in this study, hermeneutics and ethnographic interviews and observation. It also details the data gathering methods used in the research.

The next six chapters contain the results of my research and are organized around the research questions asked in this study. Chapters four and five are descriptive. Chapter four describes in detail the specific elements of the death ritual process and differences among black and white families in the ritual process. Chapter five describes the various communication ecologies that the family interacts with during the death ritual process.

Chapters six through eight focus on specific areas of analysis regarding black family death rituals. Chapter six discusses the idea of cultural

fusion in black family death rituals. Chapter seven explores the dissociative nature of contemporary death rituals. Chapter eight discusses African American family identity as it relates to the death ritual process, and Chapter 9 provides the conclusion to the study, addressing limitations and areas of future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Family Communication

The research literature in the area of family communication is immense, and covers a period of more than fifty years, even though the majority of family research has been undertaken over the last twenty to twenty-five years. This review of the literature simply seeks to review the highlights of these years of research and consider those areas most relevant to this current research project.

First, we look at the variety of ways in which the family has been defined in the literature. Second, we look at the two major research approaches to the study of family communication, including the structural-functional, and systems approaches. Finally, we consider the limitations of the literature in family communication.

   Defining the family.

It is clear that most family communication scholars view the family as primarily a communicative organization. Vangelisti (1993) says that the family is "where most of us learn how to think about communication" (p.42). Some conclude that the family is a structure that impacts various interpersonal relationships and interactions (Cissna, Cox & Bochner, 1990; Huston & McHale, 1990; O'Bryant, 1998).

In order to understand and research the family, one must draw some conclusion regarding the definition of the family. While most people seem to know intuitively what a family is, researchers in the area of family communication have struggled with various definitions or understandings of what constitutes the family (Fitzpatrick and Badzinski, 1985). A study by Trost (1990) problematizes the defining of family concluding that different families define themselves in vastly different ways.

Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1994) categorize definitions of the family throughout the literature on family communication. The "family structure"

definitions emphasize concrete definitions of what

constitutes the parental or marital bond and those of

the parent-child relationship. As well, it sets

concrete definitions on other relatives, who belong to

the family by means of blood relationship (aunts,

uncles, grandparents, etc.). These definitions draw

on what Fitzpatrick and Badzinski refer to as the

"family of origin" definition (p.727). Family

structure definitions also tend to use the household,

or "common living-space" demographic designations as

the standard definition of the family.

Others seek to define families through

psychosocial task definitions. These types of

definitions see the family as a psychosocial group

that works toward a mutual goal — primarily, the

nurturance of the group in some way. It is a

functional approach, which sets forth reasons why

families exist - to produce and rear children, for

instance (Lerner & Spanier, 1978). The role of

communication in such definitions is viewed as "able

to either facilitate or to impede goal attainment"
(p.728).

Transactional definitions of the family emphasize
the family as a group of intimates tied together
through emotional attachment, common identity and
experience. Wamboldt & Reiss (1989) see the family as
a social construction of people sharing such elements.
They argue that the concept of family is self-defined
by those involved, rather than being a functionally or
demographically organized grouping.

Fitzpatrick and Badzinski (1994) view this last
approach as the most appropriate definition of the
family because it is flexible enough to allow various
types of groupings to be counted as "family" which may
not, in other definitions, such as families without
children, families consisting of same-sex partners,
etc. Vangelisti (1993) seems to agree with this
broader definition emphasizing that families develop
through long periods of time, generally more than that
of non-familial interpersonal relationships.

A number of definitions of the family seem to combine all of these definitions, such as Bochner's (1976) definition of the family as "an organized, naturally occurring relational interaction system, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images which evolve through the exchange of messages over time" (p.382).

Such definitions also follow in some way, the major research approaches taken in the field of family communication.

Approaches to family communication research.

Structural/Functional Approaches.

Structural/functional approaches to the study of family communication focus on structural components of a family's organization which influences, in some way, the communication patterns within the family. Functional approaches refer to particular goals of the family and the ability of family members to accomplish such goals. These include things such as family rules (Yerby and Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1982), whether the

13

organization of the family violates various societal goals and principles, the attainment of a particular social or socioeconomic status, etc. (Fitzpatrick and Badzinski, 1994).

Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Bochner (1990) provide a categorization of such family rules including rules governing: Family members' responsibilities; status and authority; appropriateness of behaviors in specific contexts; sexual and intimate behavior; family members' personality characteristics; and various communication behaviors. Such rules, they argue, contribute to the formation of the overall identity of the family, as well as serving as a foundation for what permissible communicative interaction is.

Fitzpatrick and Ritchie (1993) identify another approach to the family as a resource exchange system. That is, that the family exists as a conduit for providing and exchanging various resources within the family (Roloff, 1987). Such exchanges occur through

communication and are likewise governed by certain rules (Gottman, 1979).

The majority of the research stemming from this approach focuses on various interactions between family dyads (Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994), dyads including mother-father, parent-child and sibling relationships (Austin, 1993; Blum-Kulka, 1994; Davies, 1992; Edwards and Middleton, 1988; Infante et al., 1994; Ladd, 1991; Steier, 1982; Taylor, 1995). Such research regarding these relationships are said to impact marital satisfaction, and dissolution (Schapp, Buunk & Kerkstra, 1988; Gottman, 1993); caregiving, teaching, language and attachment among siblings (Dunn, 1983;); and parental messages to children (Vangelisti, 1992; Stafford and Bayer, 1993).

The Systems Approach.

The systems approach, as applied to the family, proposes that families cannot simply be understood by looking at a particular individual or pairs of individuals within a static family organization, but that, "families are living, ongoing entities,

15

organized wholes with members in a continuous,
interactive, patterned relationship with one another
extending over time and space" (Goldberg & Goldberg,
1991, p.33; Bloch, 1985; Constantine, 1986). This
view began to be advanced in the field of
communication by theorists who claimed that such
interactions within a family system are primarily
communicative behaviors (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson,
1967).

Gregory Bateson is credited with being one of the
first to study families as "holistic communication
systems" (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 1997, p.429).
Communication scholars focusing on the family utilize
such systems ideas as the link between parts and
wholes (Bavelas & Segal, 1982), information
processing; and feedback mechanisms "useful in
describing and explaining interactions within the
family" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Thus, family
communication researchers operating out of the systems
perspective focus on relationships, rather than
individuals, and communication messages (as well as

absent messages) within families that help them accomplish certain goals (the concept of equifinality) (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 1993). They, as well, cite several models of family processes developed out of the systems perspective including interactional perspectives that focus on messages (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1990) and the structural perspective which studies the social organization and goal attainment mechanisms operating within families, (Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987).

Fitzpatrick and Badzinski's (1994) usage of the term "exogenous variables" also seems to be an extension of the systems concept. They define this category of factors affecting family structures and internal family processes as "those that deal with the social, political, and economic environment in which a kin group finds itself." These include variables such as "value orientations, social class, and access to resources and social networks" (p.731). They argue that studies such as those conducted by

Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde & Whalen (1993) and Belsky (1990) that talk about emotional relationships between parent and child when children are socialized through non-parental caregivers, and the impact of historical perspectives of the family on current family functioning (Gordon, 1988) and ideological impacts on family identity (Thorne, 1992), are useful in strengthening theoretical work on the family. Such a view is in agreement with the statement by Hinde (1979) that family identity is shaped by the social and cultural context in which the family functions.

Family Rituals

Family rituals are seen to have some influence as to how a family constructs it's identity (Werner et al., 1993; Wolin and Bennett, 1984), as a structure for guiding various communication actions (Werner & Baxter, 1994), and as acts which provide temporal continuity within the family (Altman, 1993; Werner et al., 1993).

Several definitions of ritual are used in the literature. Bossard and Boll (1950) conceive of

18

family rituals as "a pattern of prescribed formal behavior, pertaining to some specific event, occasion or situation, which tends to be repeated over and over again" (p.9). Philpsen (1987) defines ritual as a "communication form in which there is a structured sequence of symbolic acts, the correct performance of which pays homage to something that is sacred in either a religious or secular sense" (In Fitzpatrick & Badzinski, 1994, p.366).

Wolin and Bennett (1984) categorize family rituals into three categories: celebrations; traditions; and patterned interactions. Celebrations include occasions seen and practiced among many in a society that are special to family relationships including weddings, funerals, holidays such as Easter and Christmas and civil holidays such as the 4th of July. Traditions, they contend, are less cultural in nature such as the celebrating of birthdays and family reunions. Patterned interactions are routines practiced among certain family members such as family dinner. Other types of rituals that have been studied

include ritualized play (Bakhtin, 1968), and

"communication rituals" (Katriel and Philipsen, 1981).

Consistent with a systems or ecological approach

to the family, Roberts (1988) argues that rituals are

dynamic events that change the dynamics of the

families engaged in such rituals.

In summary, the main approaches to the study of

the family include structural/functional approaches

which focuses on the goals of family and how they are

attained by family members, as well as the rules that

govern family interaction. This includes those rules

surrounding family rituals that dictate, to some

degree, how members of the family communicate with

each other. Systems approaches focus instead on

relationships within the family and how the family

operates as a holistic system of interacting

individuals.

Limitations of the Research

There are several criticisms of the existing

literature in family communication that I believe

provide avenues for future research, two of which

directly relate to the present study. First, while most in the field would acknowledge, in some way the usefulness of a systems perspective in studying the family, little research fully takes and ecological perspective to the study of family communication. That is, little research explores how larger social systems (cultural, economic, social), impact various aspects of family identity and family communication.

Following from this, little research examines the cultural environment of families or conduct comparative research among families from different racial and cultural backgrounds. One recent study by Socha and Diggs (1999) begins to point out the importance of such research. These authors argue that the consideration of race and culture are important to research in family communication because: (a)families influence children's racial/cultural socialization; (b)family communication is a significant context in which individual ethnic identity formation and management takes place; and (c)because family communication gives us information about racial/ethnic

groups outside of our own, allowing us to better communicate with people outside our individual cultural frame of reference.

The researchers point to studies by Asante (1988, 1990) on the larger "Afro-centric" perspective and its applications to the family, as well as Hofstede's (1980; 1981) dimensions of "cultural variability" which includes discussions of "individualistic" versus "collectivistic" families. So, while some has been done, Socha and Diggs are correct in their statement that, "the family communication literature, which has shown great sensitivity in its efforts to define the term *family*, has spent so many years neglecting ethnic culture, and African Americans" (p. 21).

One final limitation is that the research in family communication is dominated by the positivistic research paradigm which seeks to explain predict and control (and some would add, understand) behavior. Such a predilection to the study of family communication doesn't allow for the study of broader areas of consideration and the intersection of such

areas on the family. This study, which takes a descriptive, hermeneutic approach, allows greater flexibility to inquire about the intersection of family identity, ritual communication and culture at the same time.

The Family Ecology Approach

As mentioned, relatively little of the family communication literature expands itself to consider the larger social systems in which families operate. However, much, if not most of the research out of sociology takes this approach to the study of families and family dynamics. In this brief explanation of the ecological approach, I will discuss first the larger field of human ecology from which the family approach is derived. Second, I will discuss some of the basic tenets of the ecological approach applied to families. Third, I will describe several areas in which this approach has dealt with.

The term "ecology" was developed in the field of zoology by Ernest Haekel who, in 1869 proposed the need to study organisms in their natural environments,

specifically the interrelationships of those organisms with the environment. The terms and ideas of such an approach were later adopted to study human interactions with their surroundings. This trend began in sociology (Burgess, 1925; Park, 1915) and was soon taken up in the field of geography (Barrows, 1923), anthropology (Steward, 1955; Taylor, 1934), psychology (Lewin, 1935), and political science (Sprout & Sprout, 1965).

Urie Bronfenbrenner is credited with being one of the foremost scholars to advance an ecological approach in human development (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Cochran et al., 1982). Bronfenbrenner (1979) categorized four levels of ecological systems. The family constituted the primary microsystem in which human development takes place. The mesosystems included relationships between the family and other institutions in which development occurs such as a school. Work settings and social networks, those environments outside of the family were called exosystems. Finally, the macrosystem included that

cultural and ideological environment in which these others systems participate.

The ecological approach is similar in some ways to systems theory. Bubolz and Sontag (1993) cite Miller's (1975) conceptualization of "living systems as existing in space and time, made up of matter and energy organized by information" as "applicable to the family ecosystem" (p.425). These authors also agree with the proposition by Buckley (1967) that, "a complex adaptive model characterizes systems with higher levels of organization than systems at equilibrium or homeostatic levels." "Families are complex adaptive systems, capable of elaboration and organization and morphogenetic and reorientation levels of feedback" (p.425).

Bubolz & Sontag (1993) contend that an ecological approach holds that the quality of life of humans and families are intertwined with that of their environment and add the following to their list of assumptions based on this premise:

1. In family ecology, the properties of families and the environment, the structure of environmental settings, and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed as a system;

2. Families are a part of the total life system interdependent with other living and non-living environments;

3. Families are semi-open, goal-directed, dynamic, adaptive systems; they can respond, change, develop, and act on and modify their environment;

4. All parts of the environment are interrelated and influence each other;

5. Families interact with multiple environments;

6. Information organizes, activates, and transforms matter-energy in the family ecosystem;

7. Interactions between families and environments are guided by physical and biological laws of

nature and human-derived rules, such as social

norms, that are related to use and allocation

of resources, role expectations, and

distribution of power;　　-

8. Environments do not determine human behavior

but pose limitations and constraints as well as

possibilities and opportunities for families;

9. Families have varying degrees of control and

freedom with respect to environmental

interactions; and

10. Decision-making is the central control

process in families that directs actions for

attaining individual and family goals.

Collectively, decisions and actions of families

have an impact on society, culture and the

natural environment. (p.425-426).

Examples of Research in this Perspective

Research in this perspective abounds in the field

of sociology, anthropology and psychology. The

following are just two examples of such research

studies and findings.

Harriet Pipes McAdoo (1993) contends that the ecological approach allows us to better understand "components of the family's religious, cultural, and racial identity" (p.298). Such a socio-cultural environment, she says, is made up of the rituals, beliefs and values of the family. McAdoo claims that the study of such environments reveal vast differences between ethnic families or families of color and white families. Such an understanding of how and why this is the case, she claims, provides a better framework in which to effectively deal with families in the context of therapy.

William Julius Wilson (1996) explores the family in the context of work, the economy and social (urban) space. In his work, Wilson explores the nature of family identity in the context of joblessness, neighborhood interactions, ghetto-related behavior and race, showing how these systems in which many urban, black poor exist has shaped and re-shaped what constitutes the family and the way in which families interact amongst themselves. Other such examples of

such research are replete in the sociological

literature (Anderson & Becchofer, 1994; Garbarino et

al., 1982; Goldschleider & Goldschleider, 1989;

Stichter & Parpart, 1990; Vannoy & Dubeck, 1998).

Death and Death Ritual Practices

Bowman (1988) firmly situates death and the

rituals associated with it, in the primary context of

the family. Arguing that death and bereavement is

primarily a family crisis, Bowman asserts that the

death of a family member breaks the mutual

relationships and patterns of interaction within the

family. Consequently the emotional attachment to the

deceased is greatest among those family members with

which the now dead member once interacted.

Bowman argues that now, with the growing

separation of individuals and lack of community, death

even more separates family from other social networks

such as friends, acquaintances, etc. He also notes

that it is the family that bears the primary

responsibility for the dead. It is the family who

must: file legally required paperwork, prepare the

body for the funeral, invite clergy to officiate at the funeral, secure a cemetery plot or arrange for cremation, invite ushers and pall bearers to serve, and to notify other family friends and acquaintances of the death and funeral arrangements. This occurs all within a twenty-four to thirty-six hour period.

Thus, any research concerning death, by necessity, must taken into account various aspects of the family, along with the other networks in play during the death ritual process. These aspects have revealed several important conclusions in the literature on death and the death ritual process.

The American Way of Death

Research on death and the death ritual process in America generally focuses on the larger European way of death and how it has evolved in America. The literature generally focuses on two main areas, the growth of the funeral "market" and specific burial and funeral customs practiced.

Jessica Mitford (1998) was one of the first scholars to chronicle the transformation of American

death practices from one centered around family and church, to one dominated by the capital market. She contends that a long and pervasive myth of the emphasis on "proper" funerals and burials has spawned a new desire of funerals as events focused less on mourning and more on the presentation of the dead during the funeral process in a dignified and flawless manner. This myth, she claims has created a professional industry that continually asserts its role in the practice of American funerals. She writes:

> A new mythology, essential to the twentieth-century American funeral rite, has grown up — or rather has been built up step-by-step - to justify the peculiar customs surrounding the disposal of our dead. And just as the witch doctor must be convinced of his own infallibility in order to maintain a hold over his clientele, so the funeral industry has had to "sell itself" on its articles of faith in the course of passing them along to the public. (p.20-21).

Mitford describes several "myths" that have fueled the economic growth of the funeral industry and their dominating role in American funerals. These myths include: (a) The claim that today's funeral procedures are rooted in "American tradition"; (b) That the funeral industry is only fulfilling the demand of American mourners to "keep up with the Jones's to the end" (p.21); (c) A variety of pseudo-psychological myths that create the need of the living to be left with positive mental picture of the deceased and the need for "grief therapy"; and (d) A new set of terminology to "replace the direct and serviceable vocabulary of former times" (p.22), including the changes from "undertaker" to "funeral director", "coffins" to "caskets", "hearses" to "coaches", and other such terms.

At the time of her publication's writing, Mitford cites the average American funeral cost at $7,800. Mitford's claims about the growth and domination of the modern funeral industry has given rise to another

body of research focused primarily on the work of the funeral director.

Barley (1983) concludes that the work of the funeral director is a production, meant to construct a particular communication of reality. As a constructed event, the funeral director's mission is to produce a "flawless funeral", defined by controlling complications, such as events and delays through proper foresight and planning, and by controlling the "disruptive" expression of emotion by mourners during the funeral process. Such emotions, these professionals claim, can interrupt the dignity and pace of the funeral. The dissociative nature of funeral practices has resulted in the careful scripting of each phase of the death ritual process which typically includes the following events: taking the call, removing the body, making arrangements with the family, preparation of the body, the wake, funeral and the committing of the body to the ground (p.12).

Barley describes that the other most important aspect of the funeral director's task is the care of

the body, making it more palatable for viewing by people who see dead bodies less and less because of the modern lengthening of life. The preparation of the body, which includes embalming and restoration, in terms of the deceased's visage, clothing, and positioning in the casket "involve creating a set of signs to communicate to funeral participants the image of a person sleeping restfully" (p.13).

Unruh (1979) echoes Barley's research, but focuses on the funeral director's management of risk in the funeral process. Unruh characterizes the occupation of funeral directors as one that must routinely confront and deal with risks in their attempt to produce the flawless funeral. These sources of risk, according to Unruh, include: (a) incongruent organizational appearances, including the management of organizational ideology, personal appearance and professional interaction; (b) possible intrusions, including the risk of error or unbelievability; and (c) unpredictable responses, including the display of emotion which, Unruh notes,

34

the reasonable parameters of which are cultural. The way Unruh observes funeral workers dealing with this problem is through guidance and the segregation of performers from the audience – in this case, the family from other levels of spectators.

Research by Pino (1980) seeks to explore the notion of conflict between clergy (the traditional managers of the death ritual) and the funeral director, which seems to currently dominate such events. His research suggests that while conflict is evident, it does not seem to be prevalent. Sources of conflict tended to arise from differences in opinion regarding whether the funeral should be held at home, a funeral home or church, and whether the purpose of the funeral is primarily religious or social/psychological.

The research in the American funeral process has been one of tempered extravagance, dominated by market forces and controlled by business professionals, more so than family, community and church.

Other writers and researchers have studied

changes in the philosophy of death and death rituals

in America. Saum (1977), who reflected on popular

writings in pre-civil war America described (largely

European) Americans' vision of death as one that is an

imminent fact of life (as the country dealt with high

mortality rates), as well as an event of endless

fascination. Influenced, almost singularly, by

Christian spirituality and doctrine, Americans

instilled in themselves and their children that death

was a spiritual inevitability that was part of God's

plan and should be embraced as a spiritual event which

resulted in "homegoing", the removal of the deceased

from a world of trouble to a better place.

Bowman (1977) has viewed the change in philosophy

of death and the function and practice of death

rituals in the context of urbanization, which, in

part, brought diverse ways of death and dying into

contact with each other. Bowman cites the rise of

cities as a primary condition that supplanted death

rituals as an intensely familial and communal event.

36

For much of the time in rural communities, the family
was primarily responsible for performing all of the
tasks of the death ritual process. The growth of
urban spaces made such practices less feasible and the
family began to have far less of a role in the
process. The funeral was moved from the home in which
it commonly occurred. Families decreased drastically
in size, were scattered about in various locations and
people became less neighborly. These things, along
with others, Bowman suggests, gave rise to the
insurgence of professional funeral services that were
discussed earlier.

Bowman cites three social effects of the modern
funeral: a sense of solidarity in the group,
reassurance of the validity of family ideals, and a
heightened rapport of the family with the community.
This latter desired effect is accomplished only when
the community of interacting participants in the
community is small enough to warrant such interaction.
He also gives three elements which may, in urban
settings, prevent a fuller functioning of the death

ritual process: (a) The growing multiplicity of organizations in urban society that has prevented the necessity that the deceased be an integral part of an interacting number of individuals; (b) The diversity of ideals held by various segments of the population and in the improvement of social ideals in a changing society and (c) The separation of the family from a coherent social organization and its connection with only a few, unconnected organizations. Other such conclusions are shard by other authors such as Stannard (1977) and Mitford (1963).

African American Death Rituals

It is difficult to trace what specific attitudes towards death and death ritual practices were held over by blacks in America, from their African Ancestry (Pleck, 2000). However, cursory evidence seems to suggest that some aspects of African spirituality, views regarding the dead and specific practices can be seen in African American communities, particularly during the period of slavery.

Pleck notes, for instance that during slavery,

slaves were permitted to carry on the lengthy funerals

characteristic of those in West Africa, where most

slaves originated. Some death rituals in West Africa,

such as that of the Ibo tribe, lasted for several

weeks and included multiple burials (Thomas, 1917).

African death rituals carved out distinctions among

family members as to specific roles and

responsibilities during the ritual process (Thomas,

1920).

Pleck (2000) argues that while many of the

specific African traditions did not survive the middle

passage, African slaves did retain their beliefs in

spirits, which caused them to pay specific attention

to the body.

> The spirit had to be treated properly – and
>
> needed food – to embark on its journey into the
>
> spirit world. A hungry spirit could linger near
>
> the grave and wander from there to cause harm to
>
> the living. Two important ways of propitiating
>
> the spirit were the "second burial" and

distinctive forms of grave decoration... Second

burials also functioned as memorial services and

were held from six weeks to a year after death.

(p.200).

According to Pleck, this aspect of the ritual

persisted among slaves in the rural South up until the

first third of the twentieth century. The second

burial followed the primary burial in which family and

neighbors fulfilled certain obligations to the

deceased's family. Women usually cooked an elaborate

meal for mourners at the church. This second burial

was a community event that also served as a family

reunion. It was during this public event where a

lively sermon was performed by a preacher and

significant displays of emotion were prevalent. The

emotional displays seemed to purge the grief from

mourners. So much so Pleck writes that "Southern

whites could not understand what they perceived as

'quick recovery from grief' among blacks, but they

also did not much respect black emotionalism" (p.201).

Genovese (1974) also identified other customs prevalent during slavery that mimicked African customs such as making sure the deceased's head was positioned to the left before burial, the digging of graves from east to west, and the burying of food with the deceased.

Sobel (1979) used the term "African/American sacred cosmos" to delineate the unique spiritual and religious guiding force of American slaves. This cosmos was a continuation, in part, of African beliefs and a product, in part of the contact of African spirituality with protestant Christianity prevalent on the slave plantations of America. The Anglican Sacred Cosmos, Sobel writes, was offered to the slaves and largely rejected by them. The Anglican cosmos eschewed "paganism" and "superstition" – their characterization of the beliefs the African slaves brought to America.

However, Genovese (1974) notes that the slaves mixed elements of their beliefs with that of the Christian beliefs of their masters to form a uniquely

African American spiritual and religious foundation

that would provide blacks in America with a strong

identity and bond of solidarity. "Folk belief,

including the belief in magic, constituted a vital

element in the making of the slaves' own version of

Christianity" (p.280) Genovese writes. The origin of

this unique African American religion, she says, was

built on two religious contradictions: (a)

Christianity bound master and slave together in

universal communion while contributing to their

separation; and (b) It gave the slaves a collective

strength that rested on a politically dangerous kind

of individualism.

Genovese notes that although many slave masters

were skeptical and restrictive in the slaves' practice

of burying and mourning their dead, most seemed

willing to let them grieve as a community unto

themselves. Genoveses' research agrees with that of

the others cited in this section in that the slave

funeral functioned to reunite family and build social

and community bonds. She notes that slaves usually

42

preferred night funerals because it would give neighboring family and slaves the opportunity to attend. Many of these rituals were elaborate, in part, so as to sublimate their social position in this new world and to escort the spirit of the deceased from a world of suffering and pain under slavery, into one in which they would be "free" and at home with God.

Christianity, and their rituals have heavily influenced African Americans' view of death by contemporary market forces pervasive in today's society. Research in this area strongly suggests the ongoing differences between blacks and whites in the way death rituals are performed, and the role it has in social and family life. Yet, few research studies in this area take up these contentions in contemporary social scientific literature.

Chapter 3

Theory & Method

Dimensional Accrual/Dissociation

The theory of dimensional accrual/dissociation (Kramer, 1999) seeks to explain the varieties of cultural expression that exist in the world. Kramer claims that this theory of social interaction/communication "can be used to explain any social behavior/communication including other theoretical artifacts, even the bewildering array of other conflicting theories of communication…" (p. xiii.). Kramer bases this theory on the definition of culture as expression and space and time as necessary conditions for such expression. Thus civilizational variations in spatio-temporal articulation account for the myriad of differences of cultural expression across the globe. According to Kramer, these various spatio-temporal articulations are evident in all contingent expressions. He states that:

> There is nothing "behind" expressions, which
>
> include architectures, religions, philosophies,

modes of transportation and communication,

entertainments, and so forth. Dimensions pervade

all contingencies. Expressions like rituals,

sciences, high ways, art works, utensils, and

leisure activities all present styles of

configuring space time—moods or modes of being.

(p.x).

Thus, space and time are not causal elements in the

creation of culture. There are different spaces and

times immanent in articulation or expression.

The theory, based on Gebser's (1985) notion of

mutations of culture and consciousness, contends that

at different epochs in human civilization, very

different expressions of the space-time contingent has

been dominant. These three primary types of

dimensional expressivity include: (a) the univalent

magic/idolic; (b) bi-valent mythic/symbolic; (c) the

tri-valent perspectival/signalic-codal. The theory

holds that as dimensionality accrues from magic-idolic

to perspectival-signalic-codal, dissociation in the

form of emotional and semantic detachment from concrete expression increases.

Identity, in the magic/idolic dimension is extremely collectivistic. The individual is non-existent and the group or family, identified and solidified through blood ties takes precedent. With this form of communication, meaning is embedded in both the expressed and the expression where there is complete unity and interchangeability.

The accrual of the mythic world identified by symbolic communication, a separation between the expressed and the expression exists. The mythic world is "am-bivalent" (p.xv.). With myth comes the reality of interpretation. It brings along the idea of author/reader, the reader given the ability to reflect upon and interpret the symbols of the writer. The distancing of emotion in myth is seen best in Kramer's example of the crucifix, a symbol of a god. If one steals a crucifix, even though there may be strong emotional attachment to the symbol, they are not interchangeable. It is not magic. "God" has not been

stolen. Thus, symbols are not completely arbitrary,

they do have a strong connection to the object it

symbolizes. However, unlike magic, symbols and

actions are not coincidence (arbitrary), but are not

identical.

 With the accrual of perspectival/signalic-codal

communication dissociation is further increased.

Symbols (language) are almost completely dissociated

from their object of meaning that it becomes

arbitrary. As such, there is a severe loss of

emotional attachment. Everything, in effect, becomes

the same. Because of its dissociative nature

everything is open to manipulation.

 Thus, Kramer argues that,

 Dissociation serves the will-to-power. The

 perspectival world is spatial and thus linear.

 Time is a fixed line segmented into three parts:

 past, present and future. Free of a past that no

 longer is, and a future that is not yet, the late

 modern can do what he or she wills. Such "a"

 person sees him- or herself as a detached object,

47

a mere trace or echo of a never present self.

There is no extended responsibility, as in

ancestor worship or future reincarnation. The

modern perspectival individual is relatively free

of such mythic cyclical obligations, free of

mythical and magical spaces and times. But the

"other side" of freedom is loss—being al-one.

Such a person has no possessions and cannot be

possessed. They claim not to speak of "my team"

or "my city" or "my race" or "my country" or "my

language." (p.xvii.).

Because African American death rituals are a form

of expression, one would expect to see, then, evidence

of these three communication dimensions, as well as

the dissociation that is expressed. As both Kramer

(2000) and Gebser (1985) note, the accrual of

dimensions of cultural expression does not negate the

instance of others. Thus, any expression may have a

dominant mode expressed, but as well contain elements

of other forms of expression as well. Specifically,

this study seeks to use this theory to explain they

myriad of interactions that occur in the death ritual process.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is concerned, in general, with understanding human behavior and meaning, as opposed to trying to predict and explain it. The perspective of hermeneutics used in this research follows that of Gadamer who believed that hermeneutics was concerned with more than simply bridging the historical gap in order to gain an authentic or factual understanding of a given text. Gadamer (1976) explains that the task of the interpreter is to bring to conscious awareness the meanings of a given phenomenon.

Gadamer contrasts the social engineer, whose motive of research is concerned with manipulation, control, and technological advancement, with the hermeneutician which is interested in understanding - in gaining knowledge for knowledge's sake. He argues that hermeneutics is a prerequisite for all scientific inquiry because only through understanding can we generate the questions we as researchers ask.

Gadamer sums up the theoretical task of

hermeneutics in this way:

> Philosophical hermeneutics takes as its task the
>
> opening up of the hermeneutic dimension in its
>
> full scope, showing its fundamental significance
>
> for our entire understanding of the world and
>
> thus for all the various forms in which this
>
> understanding manifests itself: from inter-human
>
> communication to manipulation of society; from
>
> person experience by the individual in society to
>
> the way in which he encounters society. (p.18).

In his book, _Truth and Method_ (1975), Gadamer further

explains what is meant by the concept of "horizon."

One's horizon is, essentially one's perspective, or in

the words of Gadamer, "The horizon is the range of

vision that includes everything that can be seen from

a particular vantage point." (p.302). When we try to

understand we not only seek to place ourselves in the

position of the object to be understood, we "learn to

look beyond what is close at hand." (p.305). Thus,

the task of the hermeneutician is to, as it has been

put, "walk a mile in another's shoes." This is to say that the researcher seeks to view the world from the vantage point of the individual with whom we are conversing.

Gadamer uses the term "effective history" to stress that the hermeneutic problem is to address history not simply as a retelling of "facts". Rather, history is always already a part of any hermeneutic analysis. The events of the past presentiate themselves in the perspective of the researcher, effecting what one chooses as an object of inquiry and what questions are asked by the researcher. Effective history situates the researcher in a particular hermeneutic horizon that allows him to shed new or a different light on the object of research.

Effective history or consciousness is reflexive in that what history means today is a product of history. Thus, the data presented in this research is a product of the research project of the social sciences of the late 20th century, the horizons of the death ritual

phenomenon and my horizons as a researcher, interpreter and mediator of communicative phenomenon.

My particular horizon positions me from the vantage point of being an educated African American male in my late twenties. I have been involved in black family life and the rituals of family life including that of death. As well, I have both personal and scholarly interest in the topic of this research project. These aspects of my situation, then are fused with those of the death ritual process in presenting an application of communication theory to the understanding of African American family death rituals.

As an insider, I am afforded the privilege of being, in some way, in the same horizon as those I am inquiring about, while, at the same time, I go beyond this as a researcher, interpreting these various horizons to a larger audience. As such, I am not proposing that I re-present the death ritual phenomenon with some validity, but present an understanding of the phenomenon interpreted through my situated position as

a researcher applying communication theory to the this phenomenon.

While hermeneutics has no pre-set rules for conducting research, researchers doing hermeneutics tend to prefer the ethnographic interview method and thick description, for data collection purposes (E. M. Kramer, personal communication, November, 1999).

Connecting Phenomenology, Hermeneutics and Ethnography

Though phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnography are, in many ways, different, there is a connection between the three forms of epistemology that make them relevant for this research project.

Husserl's (1970) notion of transcendental phenomenology opens the field of scientific investigation to not only treat material objects, but all lived experience. That is, he contends that immateriality does not mean something is not real. So, in this sense, ethnography and other systems of knowledge systems which concern themselves with non-material (objects without spatial extension and temporal duration) realities such as cultures,

languages, signification and meaning, and motives are possible, appropriate and worthy items of scientific analysis.

One point at which phenomenology and hermeneutics meet is the idea that Husserl (1970) calls the "natural attitude", Gebser (1985) calls "perspective" and Gadamer (1976) and other hermeneuticians call the "horizon". Husserl defined the "natural attitude" as those presuppositions held about the lived experience of various phenomena. For Husserl, the natural attitude must be abandoned to open up the door of inquiry to those areas previously mentioned. However, hermeneuticians such as Heiddeger and Gadamer, believed that because we ourselves as scientists are also part of the life-world, we cannot completely separate ourselves from our perspective or horizon, that vantage point from which we view the world. As such, they argued, the hermeneutic endeavor is not one to explicate essential forms, but to interpret meaning, leading to understanding. It is this idea of the researcher being a part of the life-world, acting

as an interpreter of meaning that connects

hermeneutics with ethnography.

As "thick description" (Geertz, 1973),

ethnography is concerned with symbolic action, the

systematic way in which meaning is socially

constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1967), and the

intersubjectivity of experience and meaning that make

communication possible (Garfinkel, 1967). The

ethnographer is in the place of interpreting how

systems of meaning are created and sustained in a

given community.

This process, as Geertz explains, situates the

ethnographer as a minor participant in the particular

phenomenon, but requires that our inquiry, "brings us

into touch with the lives of strangers" (p.16),

because, "It is not worth it to go round the world to

count the cats in Zanzibar" (Thoreau, In Geertz,

p.16). As an ethnographer, we are in-touch with the

people whose experience and system of signification

and communication we are trying to understand and

explain. "We begin with our own interpretations of

what our informants are up to, or think they are up to" (p.15).

The one common thread between all of these is that each seeks to better understand and explain the nature of lived experience by focusing on the motivation of people as they act and interact in everyday life. All maintain the conviction that life is meaningful and makes some sense and that to reject that for ideological ("positive" mechanistic) reasons is not justifiable.

Ethnographic Interviews & Observations

Using the method of ethnography in this study will be useful in exploring the theoretical ideas previously explained. As stated, the theory of dimensional accrual/dissociation focuses on emotional detachment in relationships in various forms of cultural expressions. It relates, in the case of death rituals, to the variety of ways in which family members communicate to each other about death, the symbolic acts they utilize to communicate these ideas, their relationship with other entities outside of the

family and how they related to the deceased. Doing ethnographic observations and interviews of those close to the death ritual process will allow me to get gain various perspectives about how the ritual is carried out and the communication among and between family members and other networks in which they interact with over the course of the death ritual process.

The ethnographic approach, using partially structured interviews, as well as observation is particularly appropriate for this study. Ethnography allows the researcher to gain deeper insight into communication phenomena than most other research methods. Because research in the area of death rituals is scarce in the communication literature, the ethnographic approach lends itself to very rich description of the communication patterns evident in the death ritual process of African Americans. It also gives me, the researcher, the ability to gain access to insider knowledge about one of the most private rituals that takes place in family life.

Thorough description of this communication phenomena is the first appropriate step in building a firm foundation for future research concerning social interaction in the performance of family rituals, family identity and how they are shaped through culture.

In their book on interpreting communication research, Frey, Botan, Friedman and Kreps (1992) give several criteria for evaluating quality in ethnographic research using both interviews and observation. Sound research using observation, they claim, include: (a) Whether the method is appropriate for the phenomenon being studied, including whether the observational setting was natural, whether the observed site is an appropriate example of the general practice and whether sufficient time was spent observing the phenomenon under question; (b) The appropriate position of the researcher as an observer, the awareness of subjects of their being studied, the lack of obtrusiveness on the part of the researcher and the qualifications of the observer; and (c) The

quality of observational recording, including whether
all communication behaviors were recorded, was there
sufficient detail in recording communication
behaviors, whether behaviors were linked with other
behaviors, as well as what occurred before and after
those behaviors, and the impartiality of the observer
in recording data (p.260-262).

I believe that observation is critical to this
study as it is the only real way to gain access to the
actual participants in the death ritual process,
without the intrusiveness of family members currently
mourning one's death. The observations in this study
will be carried out on site, at the place of the
funeral (preliminary interviews indicate that the
actual public funeral would be the only acceptable
part of the ritual process open for observation).
Because of the nature of the phenomenon under
investigation, I have chosen to be a covert observer
so as to not impose upon mourners.

Because this is largely an exploratory project, I
believe that the numbers of observations conducted are

appropriate. Conducting observations across racial and denominational lines allows me to draw some conclusions that are generalizable. Careful attention was given to observing detailed communication behavior, as well as detailing the circumstances surrounding such actions. Again, because this is an exploratory study, I began my observations without preconceived categories of communication behavior, leaving that until my data could be reviewed thoroughly.

Finally, as mentioned above regarding hermeneutics, I do not believe it is possible to conduct research, ethnographic or otherwise, without my perspective as a researcher influencing the research. As an observer, there will be certain things that prompt me to notice certain behaviors, or view some as more relevant or interesting than others. However, these things being said, I believe I have the skills and training necessary to do competent work.

The authors cited above also cite the following as important evaluative criteria for ethnographic

interview research: (a) Was the interview method applied appropriately (was this the best method for gathering data?), including, whether the interviewer fosters trust among informants, whether questions are asked in a way that doesn't bias respondents' responses, whether the interviews were conducted at places conducive for frank discussion and whether the primary researcher collected the interview data; (b) Appropriate selection of respondents, including, their representativeness, the quality of selection criteria, the trustworthiness of respondents and whether a sufficient number of interviews were conducted; and (c) Interview protocol, including appropriate material covered, sequencing of questions and whether interviews were conducted one-to-one.

The interview method is appropriate for this study because it also allows the researcher to gain deep insight into what is being studied. As well, it allows the researcher to gain some verification of behaviors observed in the observation process.

My background in the church and religious
circles, as well as my racial/cultural background of
being an African American, I believe, will convey to
interviewees that I am someone they can talk to, be
frank with and will be someone who will be able to
adequately understand what it is they are conveying to
me.

My preliminary interview and observation, as well
as past research in the area of death rituals indicate
that my interview participants, made up of clergy and
funeral directors are appropriate, since, they are
professionals who can convey both the professional, as
well as personal nature of their roles in the death
process.

As with the observations, the selection of
respondents across racial and denominational lines,
allows me some room for generalizability and a
reasonable claim to representativeness. This is
especially true given the fact that because pastors
and funeral directors belong to professions that are,
to a large degree, standardized, they can speak

regarding matters beyond their specific church or business. The interviews in this study are done one-to-one, face-to-face, by the primary researcher. Interview questions will flow from the most general to the most specific. As well, the partial structure of the interview allows me to probe other areas of interests that may present itself during the course of an interview.

Research Design

Participants.

The participants for this study include two groups, pastors of medium to large size churches and funeral directors. Pastors were selected on the basis of the dominant racial make-up of their congregations and by denomination. Three pastors of predominately African American churches and three pastors of predominately white churches were selected from three of the most prominent religious denominations in the U.S., namely Baptist (including Southern Baptist, National Baptist and Independent Baptist), Methodist (Including United Methodist, Congregational, African

63

Methodist Episcopal, and African Methodist Episcopal
Zion), and Charismatic (including Pentecostal,
Holiness, Church of God, and Apostolic).
Specifically, the African American pastors interviewed
in this study represented Baptist, African Methodist
Episcopal Zion and Church of God In Christ
(Pentecostal). The white pastors interviewed
represented Baptist, Christian and Methodist churches.

The other group of participants includes funeral
directors (mortuary directors). Two funeral directors
that cater to the African American community, and two
that cater to the white community were interviewed.
All participants were from the Oklahoma City
metropolitan area.

In the following chapters, interviewees are
identified in parenthesis in the following manner: a).
(BB), Black Baptist Pastor; b). (BM), Black Methodist
Pastor; c). (BP), Black Pentecostal Pastor; d). (WB),
White Baptist Pastor; e). (WM), White Methodist
Pastor; f). (WP); White Pentecostal Pastor; g).
(BFD1), Black Funeral Director 1; h). (BFD2), Black

Funeral Director 2; I). (WFD1), White Funeral Director

1; j). (WFD2), White Funeral Director 2.

Apparatus.

Each interview participant was questioned using a

pre-set list of questions developed by the researcher

after having conducted some initial observations and

interviews. The interview structure allows for the

possibility of following up on questions and making

further inquiries that may not be included in the set

of original questions.

Procedures.

Participants for this study were originally

contacted by phone, using the Oklahoma City phone

directory, asking them to participate in the study.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed

following the interview. The transcripts were then

read several times to elicit information regarding the

major research questions of this study.

Opportunities for funeral observations were

solicited from the ministers and funeral directors

that were interviewed in the study. Of the actual

funerals I attended, most I happened to be invited to by friends who were attending a funeral of someone they knew in some way. The others were a result of the opportunities from pastors and funeral directors that indicated that it would be appropriate for me to attend. My role in this process was as a covert observer. Family members present did not know of my role at the funeral and none of the family was questioned regarding this study at anytime at or following the funeral service. The funeral was the only part of the ritual process I attended as most informed me that that was the only appropriate event for me to attend. Careful notes were taken on every aspect of the funeral process and careful attention was noted regarding specific communication patterns evident in the funeral process.

Chapter 4

Describing the Death Ritual Process

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a thorough description of the death ritual process of African Americans, utilizing field notes of my six funeral observations and the information gathered from informants who included pastors and funeral directors.

Because of the similarity of black and white death rituals, I use this chapter to answer both research questions one and two by describing the death ritual process (question 1) in the context of black and white differences in carrying out the ritual process (question 2). Many of the issues dealt with in the descriptive portion of this chapter, will be revisited in subsequent chapters of analysis.

Black-White Differences in Death Ritual Process

The question of whether there are differences between black and white families in the performance of death rituals was justified because of the vast differences in history and experience of both ethnic

groups. My involvement in my African American family death rituals as a child, and my experiences in the death rituals of whites later in life, led me to believe that the research might show some significant differences in the manner in which the ritual is carried out among both groups.

However, according to the data in this study, there seems to be few significant differences between the manner in which black and white families carry out the ritual process. Both groups generally have the same events throughout the ritual process, mainly the a). Wake or viewing; b). The funeral; and 3). Burial or internment. The only difference between the two seems to be the degree to which people express emotion and the freedom of such expression. The following gives a brief description of these events that mark the beginning and end of the formal death ritual process.

Wake or Visitation.

The wake is generally the first formal "event" of the death ritual process. The wake has historically

been a part of African American death rituals as a
time for people to view, for the last time, the body
of the deceased, visit with the family and stay with
the body throughout the night to make sure the
deceased did not want for anything or that the spirit
of the deceased did not return angry over something he
or she had experienced in the after-life (Perry,
1993). While the wake has also been historically been
part of the death ritual process of whites, it was not
performed for these same reasons. Currently, the wake
is characterized as a formal time for people to
interact with the family of the deceased, offering
condolences, exchanging stories, etc. There is usually
no formal service during this time.

Most black and white families have renamed the
traditional wake and the majority of pastors and
funeral directors interviewed for this study referred
to it as, "the viewing", or "visitation", focusing on
the main purpose of the event.[1] Because of the change
in focus on just viewing the remains of the deceased,

most of the time this occurs at the church (the

general site of the funeral service), or at the

funeral home, as opposed to the family home where it

had been traditionally customary[2]:

> The visitation hours, and I think now… and I like
>
> this process, the visitation with the family is
>
> usually one hour prior to the funeral itself.
>
> The visitation with the family includes viewin'
>
> the body or the remains if you care to open the
>
> body[casket], and giving your condolences to the
>
> family- shaking their hands, or hugging them, or
>
> just sayin' "you have my sympathy," or whatever
>
> you decide to say, no set tone to what you will
>
> say (BP).

This comment about the visitation is characteristic of

what and how most informants referred to this

particular event.

---

[1] The truncation of this event in the death ritual process is
discussed further in chapter seven.
[2] During slavery and several years beyond, wakes were held at the
home of the deceased's family. Informants indicate that that
wakes are still held, to some degree, on the East Coast.

<u>Funeral.</u>

The funeral is the most public event during the death ritual process. One pastor termed it "the main event". It is the event in which any person having a connection with the deceased or family of the deceased attends, regardless of the degree of the relationship.

Most funerals that I observed tended to follow the same order and include the same behaviors. The following is a brief record of the events that took place during a typical funeral service I observed:

The viewing of the body took place prior to the scheduled 1:00 service time. People arrived as early as 12:00 noon. At about 12:40 a procession of ushers walked down the aisle, viewed the body and shook the hands of family members. Programs (obituaries) were passed out at about 12:45 by ushers and mortuary attendees. The officiating minister entered and sat on the platform at 12:50, kneeling to pray and then was seated. He was joined after by three additional clergy of the host church and of the church organization.

71

The choir entered about 12:55. Slow organ
music began at about 12:58. About same time, a
mortuary attendee comes up to the officiating
clergy and goes over an item in the schedule. At
1:00, mortuary attendees removed flowers from the
casket, closed it and then sat the flowers on top
of and to the side of the casket. From that
point on, the body is no longer visible. One of
the female clergy reads a scripture, then offers
a prayer. A hymn is sung.

The family of the deceased remains seated,
as the rest of the attendees stand. An Old
Testament and New Testament scripture is read.
The Doxology (formal church recitation) is sung.
Then, a prayer by a different clergy is given.
The choir then sings several lively songs. A
woman then stands at the podium addressing those
gathered. She presented the family with a
proclamation or citation regarding the work the
deceased performed for the church and then read a
biography of the deceased.

Remarks were then given by family, friends, etc. regarding some aspect of their relationship to the deceased. The choir sings again at 2:00. The presiding clergy prays at 2:05. He then delivers a sermon or eulogy that is filled throughout with shouts of, "amen", "that's right", and one gentlemen continuously shouts, "Taker her home, preacher, take her home". Organ music played constantly during the sermon. The pastor gives another prayer and the choir sings. People then prepare to exit. Mortuary attendees stand next to casket. They aid those seated on front rows in preparing to exit by helping them to put on coats, carry thing or pick something up from a pew or the ground. Platform officials greet family and then exit down center aisle. Everyone stands as flowers are given to certain people.

The choir sings the Lord's Prayer as the deceased's body is wheeled down the aisle out of the church by mortuary attendees. Family members

follow single file behind the casket being
ushered out.

With the exception of a few details here and there,
most funerals, both black and white, were
characterized by the same general funeral procedures.

Following the funeral service, people mingle and
some prepare for the next phase of the ritual process,
the burial.

Internment.

The internment, or burial event at the cemetery
or gravesite, is generally the most restrictive event
of the process. While there are no formal rules
governing who may attend the event, usually most
people who attend the funeral, do not attend the
burial service. During the burial, the casket is
generally not reopened for people to view remains (it
is generally closed at the beginning of the funeral
and is not reopened). One informant explains that,

The only reason they would do that[re-open the
casket at the burial site]is if some close family
member didn't make it down in time, maybe they

were coming from out of town and couldn't do
that... couldn't be there. But usually when they
close that body up there [the church], that's the
last time. (BP).

According to my informants, the graveside service is
considered "the final good-bye" to the deceased and
usually is comprised of a brief ceremony. Said one
informant about the event:

When you get there the grave will already be dug,
and the caretakers are there to cover the body...
They will close the box up as soon as a minister
pronounces the benediction. They'll start putting
dirt in and set the flowers around so the family
can see (WM).

Freedom of Emotional Expression.

The greatest difference between blacks and whites
in the death ritual process is not so much what
happens, but rather, the manner in which it happens.
Information received from my informants, as well as my
observations, show that there is a good deal more
outward emotional expression that takes place among

75

blacks, than among whites. The only exception in this regard is that of Pentecostal churches, in which informants indicated that Pentecostal whites, also will engage in a good deal of emotional expression, that is characteristic of most black churches, regardless of denomination. However, they indicated that, the degree varies greatly from congregation to congregation.

The types of displays of emotion during African American funerals range from loud crying, to fainting and convulsions and other acts. One pastor relayed his observations of a recent funeral he was involved in at an African American church:

> When I went to the funeral of [X] - it was at a
> Pentecostal church and they were - I mean they
> normally are very dramatic and expressive. But
> there was a lot of loud crying and people
> fainting. [X's] mother tried to take [X] out of
> the casket, and when she couldn't do that she
> tried to get inside the casket with her. The

service lasted three hours and most of it was extremely emotional (WM).

While the degree to which emotion is expressed among African Americans is evident, the real distinction comes in the level of freedom of emotional expression. That is, in African American funerals, more so than whites, such emotional outbursts are customary, almost expected. Such expressions are allowed, "normal" and appropriate, in terms of what is acceptable practice for making the funeral service an "honorable" and "fitting" service.

When asked whether anything was done to discourage emotional expression and outbursts, one pastor replied:

> Um, no. There's nothing that the church and the funeral home wouldn't permit you to be emotional within reason- they don't want you tearin' up things, they don't want you pullin' [the] person out of the casket and all that kind of stuff. But just cryin and… you know loud cryin and all like

that is permitted and people don't think anything

out of line with that (BP).

In fact, in most African American rituals, church

workers and funeral directors prepare to deal with

those certain situations. In all of the African

American funerals I observed, I noticed that church

ushers or funeral directors would be stationed

standing by the seats of family members for the

duration of the service. One funeral director

commented at length about what is done during the

funeral service regarding emotional outbursts. He

says,

> Okay, when they get overly emotional and they
>
> start passing out in the pews, first the family
>
> members, let the family help let them handle it -
>
> this is my sister that's my brother. Then if they
>
> still get it, you put the ushers on them. The
>
> ushers will come down with the smelling salts,
>
> Kleenex, whatever, a cup of water. Then after
>
> that, that's when you go to the pastors, because
>
> the pastor can say "let the church calm down". If

you can't get through with the pastors, leave it alone. You let them do their thing. You just step back and you let them do it.

Now as far as around the casket when they're viewing and there is a funeral director at the head and at the foot of the casket, you know you have these people who, and this is show, because you can always tell who is genuinely hurt by the loss versus who is like "I can act a fool today", okay you can always tell, and rule #1 is if somebody decided that they want to faint, let them hit the floor. Don't even try to catch them. First of all I'm not going to hurt my back, that's #1. #2, I ran into a situation and this was years ago, when a funeral director caught this woman but the way he snatched her up she ended up having to be rushed to the hospital because she was pregnant at the time. Okay. And even though you think you know the right thing at the right time, you want me to tell you what the bottom line is? You're responsible because you

snatched her up. Step back a little and let her

hit the floor. Let her hit the floor. There was

another situation right here down in the chapel

where this girl, she decided that she wanted

somebody to catch her, she hit her head right

there on the corner of that casket. Oh it woke

her up, I'm just telling you some honest, not

trying to be hard or nothing but you don't ever

want to get into a situation where you done

snatched somebody wrong, you done tried to catch

somebody but missed them and they broke their

pinky finger or something because the bottom line

it's your responsible. Mess around and go to a

church and do the same thing, you and the church

is going to be responsible. So a situation like

that when they decide they want to pass out,

leave them alone. Yeah, leave them alone (BFD1).

So, these types of outbursts are customary and funeral

directors and other members of the church involved in

the service are prepared to handle the situation,

which is to help to a point, but to let anything go.

With the exception of those who were Pentecostal,
all of the white informants said that generally people
in their services do shed tears and sometimes to the
point where others can hear them, they generally
refrain from the more boisterous types of emotional
expressions. Such expressions in these settings are
seen more as "disruptions" of the funeral service. As
well, funeral directors generally respond, if such
does occur, with removing the grieving person from the
situation, maybe into a private room where the person
can be alone and will not "disrupt" the funeral
proceedings.

It should be said, however, that sadness and
grief are not the only expressions common throughout
the African American death ritual. I often observed
that at the time before and after the funeral service,
much laughter took place. At first, it seemed odd to
me. As people came into the funeral service and did
their duty of viewing the body and paying respects to
the family, many would take their place amongst
friends and acquaintances. Their was joking, laughter

- what seemed to be joy, not sorrow during, what I thought to be, a sorrowful occasion.

I also was taken when, during the formal funeral service, those officiating the funeral, as well as family members and guests, engaged in joking behavior. At several of the funerals I attended, laughter was as much a part of the emotions expressed as sadness and grief. Once I witnessed a pastor and family members telling jokes and humorous stories about the deceased. I noticed that when they were told, some laughed, some did not.

As for the appropriateness of the laughter and seeming joyousness of the occasion, I was told by an informant that:

> The kind of funeral you have, whether its an
> emotional one, they do have very emotional
> funerals sometimes, but that's mostly for younger
> people. When a older person, say seventy or
> eighty years old, has passed away they usually
> have lived a good life and the things that they
> say about them are just so complimentary of the

life they've lived until you feel good about it

instead of sad (WP).

Others of my informants agreed that in the case when

the deceased was older and had a good life, the death

ritual is more one of celebration, rather than

sadness.

One pastor remarked during his eulogy of an

elderly woman, "Family, hold up your heads, because

your loss is heaven's gain." In his prayer he says,

"We are here to celebrate the home-going of Aunt X,

and comfort the living."

The more I reflected, the more it made sense to

me that laughter is an appropriate expression during a

celebratory ritual. But why did I observe some people

laughing at certain jokes and stories, and some not?

I did not ask any of my informants this question.

However, I think it is evident when we consider the

nature of humor.

Freud (1960) explains that joke-telling is a

pleasure seeking, social phenomenon in which the

motives of the teller are clear and manifest in the

reaction of the person to whom the joke is being told. This being said, it is clear through the comments of my informants, that the motive behind telling jokes at a funeral service is catharsis, to shift the mood of the participants to one of joy and celebration, rather than that of sorrow. When participants laugh at a joke, the teller knows that his/her task has been accomplished. Those who do not laugh, then are those who either do not share a common context as to the object of the joke, or they simply are not ready to give up their sorrow for the time being. The joke-telling not only served a cathartic function for participants, but worked to identify them with the deceased and with others of the living who shared a common experience with their dead loved one.

So, many emotions - from extreme sorrow and grief, to laughter and celebration, are characteristic of the African American death ritual. Although many of the same things are done among whites, the degree of expression is not nearly as prominent.

One item must be added. One pastor of a white

congregation suspected, and I tend to agree, that the

difference among groups regarding the level of

emotional expression, is not tied necessarily to the

death ritual process, but rather is characteristic of

differences in the traditional worship styles of the

two groups (WM). Genovese (1974) talks about the

expression of emotion among slaves as the one thing

that puzzled whites. The emotions expressed during

the death of another slave were seen to be largely

cathartic and the degree of expression seemed to purge

mourners of their sorrow quickly. In fact, she adds

that whites were most confused because it seemed like

the slaves seemed to be free of grief in such a short

time.

This difference in the appropriateness of

emotional expression was carried over from regular

church services where blacks, which for a time

worshipped in the same buildings as whites, were

ultimately separated from white churches into all-

black congregations because of the disagreement over

emotion. The free expression of emotion in the church, which carried over into many other rituals performed by blacks, served to create and perpetuate for themselves an identity separate from whites. It was something distinctively theirs, not something they had borrowed or been forced to receive by whites. This part of black families' religious identity has been perpetuated to contemporary times despite denominational distinctions among them.

The Multi-cultural Funeral.

One of the most interesting funerals I had the opportunity to witness, was actually of a friend of mine who died recently and suddenly. Throughout this story I will refer to her as Amy. My friend was an African American. Her husband and family are African American. Amy and her mother have attended a predominately white church for fifteen years. At the same time, Amy had very close ties to the black community in the Oklahoma City area, which included deep relationships with black clergy and churches, and social groups centered on improving the lives of

African Americans. She worked for a state legislator who represented a predominately black district, and was the editor of a newspaper which catered to the black community. Her involvement in state politics brought her in close working relationships with both blacks and whites.

Knowing some of these dynamics, I did not know what to expect when I walked into the church. I noticed as I walked into the church that two sets of choirs were lined up ready to enter the auditorium, one choir from Amy's home, predominately white church, and one choir from a black congregation in the city. I entered the auditorium and recognized family members and close friends of Amy's seated in the front as I went to view her body for the last time. Further back, the crowd was seemingly evenly mixed between whites and blacks. As the processional began, the white and black choirs took their places, along with other musicians from the respective churches. Several pastors took their places on the platform, the pastor of Amy's home church and another who was white, and a

pastor Amy had known and worked with for many years,
who was black. Another black pastor from Atlanta was
seated on the platform, along with Amy's good friend
and employer, who was also black.

As the service began, the funeral directors,
which were black, closed the casket and took their
places. From there, participants alternated singing,
praying and speaking. The white preacher prayed, then
the black preacher followed in line. Solemn hymns
were sung by the white choir, as bell ringers added to
the solemnity of the event. The black choir sang
songs to the rhythm of clapping and swaying. The
white preacher spoke words to the family and
congregation, as did the black preachers — both being
helped along by shouts of, "amen", and "that's right",
or "hallelujah." The service ended with a recessional
and the body was removed from the auditorium. Those
attending the funeral remained in the church talking,
and laughing or walked outside and did the same —
greeting family and other acquaintances. The lack of
self-segregation that occurred among participants

during the funeral service, continued in the casual interactions following it.

Friends of mine commented how that was the first time they had been to a "black funeral", and marveled at the excitement of it. Others commented about the interesting mix of what and how things happened. It took me several weeks to really get a grasp on what took place. More analysis on this particular occasion is presented in chapter six.

Chapter 5

The Communication Ecologies of
Black Family Death Rituals

The immanent sets of relationships during the death ritual process constitute the families ecology - its eco-logic. It is obvious from the information received that the frequency and type of interaction that occurs between the family and other entities helps to shape the nature of the ritual - how it will take place, the nature of family communication, and the identity of the family as a whole.

The purpose of this chapter is, as well, primarily descriptive. I briefly describe the nature of interaction within each network and the relationship of the family with each over the course of the death ritual process.

The Family

Identifying Family.

In order to make some claims regarding family definition and identity during the death ritual process, we must first understand and identify who is

considered as family and who is not during the ritual process. As we will see, identifying relatives is rather simple to do. However, there are ways to distinguish family from non-family by the communicative behaviors of the participants in the death ritual process. In my observations and dealings with informants, the following were the primary means by which to make such distinctions.

Seating Arrangement

In every case observed, and by attestation of my sources, the family of the deceased is segregated from other attendees at the funeral service. Generally, family members are seated at the front of the auditorium, closest to the where the body of the deceased is stationed. As well, family members are seated in rows, with the most immediate family seating in the very front, then moving back for more extended blood relatives.

Order of Interaction

There is a general pattern as well for what is done once funeral attendees enter the building where

the funeral service takes place. Most often, attendees enter the auditorium and, if there is a viewing of the body, their first gesture is to file past the body. Immediately following the viewing of the body, attendees turn to greet family members seated in those first rows, offering their condolences and support. Sentiments are communicated via a hand-shake or hug and brief words are exchanged. Some do not choose, after viewing the body, to greet the family. Most likely, these are people who knew the deceased, but not other family members.

Time Spent Viewing the Body

In one of my first funeral observations, I noticed that as attendees came in to view the body, most looked for about two to three seconds, while others lingered, sometimes up to thirty to forty-five seconds. When asked about why that was the case, one informant responded:

> The people who do that are usually people who
> stand there a while and look. They're people who
> probably were close to that person and just

trying to remember what they look like, visualize
what they looked like then and what they look
like now (BB).

Others indicated that those with the longer gaze tend
to be those with a close relationship with the
deceased and the family, and could sometimes be
considered a family member in terms of their
connection with the deceased and his or her family.

Presence at Events

As previously mentioned, the events of the death
ritual process generally include the viewing, the
funeral service and the burial service. Because the
funeral is generally the public aspect of the funeral,
the two previous events, the formal wake or viewing
and the internment are reserved for family.
Informants say that these events prior to and
following the funeral service are ones in which only
the closest to the deceased and the family attend.
They have more emotion invested and have a stronger
relationship with the deceased's family.

Who Gets "The Call"

Once there is an official declaration of death, usually one family member is given the responsibility of notifying others of the family member's death. Sometimes, this responsibility is carried out prior to the official death, when the family expects that death is imminent. Thus, while some non-family might say later, "I didn't even know she was sick," family members know and are involved in the death process, which may have taken days.

Because time is of the essence and because of the difficulty of the task, actual personal communication is made with only those people considered to be family - those who have the closest relationship with the deceased. This includes key blood kin, as well as non-blood relatives who have a similar relationship. Others, including distant blood relatives, friends and others must rely on other forms of communication to receive word of one's death, such as a newspaper obituary, church announcement or word of mouth.

"Speaking For" the Deceased

One of the unique characteristics of family
members, which we will deal with more extensively
later, is that of storytelling. In the everyday
practice of life, individuals often claim the right or
ability to speak on someone else's behalf. That
ability signals a deep relationship or connection
between the speaker and the person on whose behalf he
or she is speaking. The claim to speak on another's
behalf requires a sharing of perspective, the same
view of a given situation.

This being said, sometimes we do this to build
upon our own status, in claiming such a relationship
with a person who is of higher status than we.
However, in the death ritual process, people cannot
afford to, and generally would not take the risk of
speaking out-of-turn, so to speak. That is, those who
do not have such a deep relationship with the deceased
are unwilling to risk someone claiming their
statements, made on the deceased's behalf, as
uncharacteristic of the deceased. Generally, when
family members say, "If Bob were here I know he'd want

you to know…", the crowd affirms the statement verbally, usually signifying with an "amen" or, "that's right". Those then, who take this action, are those with the deepest relationship to the deceased.

These identifying characteristics of family members, my informants tell me, do not necessarily apply to only those who are blood relatives. They indicate that, while seating arrangements are set using the criteria of blood relationship to the deceased, the other characteristics apply to communicative relationship qualities between individuals and the deceased, not simply blood. That is, a distant family member related by blood would not have the freedom to speak on behalf of the deceased that a long-time friend has, because of that friend's relationship with the deceased.

While informants typically did not refer to these people as "family", they did indicate that these people "do what family members do," according to one informant.

Family Reunification & Conflict.

Other than the tasks associated with carrying out the death ritual, all informants indicated that one of the most prominent forms of communication displayed during this time is that of conflict. Because of the emotional stress of the situation, the varying degrees of relationship among family members with the deceased, and the need to make critical decisions, the death ritual is often fraught with anger, mistrust, and even violence. One informant stated, "I could recall some occasions for families where it had seemed to me that they've almost went to war over it [the funeral service]." (BB). Another put it this way:

> Part of the grief process, the grief stages, and one of those stages is anger. So, sometimes, people express their grief in the form of anger, and so, it's not uncommon to have someone that maybe is unhappy with someone else. You don't ever want to get in the middle of something like that, but you try and make sure that you take it outside and not let it escalate into something that's physical (BFD2).

The potential for such physical violence is great, as one pastor explained:

> Oh yeah, I've seen people get into knock-out drag out fights over this stuff. I mean, normally people can scream and yell and argue, but there's been several times over the years when I've seen people just go off and hit someone and you have to kinda stand in between them and try to break them up – calm them down so they can do what needs to be done (BM).

On the other hand, informants also speak of the death ritual as an event with potential reunifying qualities for family members, saying that the forced contact that comes from family members having to be gathered, results in previously estranged family members, "burying the hatchet". Often, they say, that long-standing conflicts are resolved, "for the sake of the deceased."

The communication that takes place within the family during the death ritual generally centers around making decisions about how to carry out the

ritual and the actual performance of the ritual.

Because emotion is almost always involved family

members often display that emotion either in anger and

conflict or investing the emotion into reclaiming lost

family members.

The Church

During the death ritual process many African

Americans refer to members of their church as their,

"church family." This is because the church, for

those who are involved in one, serves a major role of

support.

> I think it's appropriate that people refer to
>
> their church as their church family, because
>
> that's what we are. For those people who are
>
> involved in a church, the people - a lot of times
>
> it may be individuals from a particular Sunday
>
> School class, or missionary group in the church -
>
> these people know the family deeply and know the
>
> deceased very well and when someone dies, they
>
> feel the personal responsibility and they have
>
> the official responsibility of the church to be

an essential part of taking care of loved ones
after a death (BB).

Mortuary & Funeral Directors

The family's contact with a funeral director is
almost immediate. One director said:

> So, most generally deaths occur in hospitals, so
> we will go make the removal from the hospital and
> all funeral homes are under a Federal Trade
> Commission ruling and there are several
> guidelines there that require us, as funeral
> directors, that we must make contact with the
> family either in person or by phone to gain
> access for permission for embalming… (BFD2).

The same funeral director continues to explain the
process once contact is made with the family. He
states:

> Then, normally after that is done, during our
> conversation with the family to gain permission
> for embalming, we normally set an appointment
> time for a family to come in and make the actual
> funeral arrangements. At that time, we sit down

and by law in the state of Oklahoma, we have a
state board that regulates our rules and
regulations, a funeral director is required to
sit down with the family and make those
arrangements. So, we, in making funeral
arrangements, of course, it encompasses several
different things. We have to, first of all, gain
all the vital statistics so that we can file a
death certificate. We then coordinate all the
information we need for obituary notices and also
obituaries for a minister, if there is going to
be a minister involved, and we set service times
and coordinate those times to meet all the needs
of the family, of course, meet the needs of all
the people involved (minister, musicians, pall
bearers) — any number of things, the cemetery, if
it's going to have earth burial (BFD2).

The job of the funeral director is to coordinate
— to put things in order — from where, when and how
the service will be held, to how much the process will
cost.

Deceased's Social Network

One of the interesting occurrences I regularly observed during funeral observations is what took place among the deceased member's social network. When standing outside before and after the funerals, I often heard exchanges among people that took the form of, "Hey, Bob, I haven't seen you in years," or, "Hey, it's been a long time, here's my card - give me a call and let's go to lunch", or, "It's so sad that Jim died. How do you know him? Really, I used to be involved in that, I'd be interested in talking to you about that sometime".

Responses from some of my informants confirmed the fact that the funeral occasion often serves as a time of reunification among the deceased member's social network, as well as an occasion for networking, meeting new acquaintances and sharing stories. The commonality of experience in knowing and having had relations with the deceased can create an instant platform upon which to rekindle old, or begin new relationships among this group.

Another way in which the deceased's member's social network is involved in the death ritual is through the presentation of "declarations", or other ways of officially recognizing the deceased by an organized group to which he or she belonged. For instance, in one funeral that I observed, several representatives stood to read declarations from groups which included national and local chapters of a professional organization to which she belonged, local and national chapters of her college sorority, the state legislature, for which she worked, several churches that she was involved in, several non-profit service organizations with whom she worked, and others.

Medical Service Providers

The family's interaction with medical service providers is generally very brief. A medical service provider, usually a doctor, must pronounce an individual dead. A family member must identify the body and an official record of death is produced. The family's interaction with medical service providers is

sometimes longer in the event of a family member's imminent death. At times, family members, who know one of its members is at the point of death, must decide how the family member will spend their last hours of life. In some instances they may have to make a decision regarding life support – how long they should artificially keep the family member alive.

The last two chapters sought to describe in detail the events of the death ritual process and how they are carried out by African American families. The next three chapters are devoted to analysis of dominant themes that grow out of my observations and interviews. Chapter six deals with the story of my friend Amy related earlier and the idea of cultural fusion. Chapter seven discusses various aspect of dissociation in the death ritual process, specifically dealing with modernity, the influence of Christianity and myth-making regarding death. Chapter eight seeks to draw some conclusions from this study regarding the nature of African American family identity and the death ritual process.

Chapter 6

Cultural Fusion and the Community of Death

In chapter five, I described the funeral service of a friend of mind died recently, which raised questions regarding the co-mingling of cultural forms in the death ritual process. On the surface, my observations were simply that of two traditions being performed side by side in a common death ritual ceremony for my friend Amy.

However, the nature of that occasion, when considered more in depth, reveals much about the nature of cultural formation and change, the underlying commonalities of human beings in death, the nature of community formation and preservation and the very nature of self-identity. This chapter weaves together several theories of human communication which makes the case that my friends funeral in particular, and death in general is what might be said to be one of the few remaining impetuses for the preservation of human community.

In making this case I depart from the actual details regarding this particular death ritual event to explore a theoretical line of reasoning showing that: (a). The result of contact between cultures is expressed in cultural fusion (Kramer, 2000) rather than cultural adaptation (Gudykunst & Kim, 1988; Kim, 1988); (b). That community is, in part, an expression of identity co-constituted through difference (Kramer, 1997); (c). The homogenizing goals of adaptation/assimilation reduces difference, resulting in a loss of "Otherness"; (d). The loss of the Other negates that which, in death, reveals our ultimate connection of the self with the Other (Levinas, 2000; 1989; 1969), giving us the moral imperative necessary for community. The fact of the other – the preservation of difference, however, allows us to speak of we can call the "community of death" (Lingis, 1994). We begin by considering what, in the minds of cultural adaptation theorists, should have taken place at the point of first contact of African slaves and Europeans in America.

African Americans & Anticipated Results of Adaptation

Cultural Adaptation theory, as presented by Kim (1997; 1988), is built upon the ideals of the enlightenment and the positivist paradigm whose ultimate values are order, efficiency, and control. The positivist believed that man was the master of his own destiny; that through the use of empirical science, we could shape our world in any manner we so desired.

Central to this paradigm is the idea of progress --that the world is getting better and that our scientific methods will help us to move "forward", to "grow" as a human species. What has never been satisfactorily explained, however, by early positivists such as August Comte, Hume, Bertrand Russell, or by Kim is what it is we are progressing towards. How will we know when we have "arrived"?

Cultural adaptation theory also relies heavily upon Cartesian dualism that posits everything in opposition, in which everything is either one thing or another. The subject-object dualism separates, for

107

cultural adaptation theorists, the human individual, from his/her natural surroundings. For adaptation theorists, the subject is something akin to Locke's "*tabula rasa*", and culture is something "out there" (William Gudykunst, 1997) or in one's brain (Kim, 1997) - separate from and acting upon the human individual who has no choice but to be influenced and controlled by some external culture. It posits that those opposing positions are forever static - we are either one or the other - never both at the same time or degrees of one or the other.

Kim's adaptation model is built upon a systems theoretical perspective which sees all things in a system in which each component is affected by the movements of another and that these changes effect the system as a whole. Central to systems theory is the notion of equilibrium or equifinality, a position of stasis among the human system in which all things are balanced, equal and in harmony. This, as we see later, is presumably the ultimate goal for the human "system", according to adaptation theorists.

Cultural adaptation theory views communication as a process of transference of information from one brain to another, much like electrical impulses are transferred from one computer to another. Communication is a matter of transmitting messages from a source and downloading information as a receiver, thus making it necessary for us to "put our ideas into codes that can be transmitted, either verbally or non-verbally" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Thus, communication, or what Gudykunst and Kim identify as "competent communication" rests on the idea of being able to correctly encode messages as a sender and properly and accurately decode messages as a receiver.

According to Berger and Calabrese (1975) uncertainty refers to our ability to predict the behavior of others, and the values and beliefs which influence such behavior in order to reduce uncertainty and the correlating anxiety within ourselves. For Gudykunst and Kim, the communication process, especially in intercultural contexts, is a matter of

reducing such uncertainty and anxiety that we feel when we approach someone unfamiliar. We are anxious because those that we don't know - "strangers" are foreign to us, the act different from us. They are deviant, and this makes us uncomfortable and anxious when we approach them because we do not know what they will do or how the will act or respond to us. In the words of Gudykunst and Kim "Given that strangers, especially those from other culture's or ethnic groups, are likely to behave in a deviant fashion, it is reasonable to say we try to reduce uncertainty when we communicate with strangers more than we do when we communicate with people who are familiar" (p.32).

Thus, for adaptation theorists, intercultural communication cannot take place unless we can understand and predict the actions of another - unless we know the rules of the game. "Effective" intercultural communication exists only when all participants know, accept and abide by the ground rules.

The systems theoretical perspective of the theory shows up in what Kim calls the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic. That is, when "strangers" enter a different host culture they are stress full, because of their uncertainty. As strangers learn the correct way to communicate, interact or perform (communication competence) in the host culture, they eventually adapt. This adaptation brings growth in the individual.

Central to Kim's theory are the processes of deculturation, enculturation and assimilation (adaptation). As we move into a host culture's environment, we, especially if we have the "mind" and "flexibility" to do so, forget and eventually lose all aspects of our original culture, since, among this new environment, those old things do not conform with the new and continual reliance on the old, only results in "stress", "unhappiness", and mental illness. As we deculturate, we begin to learn what the host society requires of us. We learn to mimic the behaviors it dictates. We enculturate. At the maximum level of

acculturation (which all strangers naturally strive
for, according to Kim, 1997, p.337) we have adapted or
assimilated. That is, there is now virtually no
distinction between us and those who are native to the
host culture. The assimilation/adaptation process is
an erasure of self and the creation of self in the
manner and dictates of a host culture. This
conformity is something that strangers cannot resist
(p.338). Strangers do not have the power to change
the host environment; thus the stranger is always the
one who bears the burden of change.

Cultural adaptation theory requires, if we are
going to be successful, that we erase our own identity
- that we deculturate, unlearn, forget, cease to
practices those things which have been a part of our
experience from birth. In short, we must live in a
state which W.E.B. Dubois called "doubles
consciousness", that of looking at ourselves not
through our own eyes, but through the eyes and via the
dictates of another.

The theory of cultural adaptation is, essentially, ideological -- ideology masking itself as social science. Adaptation theorists such as Kim, Gudykunst and others tell us "what should be", rather than trying to explain what is, as is the purpose of social science. Their theory is training. It trains us how to fit in – how to be successful and mimic as closely as possible the society in which we live. It presumes that all people share their desire for happiness, their view of what constitutes "success", and what is healthy or sick. They also presume that sickness, uncertainty, struggle are all bad and undesirable.

Given this theory, African slaves that were brought to this continent should have produced a social situation that bears out the assimilative process. That is, one would expect that given the contact of these "strangers" with a vastly new culture of Europeans, these newcomers would seek to assimilate into their new cultural surroundings.

113

We could expect that African slaves would have, in short, become white, in order to minimize their anxiety and discomfort with the unfamiliarity of the host culture. Because, in adaptation theory, cultural change is one way we would expect to find European culture changing the culture(s) of the new slaves, not vice-versa.

But what has happened tells a much different story. First, though some African slaves indeed thought it may be better if they were white, few really had this as their goal. However, even for the few who may have had this as their goal, the enslavement of African Americans presents the most profound, unanswered question of adaptation theorists -- what happens when the host culture does not want or let you assimilate? The opportunities to "mimic" white society were few. But when the opportunity presented itself, for slaves to learn the communication systems (in the way used by adaptation theorists), such as learning to read, getting an education or converting to Christianity, it was for

revolutionary purposes, rather than to assimilate white identity.

What we see from the contact of Africans with Europeans in America is not a process of voluntary, naturally occurring adaptation process where African slaves assimilated into white culture, without any change occurring in he host European culture. What we do see is a profound integration or fusion of various aspects of both cultures that are very much reflected in the death ritual practices of both whites and African Americans.

Cultural Fusion and African American Death Rituals

The theory of cultural fusion (Kramer, 2000) is based on a very different conception of communication and culture than cultural adaptation theory. The notion of cultural fusion is built upon a conception of culture as communication. Culture is not some transcendental force out there working upon us, or a set of pre-given codes, but rather a complex set of expressions (Kramer, 1999) created and recreated as

human beings share meaningful connections with each other.

Communication is not simply the sharing of discrete data, but a broader, complex gestalt which is embodied as "a field of shared sense, of shared desires, fears, anticipations, that emerges out of our bodies and the way our senses open the world onto us" (Kramer, 2001, unpublished manuscript), as well as other modes and articulations.

Central to the theory of cultural fusion are the notions of "horizon" and "co-constitutional genesis" As mentioned previously, Gadamer (1975) uses the term horizon to describe one's particular situatedness. Our horizon is our particular vision of the world as seen from a limited standpoint. That is to say, there is no possibility of any outside, objective knowledge, no way to see all the dimensions of a given reality because every human being is limited to his or her own perspective. Horizons are not static, however. As Gadamer puts it, "The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves us" (p.304). Thus

116

we are always placing ourselves in different contexts, therefore allowing us to gain a different perspective of what is happening among us.

The idea of co-constitutional genesis (Kramer, 1997) states that identity and meaning are constructed through difference. That is, who "I" am is not meaningful, unless there is an "Other". This is to say that our perspective, or horizon does not become truly meaningful until we are forced to inhabit a different situation. Thus, the theory of cultural fusion explains the manner in which cultures engage each other, how cultural expressions of differing horizons "penetrate" each other, fusing together and constantly "churning" as we confront difference. Unlike cultural adaptation, cultural fusion occurs with no controlling motive and with no final goal. It is not predictable or orderly. Cultural fusion asserts that that the human drive is not towards dreary, banal existence, devoid of difference, but towards the creation of the infinite variability of expression which makes life meaningful.

Because identity and meaning are co-constituted through difference, to assert one totalizing horizon, one perspective, to the elimination of all others, would be the loss of meaning. To erase all difference in the service of certainty, of truth, is to erase ourselves, to erase meaning, what Nietzche (1974) calls, nihilism.

Evidence of such fusion is alluded to in previous literature on death, explaining the introduction of Christianity into the death ritual practices of African slaves, and the result of the mixture of white cultural practices and traditional African practices during American slavery and beyond.

When whites encountered the embodied expressions of African Americans during their death rituals, as well as other practices, it was foreign to their own. Their myopia, or limited perspective, cast the slaves as being superstitious, heathen, uncivilized and barbaric. As mentioned earlier, the expressivity of black slaves is what eventually led many whites, which allowed their slaves to practice Christianity, to do

so in separate dwellings, apart from whites. However, this nuance, this mode of communicating amongst the slaves during the experience of death eventually found its way among white Christian religious experience. The emotionalism of the slaves eventually found some expression in white Christian churches, namely the Pentecostal church.

Black slave preachers such as John Jasper (Hatcher, 1980), attracted whites because of his excellent orations. Their exposure to Jasper and others during church services, funerals and other gatherings allowed them to see the behaviors of African slaves from a different perspective, one indeed that was meaningful, rather than savage.

Thus the emotionalism, one of many African Americans' accents to the practice of Christianity, has and continues to effect whites. The white pastor who jointly conducted the funeral of my friend Amy responded this way when asked about the influence the emotional expressiveness of African Americans has had

on white church-goers, particularly during the death
ritual:

> My congregation commented, some in my
> congregation said, "Hey, Don; that became almost
> a preaching marathon, didn't it?" See, here you
> had… preacher, preacher, preacher. I felt more
> spirited in my affirmations because of the
> context. That was very rewarding to me. I mean,
> I thoroughly (is this the wrong word?) … I want
> to say I thoroughly enjoyed the context of that
> service. So, I would affirm the need probably
> for more true emotion in our traditions.
>
> What I'm aware of is that, I guess the word
> would be "streamlined", that in our practices we
> have streamlined some process, and in so doing,
> may have insulated ourselves a little bit
> emotionally, and that may not be terribly
> healthy… I do think that we have tended to be so
> rational that we lost touch with the emotional
> (WM).

Another pastor responded this way to the question:

I like the more-overt emotional expression. The
enthusiastic hugs. The Lebanese community also
has this. I don't know if you know many people
in the Lebanese community, they're near-eastern
heritage. We go to some of their events.
They're Christian Orthodox. They're much more
formal and ritualistic. But, in family
gatherings, every teenage boy who walks in the
room kisses every elderly woman. It's good… it's
real. So, we [white Christians in general] do
have things to learn from each other and I can
see that (WP).

Scholars also note that other practices brought to
America from Africa influenced the death ritual
practices of whites, such as longer funerals and more
elaborate celebrations, among others (Genovese, 1974).
Thus the experience of death Among African Americans
has been largely influenced by white cultural
practices, and vice-versa and both traditions have,
since the time of their meeting, continued to change.
Even one slave-owner remarked about the mixture of

Christianity with various African traditions saying that:

> The superstitious notions prevalent here and there...probably...reflects...more‾ancient superstitions, handed down by tradition and propagated by so-called leaders, who prior to the preaching of the Gospel by...the missionaries...wielded a fearful amount of spiritual influence among their followers, and the Negro communities of the plantations generally. And it is with remarkable tenacity these superstitious actions still maintain their hold in spite of a better teaching. Instead off giving up their visionary religionism, embracing the simple truth...our missionaries find them endeavoring to incorporate their superstitious rites with a purer system of instruction, producing thereby a hybrid, crude, and undefinable medley of truth and falsehood. (In Creel, 1990).

Community in Death

Earlier, in the course of discussing the events at my friend Amy's funeral, I posed the question of why, when 11 o'clock on Sunday morning continues to be the most segregated hour of the week, will people, both black and white join together over the death of a common loved one, friend or acquaintance, despite differences in preference over how a particular funeral service is carried out? Why is it at this example of such a funeral, people will not self-segregate, and join in meaningful interaction with each other when they generally prefer not to at other religiously oriented events – interactions that are not necessarily goal-oriented, purposeful or useful? Perhaps, this is the case, not only because of the commonalities shared by fused horizons, but because the event of death is one of the remaining impetuses for community.

For Levinas (2000), the living human being is characterized by the ability to express oneself physically. As mentioned earlier, embodied expression is a powerful form of communication that allows one to

create and share meaning. Levinas asserts that we
cannot know death phenomenologically. That is we
cannot know the true experience of death and live to
tell about it. What happens in death, however, is
that we come face-to-face with the death of the Other,
someone who is not us, is different than us. The
death of the Other, because his or her body can no
longer signify or express itself, calls upon us to
take upon ourselves the responsibility of responding
for him or her. Thus, while we do not share an
identity with the deceased in that we too step in
their shoes, we are, because of our relationship with
that other, profoundly affected until such time that
we join them in their experience. Levinas states,

> Someone who expresses himself in his nudity – the
> face – is one to the point of appealing to me, of
> placing himself under my responsibility:
> Henceforth, I have to respond for him… The other
> who expresses himself is entrusted to me (and
> there is no debt in regard to the other, for what
> is due is unpayable: one is never free of it).

The other individuates me in the responsibility I

have for him... My being affected by the death of

the other is precisely that, my relation with his

death. It is, in my relation, my deference to

someone who no longer responds, already a

culpability - the culpability of the survivor.

(p.12).

Because identity is co-constituted through difference,

through both the "I" and the "Other", death does not

give us the experience of dying with the other, but

the death of the other is a separation of the other

from ourselves, an experience of which we are deeply

affected. The death of the other provides the

greatest of moral appeals. The death of the other

also brings us face-to-face with the reality that

someday, with certainty, we will go the way of the

other, that we too will die, cease to signify. "The

future of death determines the future for us, the

future insofar as it is not present" (Levinas, 1989,

p.46).

Lingis (1994) explains that it is precisely this moral
imperative and responsibility because of the death of
the other that we have the experience of "the
community of those who have nothing in common". That
is, we usually define "community" as an experience of
people who have things in common with each other – a
common race, language, social standing, etc. However,
Lingis asserts that community happens when we expose
ourselves to the other, thereby taking up the
responsibility of the other for we see ourselves
through them. He explains it this way:

> One exposes oneself to the other – the stranger,
> the destitute one, the judge – not only with
> one's insights and one's ideas, that they may be
> contested, but one also exposes the nakedness of
> one's eyes, one's voice and one's silences, one's
> empty hands. For the other, the stranger, turns
> to one, not only with his or her convictions and
> judgements, but also with his or her frailty,
> susceptibility, mortality. He or she turns to
> one his or her face, idol and fetish. He or she

126

turns to one a face made of carbon compounds,
dust that shall return to dust, a face made of
earth and air, made of warmth, of blood, made of
light and shadow. He or she turns to one flesh
scarred and wrinkled with suffering and with
mortality. Community forms when one exposes
oneself to the naked one, the destitute, one, the
outcast, the dying one. One enters into
community not by affirming oneself and one's
forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at
a loss, to sacrifice. Community forms in a
movement by which one exposes oneself to the
other, to forces and powers outside oneself, to
death and to the others who dies. (p.11).

What happens when we lose the other, the different,
the "not us"? We lose not only our very selves, but
the ability to commune, communicate to have community.

Death rituals then are communal events. They
expose us to the other and allow us to share in the
mutuality of our experience, responsibility and common
destiny.

Chapter 7

The Dissociative Nature of Black Family Death Rituals

Dissociation, in the form of emotional and semantic detachment from concrete expression is evident throughout the death ritual process that manifests magic/idolic, mythic/symbolic and perspectival/signalic codal expression. In some instances, more than one form of communication are displayed in a singular form of expression. Evidence of such dissociation has come about as a reflection of Christianity, commodification and urbanization, and are reflected in the process of the death ritual, the myths surrounding death and in the family's relationship with the deceased's body.

Modernity, Myth & Memory

Christian Myth and Modern Rationality.

The modern, mental-rational preoccupation with rationality, order, control, efficiency, dualism and visiocentrism (Kramer, 1999) are all qualities apparent in contemporary African American family death rituals. These "values", give us some clue into the

motives behind contemporary death rituals, giving insight into not only what is done, but for what purpose.

Order flows from the spatialization of time in a linear fashion that has a definite beginning and a definite end, and is reflected in the mythic/symbolic and magical communication of contemporary Christian death rituals. According to Christianity life begins at birth and ends at death. Though there is an "afterlife", when a person physically dies here on earth, their life and relationship with the family and others are ended. The dead are not current and on-going members of the family group, but are symbolic of a future life, better than one's life on earth. One pastor quoted to me Edward Markham's epitaph, that I believe sums up the Christian mythology that dominates contemporary death rituals in black families. The epitaph reads:

> Let us not think of our departed friends as
> caught and cumbered in graves of earth, but think
> of death as of another birth, a new freedom for

the wings outspread. A new adventure waiting on
ahead, where all may taste immortal bread. So,
friends, if you should pass my grave sometime,
pause long enough to breathe this little line….
Here now, the best of Edwin Markham lies, but lo,
he is not here. He is afar on life's great
errands under brighter skies, pressing on some
towards melodious star (BM).

Christian mythology is clear that a person's death is
not only a physical death – it is a death to all
worldly social relations. However, while the mythic
elements of Christian doctrine signifies the dead as a
symbol of future life, it is very much magical,
concerned with identity. Christians believe that
death takes their loved ones away from them only
temporarily and that when the living family member
dies, they will again be re-united with not only the
deceased loved one, but with all of those who have
passed on before them that are part of the "body of
Christ". A 1991 Gallup poll shows that the majority
of Americans believe in life-after death, one-third

believe in angels and about thirteen percent say they

have made contact with the dead.[3] So, while there is

physical separation, a magical connection remains

insofar as people believe that their dead loved ones

are watching over them and that they will one day be

reunited.

The symbolism of Christian mythology is referred

to on another occasion of the previous pastor

regarding a recent funeral he was involved in, which

again speaks to the symbolic nature of African

American death rituals. He says:

> The ritual that I see of dignity and seriousness,
>
> and I would use the phrase "some pomp and
>
> circumstance", when I saw the representatives of
>
> the sorority all dressed alike, the funeral home
>
> attendants, the women all dressed in white, the
>
> white '56 or '57 Jaguar that led the funeral
>
> procession – I liked it. I mean, I felt that a
>
> statement was being made. I think when the Bible

---

[3] MOST AMERICANS SAY THEY DON'T FEAR THE END, George Gallup Jr.
and Frank Newport 1991, The Gallup Organization

speaks of "streets of gold" and "gates of pearl",
that's poetic. We asked my father when my
brother and I, I was a sophomore and he was a
senior in high school, and we said "Dad, what
comes after death?" He was a minister, and he
said, "Well, boys, I don't know of anyone who's
been there and back to tell us." But, he said,
"I think the Bible tries to describe the
indescribable in poetic language -- streets of
gold, gates of pearl." We don't think it's
physically defined. We give physical description
to what we can't imagine. But, he said, "I will
tell you this, I eagerly anticipate the
adventure of it." How neat! (WP)

The "pomp and circumstance" referred to, then, is the
manifestation of the ambivalence of the symbolic
consciousness structure, which is why the word "life"
is used to describe both the here and the hereafter.
As well, the mythology focuses on this separation of
the deceased from the "living" by pointing to the day
when the dead and the living will be reunited - either

at the latter's subsequent death or, the time of a

second coming where all "believers" will be reunited

with their loved ones who have gone before them in

death.   -

As a result of Christian myth in which the dead

are cut off, to some degree, from the living, African

American death rituals are typically conducted for the

benefit of the living.

Myth, Memory & Story-telling,

Myth-making in the death ritual process, not only

serves to symbolize the Christian afterlife,

separation of the living from the dead, and future

reunification of the two. Myths regarding the

deceased also serve to invoke memories of the deceased

that will, as well, comfort the living. One of the

greatest of such myths is produced by funeral

directors as they prepare the deceased body for

burial. After embalming, probably the most important

aspect of preparing the dead body is the cosmetic

preparation. One funeral director remarked, "We kind

of pride ourselves in making somebody look like - 'oh

Norma look just like she sleeping' you see". (BFD1).

For those Christians who believe in the after-life, a

heaven where their loved ones will go to await them,

the myth created through the dressings of the funeral

director seeks to confirm that their loved ones are at

rest, are at peace and are at home. These practices,

resemble, to some degree, the practices of the

Egyptian cult of the dead, which changed the focus of

death to life in the hereafter, where the deceased

would continue to live and have an active role in

worldly affairs. Given this focus, upon death,

families went to great lengths in preparing the

deceased for their new life. Such preparation

included such things as washing the body, some form of

preservation of the body, "mummification", leaving

items in the deceased's tomb that they would need in

their new life, etc. One pastor told of a story

resembling such preparation.

> Now when my nephew was funeralized, his wife
>
> requested that he be open at the gravesite. And
>
> she went up and tucked him in like… and that's

very unusual… tucked him in just like she was putting him in bed for the night. And it was almost too emotional for me. But she did that and it satisfied her. (BP).

While contemporary African American families generally don't go to these lengths, there is an effort on the part of families, to request of the funeral director that the body is prepared so that it looks as if the deceased is in a state ready to face the hereafter - to give the family the peace of mind of knowing that their loved one is at rest and in a better place.

Linguistic, Non-linguistic and Mixed Symbolic Story-telling

There are however, some myths produced by the family that serve to create some magical connection with the deceased - that we are "all Christians", "children of one God", "joining a community in heaven". Presupposing the magic, the mythic level of consciousness produces myths that function to continue to have the deceased, "live on" in their on-

going lives. These myths are created and reproduced

through story-telling about the deceased. Such story-

telling, it is hoped, will invoke strong and lasting

memories among the living, so as to have an impact or

influence over their thinking and behavior. In fact,

the fear is that when we die, no one will do such on

our behalf - that our life would have been forgotten,

not having any lasting effect on anyone.

One pastor told a story of man who had recently

died and what was done to invoke memory amongst the

family and funeral attendees who were close to him.

He says:

> And so, I focus a lot on the person, and try to
>
> have a few personal stories, but our remembrances
>
> of the family, but may cause a tear, but may even
>
> cause laughter. This man, Jim Cooper was his
>
> name, (his family wouldn't mind), who died this
>
> past week and his service was Monday - Tom Landry
>
> was a hero of his, and so, he also loved to wear
>
> hats. So, part of the display outside of the
>
> chapel was a table with six to eight hats on it.

They were all of one style. He was a dapper, but
conservative, dresser. They were a fedora-type
of hat, but some with a feather in it, and some
were checked. Just that emphasis made the family
feel good (WB).

Such myths are created through non-verbal symbolic
arrangements, sometimes in arrangements of language
and other symbols or in purely linguistic stories
regarding the deceased. The previous is an example of
the first type of mythical construction. An example
of the second is what is commonly called an obituary,
funeral bulletin or funeral program. Speaking of one
family, a pastor remarked that,

Their funeral bulletin which they prepared had
"in loving memory of", and gave his name, and
then they had, instead of just his picture, they
had the picture from his 75th birthday party,
where all the family had been gathered and was
gathered around him. That set a nice tone (WM).

He spoke of another saying that,

It was one of the more elaborate, but beautifully

done, that I've ever seen. I thought that the

sensitivity, the celebration of the different

arenas of her life, so that instead of one

picture there were a half-a-dozen pictures in the

folder, really set a tone of celebration of the

breath of life (WM).

In this way, family members create, through the use of

linguistic and non-linguistic symbols, a reality about

the life of the deceased. It is created to tell a

particular story – one that will show the deceased in

the best possible light, and one that will connect

with what people remember of the deceased and their

experience with him or her.

The third category of story-telling comes through

just simple linguistic stories or recollections of

families about the deceased. These stories, forms of

mythic/symbolic communication, shows evidence of

dissociation with the introduction of perspective.

That is, we tell stories of the deceased because we

lack the singular magic identification with him or

138

her. Our story-telling or myth-making is purposeful

and perspectival. As one pastor put it:

> When I see them[family members of the deceased],
>
> even if it's a year from now... "How are you all
>
> doing? How are the kids doing?... Are we still
>
> telling stories about Jim?" For, I encourage
>
> families to do that. I think the remembering is
>
> awfully important and most of the things that we
>
> remember bring a smile. You know, *that's what we*
>
> *choose to remember [emphasis added]* (BM).

It's amazing that during the time of death, generally

only the good things about that person are openly

discussed. Although sometimes this is not the case.

In one observation of a funeral, I remembered people

discussing how this person, who was married and had

children spent a lot of time in a local bar, getting

drunk, flirting with other women etc. However these

such comments are generally made in private amongst a

small groups of people. Every person, despite the way

they lived, at this time, the symbolic messages are

constructed to help mourners focus on the good qualities of the deceased's life.

As previously mentioned, story-telling is re-told, and reproduced by those who know the deceased and continues a lasting memory about him or her. These stories, because of the nature of dissociation, then take on a life of their own. In doing so, they are often used to further a particular goal, or the practice of certain behaviors by the story-teller. The story-teller says, "you should do x,y,z, because this what so-and-so did." They claim that doing these things would "extend the life" of the deceased in their actions. "I'll do x,y,z because that's what so-and-so would have wanted." Thus these things are done in hopes that we will feel obligated to extend their intentions beyond the physical body.

One pastor talked at length about our mutual friend, Amy that passed away. I asked him about how her memory, her myth would live on after she had gone. He explained:

[Amy] had already, for most of our congregation, had already helped us over some barriers. When you confronted [Amy] in the hall, you didn't have to overcome any racial tension, because she'd been with us so long. She and Alice, you know, had probably initially been token blacks for us. But they hung in there with us, and we have a debt. So, in that sense, she lives on.

One of our great white preachers, Fred Craddock, and he's from Atlanta as well, said that our memory… if our memory begins with our birth and ends with our death, we are of all people most to be pitied. Memory ought to extend from before we were born until after we're gone.

So, in that sense, I can see that vicariously, I can say for [Amy], hers does. You know, she'll be a meaningful … a sermon illustration, in many different ways, many different times, we'll reference her quality, her capacity for life.

The story that I told in the funeral about

the phone ringing when we were turned in circle

for prayer and I'm about at the end of the prayer

and guy next to me, his phone rings, and Michael

says, "You'd better get it, it might be [Amy]."

So the minister from Atlanta comes to me at the

graveside and he said, "You don't mind if I tell

that story, do you?" And, I said, "Well, of

course not, it's our story now, isn't it?"

What is a story like? I mean, to pick a

story like that apart, it would in some sense

perhaps diminish it, but you and I could do that.

We could weep without diminishing it. What we

can do, is we can analyze it and say what it

suggests is to the person who is the story that

we can't quite say how we know that there is…

that [Amy's] presence is there (WM).

The Commodification of Death

Contemporary African American death rituals

revolve around modern rationality that reduces the

dead body to simply, "A useless pile of dust and

chemicals that's not even worth the money we spend to bury someone in", as one pastor put it. That is, a deceased body is nothing more than its chemical make-up. Because it is only material, something devoid of life or meaning, the dead body has become commodified. Or, it is probably better said that a commercial system has evolved which caters to the disposal of this "stuff" - this dead matter once viewed as a living member of a family and larger social system.

The commodity of mortuary services thus dominates much of the death ritual practice. With the reduction of the body to mere chemicals, the dead body is obsolete, not useful, and even harmful - much like any other form of material waste. Thus, as we have garbage collectors to dispose of our trash, so to the family relies upon funeral directors to dispose of a dead loved one. This is why, in most instances, dead bodies are not present in the home of families at any time, where in times past, the home was the primary place where the death ritual took place. One of my informants spoke at length about the difference of the

ritual process, especially what was done with the body, six to seven decades ago in black communities:

When I was a lot younger and raised in the country, the funerals were very, very different. First of all there were no mortuaries close around, and usually you were pronounced dead by the mortician, I guess, or by someone in the family. They did have the wakes at the house and they would come, people would come and sit, they'd put the person in the casket and put them in the house with the wake. I guess that's why they call it a wake - they stay awake all night long. (Laughter) They stay awake all night long, and you now they serve food, they still serve the food and be jovial- they wouldn't be sittin' around cryin'.

And back in that time, a person was… when I was younger, people were carried to the graveyard in a little wagon. You know, they were carried to graveyard and people would walk behind it, behind the casket. Because they didn't have any cars or

anything to drive, you see? And they would get to

church and it would do to have the service, just

pretty much the same kind of service. And it

might be a hallelujah kind of thing, you know?

And it might be sad just the same way they are

now. And at the funeral instead of going to a

gravesite that's already manicured and

everything, they would always bury you at the

church. And the church had its own cemetery so

they would always bury you in the church cemetery

(BP).

At one time, the dead body was still considered, in a

way, as a continued living member of the family.

Folks were not afraid of the body. They did not think

it strange to have it sitting in their home for

extended periods of time. The body was kept close to

the family, being buried in the family's yard or on

church property, an extension of the family.

In this way, there was a magical connection

between the land and those who dwelt on it, either in

life or death. The soil in which the dead were

buried, whether on church or family property is a part

of the families identity. This type of identity with

geographical space is one of the underlying basis of

various kinds of tribal, communal or national identity

(Hutchinson & Smith, 1994; Mumford, 1961). To have

desecrated the land in some way, by digging up the

dead body, desecrating the physical landscape - was to

do harm to both the deceased and the deceased family.

This is still the case to some degree today, but

less so. Desecration of cemeteries today, because

they are, for the most part, "public", rather than

"private" property do not invoke the physical and

emotional harm in the same way. Desecration of

cemeteries in today's society invokes legal sanction,

more so than psychic harm to the deceased or their

family.

Because of this, I would suspect, the death

ritual process was more centered around the deceased

family member and the ongoing relationship he or she

should or would have with the family, rather than a

focus on how the family would get by without the

deceased member. The displacement of the primary

place for the ritual, as well as responsibility for

it, to the funeral director, signals a change in the

family social interaction.

The perspectival/signalic-codal communication

that dominates contemporary death rituals, thus

relegates the dead body to serve any function or

create any meaning so desired by those who get to

control that meaning. The funeral director, then, has

become a primary factor in the ritual process. This

shift of power and control has altered social

relations within the family. The ritual, once

centered on family and church, the building of

familial and community bonds and mourning, has become

one predicated on order, coordination, convenience and

control.

Efficiency, Funeral Costs, Family Conflict and Status.

With responsibility of the death ritual being

taken out of the hands of the family and placed in the

hands of funeral directors, we begin to see the

capital driven market of funeral services, in which

values of efficiency, order and control take

precedence over the social nature of the family

ritual. First, we have control over costs. Where

once a family's primary concern during the ritual

process was taking care of the deceased's spirit and

attending to the needs of a grieving family and

community, we find now that much, if not most of the

family interaction during the ritual process centers

around money - payment for goods and services, such as

insurance companies, lawyers, wills, taxes and others.

In this system, the family is replaced by

bureaucracy, what Weber (1947) defines as, "the

exercise of control on the basis of knowledge"

(p.339). They are institutions of administration in

the service of providing rational social order. The

fundamental question regarding this is who controls

the bureaucratic machinery? In the context of death

rituals, state and local governments exercise the

power over what is legal/illegal regarding all aspects

of death. As Weber contends, those making up the

bureaucratic administration are those with highly-

skilled, technical knowledge, generally in the service
of private enterprise.

This is certainly true in the case of dealing
with the deceased. Through much lobbying, funeral
directors have their interests represented in the
legal manifestations of state and federal
bureaucracies.

On the federal level, the Federal Trade
Commission is the bureaucratic institution given the
power to enforce various laws over how the deceased
are cared for. The "Funeral Rule"[4] is the general law
regarding what is to be done with the dead. This law
dictates what the deceased can and cannot be buried
in, the time in which a person must be disposed of,
what care must be taken of the ground one is to be
buried in and how the deceased must be dressed for
burial. One funeral director noted that the deceased
are even required to be buried wearing underwear and
shoes.

---

[4] From "Funerals: A Consumer's Guide", Federal Trade Commission
Web Site: www.ftc.gov.

State bureaucracies have been given the authority to dictate who may dispose of a deceased's remains. Most states, either specifically prohibit family members from burying a loved one, or have regulations regarding who is qualified to do so which, in effect, make it almost impossible for a family member to preside over burial unless he or she is a licensed mortician or funeral director.[5]

Oklahoma law technically allows individuals to bury their own dead, however, they must go through a rather lengthy licensing procedure.[6] Oklahoma statutes, because of zoning laws, local ordinances or deed restrictions also prohibit the deceased from being buried on private property.[7] Thus, bureaucracies have dictated, to some extent, what families must pay for in order to bury a loved one, leaving it up to private businesses to determine "what the market will bear" insofar as charges for specific services and

---

[5] FAMSA-FCA (Funeral Consumer's Alliance) publishes a list of such state laws on their web site: www.funerals.org.
[6] Oklahoma Statutes, 59 O.S.§ 396.19.

[7] Oklahoma Statutes, 8 O.S. § 183.

burial items are concerned. The laws, in effect, legitimize the funeral professional to say, "I've got to do thus and so, for this amount of money because it's the law."

The focus on financial payments for goods and services has three impacts on the funeral ritual. First, family members are focused on how much the services will cost, who will pay the costs, and how the payments will be made. Second, funeral directors seek to make the services most efficient, that is, being able to get maximum financial remuneration to pay over and above the costs of providing their services. Their main concern is how much can I offer the family, what is it going to cost me cover that offer and how much must I charge in order to cover my labor time and physical commodity costs? Third, the focus on finances has worked to extend our consumer-oriented culture into the death ritual process, influencing many to spend exorbitant prices on the outward show of wealth and status. The size of the gravestone, fanciness of the casket, the amount of

flowers - all are an expression of how much the family loves the deceased, as well as signifying the social status and stability of the family.

We spoke previously of the great likelihood of family conflict arising during the death ritual process. Much, if not most of that conflict has centered on family members' decisions about what will be paid for a funeral and who will pay. We find that old power struggles come to bear during this time as family members grapple for power and control over the remains of a loved one. One funeral director explains,

> No two are alike because you are going to always run into a situation as far as dealing within a family where you may have a new wife and the old kids and the old kids don't like the new wife, but by law the new is the one who is responsible for the funeral. Doesn't always work out that way though, because the bottom line is the person who is going to be in charge is the person who got the money. That's the bottom line. Then you

always run into a situation of trying to cater to

the wife and to the kids, you know so you run

into a lot of tricky situations like that but in

the end you've catered enough to both of them to

were it was a good day. Okay (BFD1).

He continues,

Oh yeah, it brings up a lot of conflict between

each other and what ends up happening is the

funeral home gets caught in the middle because

you have this part of the family saying we don't

want them to handle nothing, we going to take

care of everything. But you have this part of the

family coming to you saying "Mr. Funeral

Director, that part of the family don't have no

money, now who are you going to listen to?" Okay.

And then it all comes back to how is going to pay

for this? And it's not always good, but that's

just how it goes sometimes (BFD1).

However, because money is extremely emotional, such

conflicts over money can serve either to divide the

family according to competing interests or it can

serve as an impetus to close ranks. At these times, when perhaps one family member is too emotional to make decisions about money, a brother, mother, pastor, or even a lawyer who becomes a part of the family at this time, will often step up to protect the best interests of the family - to speak on behalf of the deceased when a will exists or simply to speak up on the family's behalf about what is needed, wanted and what is not.

We find this necessary at times because we find that the funeral director, most of all, is concerned about the bottom line - who is going to pay for the funeral and how much.

As one funeral director explains,

Someone has said that it takes about 400 hours of paperwork and manpower to complete a funeral service, and that's probably true by the time you involve all of our staff and what we do. Really, in the cost of the funeral, that's one of the biggest things is the staff and our ability to respond anytime within a matter of less than an

hour. You know, we have people working around the clock, so that labor expense is expensive along with our facilities and equipment.

The bottom line is it costs to come in and it cost to go out. It cost to go out, you know, so you try to stress to them that basically you are not going to be buried for free and our cost are indicative of the chemical embalming fluid companies, the casket companies, the company that supplied this, the overhead, your gas, your electric, all of this is indicative, so get some insurance (BFD2).

These costs, in a capitalist system, are passed along to the consumer (in this case the family). However, sellers of funeral services have, as all capitalist producers do, worked to create the need for their services and to offer as much as the market will bear for these services. Where once you had simple burials where the deceased was buried in a pine box, buried in a grave dug by family members, and home-grown flowers placed on top of the grave, now, when it comes to

families purchasing funeral goods and services, as one pastor puts it, "the sky is the limit".

A funeral director explains that,

> When I first started doing this in the early 70s, there was never really any questions because you did all funerals the same. And, people, you know, you just basically, it [the arrangement meeting] was kind of a question-and-answer period, you got your information and you set the funeral and this was how it was done. But now, there are so many different options that families have and families are, and rightfully so – we're all consumers, and they're more conscious of costs and exactly why does this cost this and what are we going to get for what we are spending. So, there is more of that process too in the arrangement conference. And that's not bad. That's a good situation.
>
> That's why all funeral homes have price lists, price books. I'm required by the Federal Trade Commission to give out prices over the

phone or if somebody walks in the door wanting to
know about prices, I'm required to do that.

Again, that's just good for the consumer (WFD1).
So, funeral directors perpetuate the sentiments to
families that they are primarily consumers, that
because they are consumers, they must pay, and because
they're consumers, they're entitled to the very best
they can afford. Such costs, range an average of
$4,000-$6,000. Calculating what might pay for a
funeral if they wanted the best of everything, one
might pay an estimated cost as high as $12,000 -
15,000.

Because funeral services are market driven, and
families are highly consumer driven (African American
families are the highest ranking ethnic group of
consumers)[8], many African Americans go all out when it
comes to servicing their deceased loved ones.

The increased dissociation evidenced in the
commodification of the death ritual, has lead to a
view of the deceased and the death ritual process, as

---

[8] Drug Store News 21, no. 9 (June 07, 1999):

an event to showcase the family, more so than a ritual focused on the deceased. When asked about how many African American families, "go all out" for the death ritual process, one funeral director replied,

> Oh yeah. What you see here are top of the line, you are looking at probably 11 [thousand dollars], okay. And I'm going to say about 65% are going all out. Okay. You know you have heard somebody saying "just put them in a box" okay, we've had families who have come and literally bought, it's an estate box, and bought it and then once they saw mom or dad in the box just got to thinking and then realize I guess in their heart "I don't want to put my mom in nothing like this" especially when they had $100,000 insurance. And so they always go from "we don't want that" and I guess they feel so bad that they even did that in the first place, that they done got a $9,000 viewing casket. They will spend, that is for certain because basically it's kind of like this is the last time I'm going to get to. That's what

I tell people all the time, get some insurance.

Get insurance, you know, because if you paid $400

worth of premium but then you get $100,000 back

in return, that's a lifelong investment. Get

insurance (BFD1).

In a consumer culture, wealth is a sign of status and

family identity. To showcase yourself through

possessions, or the elaborateness of what you are able

to spend, is a statement of which you are as an

individual and person. Many times, it is these such

statements that families try to make by spending to

the hilt on ritualizing their loved one, who, by their

own admission, no longer has any earthly cares. That

is, the dead, is in a better place, a place where

earthly concerns are no longer theirs. Families that

engage in such spending during this occasion do so for

the sake of themselves and others. To rid themselves

of the guilt of burying their loved one in simplicity,

and to show to onlookers that theirs is a family of

pride – that they have the dignity enough to put their

loved ones away in style, rather than like a pauper

who has no family, and has exhausted all earthly relationships. These outward shows are made through the outward use of flashy vehicles, elaborate, flowers, caskets, headstones and other amenities. One funeral director even remarked that, "...we have actually had people switch over to us because of this right here. We were riding in a blue and gold limousine," (BFD1).

Order, Control and Convenience

The second major shift in family/social relations brought on by the commodification of death is the concern with order, control and convenience. Because funeral directors must be efficient in how they carry out their services, ensuring they don't spend more time and money than what they will be paid for, order and control is one of the main concerns when speaking of the role of the funeral director in the funeral service. Order is a function of controlling time and space. That is, to put something in order is to ascribe a linear temporal sequence to events that must be carried out with precision in order for the service

to have become considered an "orderly" service. This is true especially during the speaking part of the service, the eulogy.

The eulogy is an important communicative feature of the service because, for most people, it is the one time that an authority figure such as a minister, or respected members of the community will dedicate a public speech specifically to them. It also a time in which the audience can, in some ways, bond together as family. This is why funeral directors, pastors, as well as family members want this time to be orderly and free of unnecessary distraction.

However, order, as a handmaiden of control and power, in our culture is considered a value of he highest order (so to speak). A good funeral, is an orderly funeral. To have order, necessitates oversight and control, that is, there needs to be a figure to control the flow of events to make sure that things go "as planned". One funeral director talks about his focus on order and control during the funeral service. The director says:

Well a lot of times I tell people for example
when I go to a church, let's just say it's
telephone Baptist church okay, when I get to the
church you can come to [my] Baptist Church okay,
because I control everything that comes in or
out, I decide who goes, I decide the role of
everybody from the funeral director to the
patrons, to the ushers, to the ministers.

If I want the minister to sit over here on
this first row that's where he is going to sit.
Okay because there is a reason behind everything,
so if I put y'all over here he's putting us over
here for a reason. And then you have to come in a
make that known and establish and let everybody
know look this is my church today. Because what
will happen is you will have too many chiefs.
You'll have to many people wanting… I ran into a
situation like that Thursday as a matter of fact
where it ended up being a bunch of confusion
because a couple of ushers, I guess they thought
that they were doing a good thing but we ended up

162

having the family members going two different

ways, which made for a whole lot of confusion, we

ended up having to stop the funeral, have

everybody go back to your seats and basically

start the entire viewing process all over again.

So as far as role playing when a funeral director

gets to a church, he needs to just go ahead and

establish for the next two hours this is my

territory (BFD1).

The same director commented that, many blacks, left to

themselves, step out of this need for order during

personal family gatherings an events. The director

states that, because of this, he must sometimes be

much more forceful in asserting control. He claims

that this is not the case in the few white funerals

that he conducts (usually 3-4 per year). However, he

did remark that the same people (African Americans)

will not break ranks when a white funeral director is

presiding.

Time-efficiency has become another hallmark of

the death ritual process. Time efficiency, ensures

funeral directors that they will not spend too much time for their services than what a family is paying. Therefore, the trend is to keep things moving in an orderly fashion so that events may be wrapped up in a timely manner. One funeral director expressed a conflict in this regard, noting his preference to get things done quickly, but not wanting to offend family members in the process. When asked about trying to limit the time of funerals, he responded,

> You try if you can, especially if you got another service, but if push come to shove you'd rather go ahead and miss out on something or be a few minutes late to an appointment versus offending this family who just spend $10,000 with you. You don't want them to go nowhere. So you don't…you got to take care of them (BFD1).

This concern about time, however, pertains not only to the funeral director and those officiating at the service. The time urgency characteristic of contemporary urban life makes the funeral event one that people almost have no time to go to. Services

are held typically during the day, leaving most mourners only the opportunity to attend a funeral for the time allotted them for a lunch break. If services continue too long, many must leave during the service. This aspect of life, leads family members, pastors and funeral directors to conduct ritual events in a manner that is convenient for people to attend and be properly involved in.

Techno-Death Rituals

The introduction of communication technologies into the death ritual process, also signals a changing relationship between living and dead family members. Talk of these technologies were brought up twice, by two different pastors, speaking of how these technologies have helped families in some way. The first instance brought up was using video cameras and/or audio recorders to tape the funeral service for later viewing or listening by family members. The second instance was that of performing a funeral via conference call.

One pastor talked about some family members, particularly those who were really close to the deceased, being in a trance-like state during the funeral. Being in such a state of mind limited the family member's ability to fully experience the funeral service. The pastor explained that,

> Sometimes families in such deep grief - one lady whose husband was 95 when he died and she's in her late 80s, but she's still very sharp and alert, she told me she went up to Virginia just a couple of weeks ago and he died at Christmas time. So, there was some gap in there. She said, "I took the tapes of the service, and my son and I listened and I realized I hadn't heard the service. It was very comforting to me. So, we do try to audiotape every service and just give that to the families (BB).

Certainly there is a qualitative difference between experiencing a funeral service first hand, and that of listening to it on audio tape or watching the service on video. Again, it underscores the motivation behind

contemporary death rituals as one focused on the well-being of the living. What audio or video taping does, essentially is to fix the death ritual in time and space. It poises itself to become the ultimate memory, recollection or representation of the deceased. As well, funeral services conducted in the absence of physical people in the same proximity lose the embodied, sensory expression of communication, such as touch and odor.

Regardless of the motive, however, a funeral service conducted in the physical presence of family, the deceased and others in the family's social network is certainly a different experience of experiencing it alone – being distant from the relational context in which the funeral service takes place.

An extreme case of this was brought up by one pastor who recently performed a funeral via teleconference.

> Here's something you might be interested in.
> It's something I did for a family recently – in
> act it was a member of my own family, but since I

am a minister I officiated the funeral through a conference call on the telephone. The situation was such that the children of this person were scattered about the country and a lot of them lived too far away to be able to come down here. So I - I wanted to help out and I did with money and so forth, but what we did after the person died they were cremated. So I had the ashes with me in the urn here at the house. We dialed into a teleconference service and they dialed and got each of the other family members on the phone. When they were all on I said a prayer, said a few words and then let other family members say what they wanted to say. I mean it went really well, I thought - we did pretty much the same thing we would if we were having a funeral service in a church here or something. People told some stories and we remembered - people cried and then we all said good-bye and that was it (BM).

When I asked what bearing this had on the performance of the ritual he replied:

Well, I didn't think it changed much at all - I mean we essentially did the same thing as a regular funeral. People were able to grieve - and they did, people cried and told stories and some people laughed. But after the conference call was over I had several of the family members call me individually and tell me they thought it was a good service and they thanked me for doing this so they could be involved in some way. So, I don't know if this will really become a thing done a lot in the future, but I think it made things accommodating for a family that otherwise would not have been able to commemorate this person's death in some way. So, I don't know, it might be something I think a lot of families and pastors might think about more in the future (BM).

Someone once said that we all die alone. It seems increasingly likely that not only do the dead die alone, but that the living mourn alone as well.

Dissociation, in the form of semantic and emotional detachment is evidenced throughout the death ritual process of African American families. We see throughout the process, various forms of communication, from magic/idolic communication in the emotional connection established between family members and the deceased through memory, to mythic/symbolic communication of Christian myths regarding death and dying and the stories we tell about loved ones who have dies, to the extreme dissociation in signalic-codal communication, which treats death and the dead body as purely material commodity with use-value.

I am not privileged to ascribe value to these types of expressions evidenced in the death ritual process. It is not for me to say what is good or bad. But what is evident, is a widespread shift in values and sentiments that had greatly influenced the social relationship of the family.

Chapter 8

African American Family Identity and the
Performance of Death Rituals

From some of the previous description of the
death ritual process we can characterize those
considered family as those who: (a) Make a physical
presence at ritual events; (b) Share an intimate
relationship with the deceased (and, at times, other
family members); (c) Share common experience with the
deceased and his or her family; (d) Because of their
relationship, have certain prescribed or voluntary
obligations they must fulfill; and (e) Are recognized
as family. It seems that all of these characteristics
as a whole describe family membership. That is, a
person who is physically present at events, but lacks
a shared experience with the deceased, would not be
seen as family.

According to my observations, such would be the
same both for both black and white families. What may
be different however, is that it seems that black
families are much more open to accepting as family, a
wider array of people than whites. This is to say the

mutuality of a family relationship, within black families, is extended far beyond those who share common blood or living spaces. The acceptance as family, of those not bound by blood ties, is extended to those people who perform the duties and fulfill the roles and obligations expected of family members.

This is evidenced in the relationship, peculiar to African American communities, of the family, church and funeral directors.

Family-Church-Mortuary Relationship

This research indicates that the experience of family goes far beyond that of blood ties and extends to those who fulfill certain roles and obligations. As stated earlier, one may not be family in the sense of blood, but one may do what family members do.

In the black community, both the church and funeral directors join the family as full-fledged members. Pastors act in both an official and family capacity when they visit the home of the family who has lost a loved one. The pastor, in the case where there was a relationship between the family and

172

church, shares in the emotional sorrow of the event, seeks to comfort the family through prayer and the giving of advice and counsel. Pastors, or other church members help families to navigate the process of planning and performing the death ritual process.

I thought it always customary at funerals, that family members were the ones who acted in some official or ceremonial capacity such as pall bearers, flowers bearers and the like. I noticed at many black funerals, however, that both blood relatives and church members filled these roles. In one case of a funeral I observed, the obituary listed the casket bearers as stewards and trustees of the church, floral bearers as members of the Deaconess Board and Missionary Society #4, honorary flower bearers as ministers' wives and widows, and Helping Hand Literary Art Club. These members of auxiliary organizations within the church were those closest to the deceased, participated in the deceased's life, and had a strong relationship with the deceased's family were, at this time family members.

Because the person is now dead, it is likely that such person's will have a very different relationship with the family, depending on the depth of the relationship between the church member and the remaining family members of the deceased. Church members cook meals, drive the family around, and comfort family members during and outside services. They perform their duties voluntarily.

Funeral directors fulfill much of the same duties in many instances. More so than in white communities, black families, church members and funeral directors have a prior relationship with each other before a death occurs. It is common that within a church there is a member who is a funeral director, or that church leaders and members have cultivated a relationship with. Many times the funeral director has a relationship with the members of that church.

When asked if this is the case, one funeral director remarked,

All the time. And then basically I would say that every funeral home already have an established

clientele. You already know who you are going to.

Okay. Usually when you get a new family to come

in to you that's when somebody young has died in

the family and you know they didn't bury mamma

and daddy, but we're burying our son. So since

we've never gone through it, and then it's just

word of mouth were you want to go. Okay, then

particular churches, funeral homes have a

stronger following, so let's say if you went to

church XYZ that particular church might be 90% [X

funeral home]. Okay so when you ask him what

funeral home do you recommend? Oh just gonna tell

him that we use [X funeral home] (BFD2).

When a member of the church dies, then, it is likely

that they will use the funeral director with which

they already have this relationship. When this is the

case, the funeral director goes beyond his or her

normal duties as a businessperson and performs those

acts of family members. One funeral director

explained that when this is the case, I am more

helpful to the family" than with someone with which

they did not have this relationship. One pastor
explained that,

> Yes, most of the time the mortuary does know the
> family of whom they're working with - personally,
> in a personal way… So, usually it's someone that
> they know. Usually the mortuary, you're pretty
> familiar with the people at the mortuary (BM).

One funeral director explained why this prior bond
works so well amongst families, churches and the
funeral directors. He says, "All the black funeral
homes are family, in Oklahoma. That's because we still
down home, okay, and we know the importance of a smile
and a handshake (BFD1).

It was difficult with this research, because of
the limitations in not being able to talk directly to
family members regarding the death ritual process, to
gain a full picture about what it means to be a
family. But from what I was able to observe, and the
insight gained from my informants, it seems, at least
on a surface level, that African American families
continue to be somewhat community oriented in their

make up. That is, the bonds of family, which include
mutual recognition of membership, adherence to
obligation, physical presence at events, and shared
relationships and intimate experiénce with the
deceased, are extended to include those not related by
blood, but who, during this time, are considered to be
family.

Family, in this sense, is not so much something
we have, but something we experience. That is, during
the death ritual process, we experience that
recognition, support and emotional and physical
connections because of the nature of the event.
Family membership is, thus ever changing, and
influenced by the context and relationship with other
networks the family comes in contact with during a
particular situation.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

As a discipline, communication is concerned with the varieties of ways in which human beings construct meaning. The family, is an experience of ongoing relationships between individuals and larger social institutions and contexts. Whether it is the exchange of money (an economic relationship between producer and consumer) with a funeral director, the exchange of stories with attendees of at a funeral, or an exchange of words with a family member, the family, in the context of the death ritual process, is shaped by these relationships which signify what it means to be family.

The death ritual process demonstrates how the dynamic development of relationships within the family and between the family and larger social networks, works to shape family identity and interaction. These relationships help us to understand what constitutes family, what distinguishes one family from another, as

well as a host of other interactions that take place over the course of the ritual process.

This study, one of the first in communication provides us with an array of experience which should be the subject of meaningful research. The present study first sought to give a broad and thorough description of the dynamics of the death ritual process for African Americans, distinguish it from the practices of white families, identify instances of dissociation in the ritual's performance and comment about the nature of African American family identity in the context of the death ritual process. In the course of dealing with these areas, many other interesting items presented themselves that could not fully be explored in this study.

Limitations & Future Research

There were several limitations to this research project. The limitations are generally limitations of the scope of research and limitations in the method of the research.

Limitations of Scope.

The first significant limitation was the scope addressed in this research. Throughout my interviews, participants indicated that those things to which they attest were likely to be different in other geographical regions of the country.

In order to answer the previously mentioned question regarding the essential nature of African American death rituals, future research will need to adequately deal with geographical differences among African Americans of the death ritual process.

Related to this, this research was limited to three main Christian denominations. However, while Christianity dominates the faith tradition of the majority of African Americans, it certainly isn't the only one. A growing number of blacks in the Catholic church, as well as blacks who practice a variety of tribal religions from their particular origin in the African Diaspora. These differences must also be dealt with in future research in order to cover the full range and description of the rituals African Americans engage in during the time of death.

Limitations of Method.

Another significant limitation in this research

is that, because of the intimate nature of this

ritual, the researcher was relegated to dealing with

informants who were not at the center of the

phenomenon. While the informants used in this study

were useful on that they are involved to a large

degree in the process, they are not the family members

themselves. The missing perspective in this study is

that of actual family members. Future research should

try to make the necessary connections to be able to

gain the insight of actual family members involved in

the death ritual process in a way that is not

intrusive.

In essence, future research should extend this

project by adding the full range of perspectives of

insiders regarding the phenomenon. Only then can we

answer the fundamental question of what an African

American death ritual is essentially, the variety of

expressions of death rituals, and further insight into

how the practice of death rituals shapes family

identity and interaction.

Bibliography

Anderson, Elijah. (1997). Neighborhood effects on teenage pregnancy.

Bernard, Jessie. (1966). Marriage and family among Negroes. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Baxter, Leslie A. and Clark, Catherine. (1996). Perceptions of family communication and the enactment of family rituals. Western Journal of Communication, 60, 3, 254-268.

Billingsley, Andrew. (1992). Climbing jacob's ladder: The enduring legacy of african-american families. New York: Simon and Schuster.

_____. (1971). The treatment of Negro families in american scholarship. In Robert Staples (Ed.) The Black Family: Essays and Studies, pp.28-36. California: Wadsworth.

_____. (1968). Black families in white america. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Barley, Stephen R. (1983). The codes of the dead: The semiotics of funeral work. Urban Life, 12, 1, pp. 3-31.

Berger, Peter L., and Luckmann, Thomas. (1967).
The social construction of reality. New York: Double
Day Anchor.

Bochner, A. (1976). Conceptual frontiers in the
study of communication in families: An introduction to
the literature. Human Communication Research, 2, 381-
397.

Bossard, James H.S. and Boll, Eleanor S. (1950).
Ritual in family living. Philidelphia: University of
Pennsylvania Press.

Bott, Elizabeth. (1970). Family and social
network: Roles, norms, and external relationships in
ordinary urban families. Second Edition. Tavistock
Publications.

Bowman, Leroy. (1988). The american funeral: A
study in guilt, extravagance and sublimity.
Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

Bowman, Leroy. (1977). The effects of city
civilization. In Charles O. Johnson (Ed.). Passing:
The Vision of Death in America. Connecticut:
Greenwood Press, pp. 153-173.

Bradfield, Cecil D. and Myers, Ann. (1980).

Clergy and funeral directors: An exploration in role

conflict. Review of Religious Research, 21, 3, pp.

343-350.Saum, Lewis O. (1977). Death in the popular

mind of pre-civil war America. In Charles O. Jackson

(Ed.) Passing: The Vision of Death in America.

Connecticut: Greenwood Press, pp. 65-90.

Brennan, John L. and Wamboldt, Frederick S.

(1990). From the outside in: Examining how individuals

define their experienced family. Communication

Research, 17, 4, pp. 444-461.

Broman, Clifford L. (1997). Families,

unemployment and well-being. In Robert Joseph Taylor,

James S. Jackson and Linda M. Chatters (Eds). Family

Life in Black America, pp. 157-166. California: Sage

Publications.

Bubolz, Margaret M. and Sontag, M. Suzanne.

(1993). Human ecology theory. In Pauline G. Boss,

William J. Doherty, Ralph LaRossa, Walter Scumm, and

Suzanne K. Steinmetz (Eds.). Sourcebook of Family

Theories and Methods: A Contextual Approach. New

York: Plenum Press, pp.419-447.

Carper, Laura. (1971). The Negro family and the

moynihan report. In Robert Staples (Ed.) The Black

Family: Essays and Studies, pp.65-86. California:

Wadsworth.

Cheal, David. The ritualization of family ties.

American Behavioral Scientist, 31, 6, 632-643.

Creel, Margaret Washington. (1990). Gullah

attitudes towards life and death. In Jospeh E.

Holloway (Ed.) Africanisms in American Culture.

Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. pp.69-97.

Corcoran, Farrell. (1983). The bear in the back

yard: Myth, ideology and victimage ritual in soviet

funerals. Communication Monographs, 50, 305-320.

Davis, Richard A. (1993). The black family in a

changing black community. New York: Garland

Publishing.

DuBois, W.E.B. (1909). The Negro american family.

Atlanta: Atlanta University Press.

.

Ellison, Christopher G. (1997). Religious involvement and the subjective quality of family life among african americans. In Robert Joseph Taylor, James S. Jackson & Linda M. Chatters (Eds.) Family Life in Black America, p.117-132. California: Sage Publications.

Farley, Reynolds. (1996). The new american reality: Who we are, how we got here, where we are going. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Fiese, Barbara H. (1992). Dimensions of family rituals across two generations: Relation to adolescent identity. Family Process, 31, pp.151-162.

Fitzpatrick, Mary Anne. And Badzinski, Diane M. (1993). All in the family: Interpersonal communication in kin relationships. In Mark Knapp and Gerald Miller (Eds.) Handbook of Interpersonal Communication. Second Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

_____. and Indvik. (1982). The instrumental and marital expressive domains of marital communication. Human Communication research, 8, 3, p. 195-213.

_____. and Ritchie, David L. (1993).
Communication theory and the family. In Pauline Boss,
William Doherty, Ralph LaRossa, Walter Schumm and
Suzanne Steinmetz (Eds.) Sourcebook of Family Theories
and Methods: A Contextual Approach. New York: Plenum
Press, pp. 565-585.

Frazier, E. Franklin. (1939). The Negro family in
the united states. Chicago: University of Chicago
Press.

_____. (1968). Frazier: On Race relations: Illinois:
University of Chicago Press.

Freud, Sigmund. (1960). Jokes and their
relationship to the unconscious. In the Standard
Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund
Freud. Translated by James Strachey and Anna Freud.
Volume VIII. London: Hogarth Press with Routledge &
Kegan Paul, LTD.

Frey, Lawrence R., Botan, Carl H., Friedman, Paul
G. and Kreps, Gary L. (1992). Interpreting
communication research: A case study approach. New
Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Gadamer, Hans Georg. (1998). Second, Revised Edition. Truth and method. New York: Continuum.

_____. (1976). Philisophical hermeneutics. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Garbarino, James. (1982). Children and families in the social environment. New York: Aldine Publishing Co.

Garfinkel, Harold. (1967). Studies in ethnomethodology. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Gebser, Jean. (1985). The ever-present origin. Translated by Noel Barstad and Algis Mickunas. Ohio: University of Ohio Press.

Geertz, Clifford. (1973). The interpretation of cultures. New York: Basic Books.

Genovese, Eugene D. (1974). Roll, jordan roll: The world the slaves made. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gudykunst, William B. and Kim, Young Yun. (1997). Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication. New York: McGraw Hill.

Gutman, Herbert. (1976). The black family in slavery and freedom, 1750-1925.

Hatcher, William E. (1980). John jasper: The unmatched Negro philosopher and preacher.

Hatchett, Shirley J., and Jackson, James S. (1993). African american extended-kin systems: An assessment. In Harriette Pipes McAdoo (Ed.) Family Ethnicity: Strength in Diversity, pp. 90-108. NewBury Park: Sage.

Herskovitz, Melville. (1958). The myth of the Negro past. Boston: Beacon Press.

Husserl, Edmund. (1970). The crisis of european sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenology. Translated by David Carr. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Jayakody, Rukmalie., and Chatters, Linda M. (1997). Differences among african american single mothers: Marital status, living arrangements and family support. In Robert Joseph Taylor, James S. Jackson & Linda M. Chatters (Eds.) Family Life in Black America, p.176-184. California: Sage.

Jorgenson, Jane. (1989). Where is the family in family communication?: Exploring families' self-

definitions. Journal of Applied Communication
Research, 17, 1-2, pp. 27-41.

Kiecolt, Jill K., and Fosset, Mark A. (1997). The
effects of mate availability on marriage among black
americans: A contextual analysis. In Robert Joseph
Taylor, James S. Jackson & Linda M. Chatters (Eds.)
Family Life in Black America, p.63-78. California:
Sage.

Kramer, E.M. (2000). Cultural fusion and the
defense of difference. In Molefi Asante and J.E. Min
(Ed.) African-American and Korean-American Relations.
New York: University Press of America.

_____. (1997). Modern/Postmodern: Off the beaten
path of antimodernism. New York: Praeger.

_____. (in press). Contemptus mundi: Reality as
disease. In J. Murphy (Ed.) Computers, Human
Interaction, and Organization: Critical Issues. New
York: Praeger.

_____. (1997). Postmodernism and Race. New York:
Praeger.

_____. (1993). Understanding co-constitutional genesis. <u>Integrative Explorations Journal of Culture and Consciousness, 1, 1,</u> 41-47.

Levinas, Emmanuel. (2000). God, death and time. Translated by Bettina Bergo. California: Stanford University Press.

_____. (1989). Time and the other. In Sean Hand (Ed.). <u>The Levinas Reader</u>. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, p. 37-58.

_____. (1961). Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Lingis, Alphonso. (1994). The community of those who have nothing in common. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

McAdoo, Harriett Pipes. (1993). The social and cultural contexts of ecological developmental family models. In Pauline G. Boss, William J. Doherty, Ralph LaRossa, Walter Scumm, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz (Eds.). <u>Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods: A</u>

Contextual Approach. New York: Plenum Press, pp.298-301.

Mitford, Jessica. (1998). The american way of death revisited. New York: Alfred Knopf.

_____. (1963). The american way of death. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. (1965). The Negro family: Commonly known as the Moynihan Report. United States Dept. of Labor, Office of Policy and Planning. Washington: U.S.G.P.O.

Mumford, Lewis. (1964). The myth of the machine: The pentagon of power. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

_____. (1961). The city in history. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Neighbors, Harold W. (1997). Husbands, wives, family and friends: Sources of stress, sources of support. In Robert Joseph Taylor, James S. Jackson & Linda M. Chatters (Eds.) Family Life in Black America, p.277-292. California: Sage.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1974). The gay science. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

Ogbu, John U. A cultural ecology of competence among inner-city blacks. In Margaret Spencer, Geraldine Brookings & Walter Allen (Eds.) <u>Beginnings: The Social and Affective Development of Black Children</u>, pp.45-66. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Pathak, Archana. (1998). To be indian (hyphen) american: Communicating diaspora, identity and home. Doctoral Dissertation, The University of Oklahoma.

Perry, Hosea L. (1993). Mourning and funeral customs of african americans. In Donald P. Irish, Kathleen F. Lundquist and Vivian Jenkins Nelsen (Eds.) <u>Ethnic variations in dying, death, and grief: Diversity in universality.</u> Washington, D.C.: Taylor & Francis. pp.51-65.

Pleck, Elizabeth H. (2000). Celebrating the family: Ethnicity, consumer culture and family rituals. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Riedmann, Agnes. (1988). Ex-wife at the funeral:
Keyed anti-structure. Free Inquiry in Creative
Sociology, 6, 1, 123-129.

Scheff, Thomas J. (1977). The distancing of
emotion in ritual. Current Anthropology, 18, 3,
p.483-505.

Sobel, Mechal. (1979). Trabelin' on: The slave
journey to an afro-baptist faith. Connecticut:
Greenwood Press.

Socha, Thomas J. and Diggs, Rhunette C. (1999).
At the cross roads of communication, race, and the
family: Understanding black, white and biracial family
communication. In Thomas J. Socha, and Rhunette Diggs
(Eds.) Communication, Race, and Family: Exploring
Communication in Black, White, and Biracial Families.
New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.1-34.

Smith, Herbert L., Morgan, Philip S., &
Koropeckyj-Cox, Tanya. (1996). A decomposition of
trends in the nonmarital fertility ratios of blacks
and whites in the united states. Demography, 33, 2,
p.141-151.

Stack, Carol B. (1974). All our kin: Strategies for survival in a black community. New York: Harper & Row.

Stannard, David E. (1977). The puritan way of death: A study in religion, culture and social change. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sucoff, Clea A. and Upchurch, Dawn M. (1998). Neighborhood context and the risk of childbearing among metropolitan area black adolescents. *American Sociological Review, 63,*, p.571-585.

Stewart, David. And Mickunas, Algis. (1974). Exploring phenomenology: A guide to the field and its literature. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Taylor, Robert Joseph. Chatters, Linda M. and Jackson, James. (1997). Changes over time in support network involvement among black americans. In Robert Joseph Taylor, James S. Jackson & Linda M. Chatters (Eds.) *Family Life in Black America, p.293-319.* California: Sage.

Thomas, N.W. (1920). Notes on Edo burial customs. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 50, pp. 377-411.

_____. (1917). Some Ibo burial customs. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 47, pp. 160-213.

Trost, Jan. (1990). Do we mean the same by the concept of family? Communication Research, 17, 4, pp. 431-443.

Unruh, David R. (1979). Doing funeral directing: Managing sources of risk in funeralization. Urban Life, 8, 2, pp. 247-263.

Vangelisti, Anita L. (1993). Communication in the family: The influence of time, relational prototypes and irrationality. Communication Monographs, 60, p. 42-54.

Weber, Max. (1947). The theory of social and economic organization. Translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons. Illinois: Free Press.

Werner, C.M., Altman, I., Brown, B.B., and Ginat, J. (1993). Celebrations in personal relationships: A

transactional/dialectical perspective.   In S. Duck

(Ed.), <u>Social Context and Relationships: Understanding</u>

<u>Relationship Processes</u>.   California: Sage. 109-138.

    Wolin, Steven J. and Bennett; Linda A. (1984).

Family rituals.   <u>Family Process, 23,</u> pp.401-420.

    Wilson, William Julius. (1996). When work

disappears: The world of the new urban poor.   New

York: Vantage Books.

.

APPENDIX A

The University of Oklahoma

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ADMINISTRATION

February 14, 2001

Mr. Charlton McIlwain
PO Box 721981
Norman OK 73070

Dear Mr. McIlwain:

Your research application, "Communication Ecologies and African American Families: A Study of Family Death Rituals," has been reviewed according to the policies of the Institutional Review Board chaired by Dr. E. Laurette Taylor and found to be exempt from the requirements for full board review. Your project is approved under the regulations of the University of Oklahoma - Norman Campus Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research Activities.

Should you wish to deviate from the described protocol, you must notify me and obtain prior approval from the Board for the changes. If the research is to extend beyond 12 months, you must contact this office, in writing, noting any changes or revisions in the protocol and/or informed consent form, and request an extension of this ruling.

If you have any questions, please contact me.

Sincerely yours,

Susan Wyatt Sedwick, Ph.D.
Administrative Officer
Institutional Review Board

SWS:pw
FY01-225

cc: Dr. E. Laurette Taylor, Chair, Institutional Review Board
       Dr. Eric Kramer, Communication

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. In your experience, what all is included in a death ritual?

2. What event marks the beginning and the end of the ritual?

3. Who all is normally involved in the ritual?

4. Are there some people involved in some events of the ritual who are not involved in other events?

5. How are you able to identify who is "family" and who is not during the ritual?

6. Would you say that there are some people who are considered "family" during this ritual who may not be outside of this occasion?

7. As pastor, what is your role in this ritual?

8. What, if any, symbols or symbolic overtures are used during the ritual process?

9. What is generally done with the body during the ritual process? (May be included as follow-up in questions 1 or 2.)

10. What is usually done to help the family members of the deceased pay for the ritual?

11. Does a family's financial capacity have any bearing on the ritual?

12. Would you say there are differences between death rituals of black families and white families? If so, what are they?

13. Would you say there are any differences in how this ritual is carried out amongst black families of your denomination as opposed to those of another Christian denomination?

14. What is the purpose of performing this ritual?

15. Where does the ritual take place?