

HAWAIIAN FUNERAL

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This paper describes briefly the funeral practices of the members of the XYZ Church, consisting predominantly of Hawaiians and Part Hawaiians, drawn chiefly from the ranks of the lower classes. The members of this Hawaiian Church have broken away from the mother church--Ka Makua Mau Loa Church (Church of the Living God)--located on Mokauea Street in Kalihi. XYZ Church is only one of several independent churches formed by dissident members of the mother church, which, in turn, probably broke away from the earlier Congregational Church in Hawaii. This particular church can perhaps best be conceived as a nativistic religious movement of the cult-sect variety.

One of the basic assumptions of this paper is that the funeral practices of the church not only provide a gathering of the group to meet a specific crisis of some of the members, but also serve to meet a deeper and chronic crisis of the Hawaiians, pertaining to their ethnic unity.

Three mortuaries in Honolulu have handled the funeral arrangements for this group, over a considerable period of time. The one enjoying the greatest prestige at present derived this position from having conducted the funeral of their leader and pastor in a manner that was especially satisfactory to most of the members. Then too, this particular mortuary had at that time a plan for easy payment of the funeral costs, prior to the now existing Purple Shield Plan fostered by most of the city's mortuaries.

For the lower income families of this church, the financial burden of a funeral is quite considerable and it is partially eased by the contributions made by Church members and various of its organizations such as the Makuahines (Mothers' Club), the Makuakanes (Fathers' Club), and the Opios (Young People). These organizations contribute as a loving and helping gesture. Besides the monetary gifts, members usually donate coffee, sugar, cream, rolls, and sandwiches to be served at the mortuary when the body lies in state.

A wake, being a local custom among Honolulu's multi-racial population, is usually held the night before the actual funeral. At the funeral parlor, the inexpensive casket lies in a central position in the front of the mortuary chapel. The deceased is clothed in his best suit or her best dress. There are very few floral offerings because the members feel that the family can make more use of the actual cash. What flower offerings there are, come from family and friends who are not members of the Church. Members almost always string leis from melia, pikake, or ilima blossoms and drape them on the casket as their floral tribute. At many Christian funerals there is a cross just behind the casket with candles burning around the bier. However, the cross is excluded at the funerals of XYZ Church members who are Protestant and extremely anti-Catholic. Any manner or form of symbolic religious objects or gestures are not tolerated because they connote the outward forms of Catholicism. To them, any religious object is a statue and an idol, and God forbids the use of idols for worship.

Most of the callers who come to pay their respects to the deceased are Hawaiians and Part Hawaiians with a scattering of other ethnic groups. Most of the church members attend the funeral since they are a small closely knit, homogeneous group. The immediate family members dress either in white or black. They sit alongside the casket greeting friends

who come to pay their respects. Each person approaches and passes before the casket, many times breaking into a sob or loud wail, and then expresses his sympathies and condolences to the family members gathered around the casket, by either shaking their hands or embracing them. Particularly the elderly women greet a person with an embrace and a kiss. This form of greeting is very common among Hawaiians. Often, relatives and friends will lean over the casket to kiss the deceased person. To the Hawaiians, a kiss and an embrace are the most intimate ways of expressing love and respect.

The attire worn by distant relatives and friends is an unusual sight for a funeral especially when one is accustomed to the more conventional garb of either black or white. People enter the mortuary chapel wearing ordinary street clothes. The men just wear a sport or aloha shirt ranging from a dark to a very bright-colored one. Many women wear mumuus to the funeral. However, the elderly women often wear their old-fashioned holokus. A few women may come in slacks. Men and women even come wearing slippers. The overt expression of respect in wearing proper funeral attire is dissimilar to the Orientals and other ethnic groups. The Hawaiian expresses his emotions more concretely--the mere fact of being present at the funeral, seeing the family, and crying.

The general atmosphere of the mortuary is a grand mixture of sorrow, happiness, crying, laughter, and general conversation. Within the chapel itself, the people behave in a sombre, devout manner except for the mutterings of those greeting friends whom they haven't seen for a long time. Only the immediate family maintain the sad and sombre vigil throughout the funeral. In the corridors, people are having a social hour--joking, arguing, laughing, there is almost a gay spirit. The church members always serve coffee, rolls, and sandwiches in the mortuary kitchen for those attending the funeral. The general atmosphere in the kitchen is like a college snack bar. Little children are running in and out of the kitchen and chapel and up and down the corridors. The general atmosphere of the funeral gathering is like a 4th of July picnic.

The funeral service is always held in the mortuary chapel prior to burial and a church funeral is taboo. All who have come to the mortuary crowd into the chapel in a solemn reverent mood. Laughing and joking stops and a hushed silence comes over the place. All gather to join in worship.

The service is conducted by the pastor of the church, who has been appointed by God through messages related by dreams, and other natural signs. The minister wears a businessman's suit. The service begins with the singing of English and Hawaiian hymns by the congregation led by a choir provided by one of the various church organizations. The hymns, sung without musical accompaniment, are of the soft sweet melancholy type. Sentimental hymns such as "Savior Like a Shepherd Lead Us," "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "In the Garden," "Let the Lower Lights Be Burning," and "Where He Leads Me I Will Follow," suggest a feeling that Christ is comforting and loving. The sentimental feeling of love deeply entrenched in the Hawaiian mind is expressed through the choice of hymns. It ought to be emphasized here that this particular group of worshippers are not revivalistic in their services but follow very closely in Congregationalist form of worship.

After the singing of hymns the minister usually opens the Bible and randomly chooses and reads that passage of Scripture, in the belief that God

is speaking to the group at that particular moment by way of the random selection. The minister then interprets the Scripture to the congregation in terms of personal testimony, usually tying his experiences in with the deceased. He attempts to point out the cause of the person's death, following the belief of the group that death is punishment caused by sinful ways of living. It is not God but the Kepalo (devil) who causes death and illnesses. This belief is further associated with the ideas of kahunaism and spirits. God always warns a person of approaching death through dreams and special signs, which often go by unnoticed. Belief in spirits probably goes back to the old Hawaiian worship of akuas (nature gods), aumakuas (ancestral or guardian spirits) and unhipillis (recently departed spirit). This group of followers are very conscious about the care of their kino (body) and uhane (spirit), particularly with the latter. This idea of the importance of the spirit is probably a remnant of the ancient Hawaiian concept of the human soul.

The funeral service has no set ritual and the procedure followed varies with the minister in charge of the service. Often important members of the church are called upon to speak. The testimonies usually lead on to eulogies. The minister and other members of the congregation usually begin speaking in Hawaiian and end in English for the benefit of the younger people. The Hawaiian language is very important to this group and is used as much as possible.

Following the testimonies, final prayers are said in English and Hawaiian, asking God's mercy on the deceased and special comfort and help for the members of the family whom the dead person has left behind. There are no set prayers but each is made up on the spur of the moment. The service ends with the singing of the doxology and the recitation of the Lord's Prayer, both in Hawaiian.

The closing of the coffin climaxes the funeral. It is at these final moments of the funeral that emotions are given free reign. Relations and friends file by the bier taking a last glance at the beloved. Many sob quietly, others burst out in a loud wail. Many persons pause before the bier, then lean over to kiss the body in farewell. While this is all going on, the immediate family members are being aroused emotionally more and more until some of them can't control themselves. They usually break down with loud screams, wailings, and mumbling. Finally, their last look at their beloved ends in a clutching embrace and kiss of the departed one.

A short service is usually performed at the graveside. A Hawaiian or English hymn is sung, prayers are offered and a final blessing is asked for both the spirit of the departed and the family. Then as the casket is lowered into the grave, the church members always break forth in the singing of "Nearer My God to Thee" in Hawaiian. Friends and family members usually remain at the graveside until the grave has been filled. Then people say good bye with final embraces and kisses to the bereaved family and depart.

Conclusions

It must again be emphasized that as these observations are rather limited in scope and depth, only tentative conclusions can be made. Further intensive research is needed.

1. The death of an individual provides an opportunity for friends

and relatives to gather together. It brings the group together strengthening the close ties of this particular Hawaiian group. The gathering at a funeral is like the gathering of a clan. It provides for a social gathering and an expression of closeness and unity.

2. In contrast to other ethnic groups, the Hawaiians tend to be very informal. Their dress at funerals brings out this idea. Their ways of showing respect, love, and sorrow also seem more unrestrained and informal. The emotions are expressed in a very overt fashion.

3. Attempts to preserve the Hawaiian heritage by this group can be observed in the use of the Hawaiian language in the service.

4. Some of the beliefs and actions of this particular church group suggest a cult-like character. Many beliefs seem to be a mixture of Christian and ancient Hawaiian ideas. Other beliefs are tied up with spirits and dream interpretation.

5. The Hawaiians have become a disorganized people, having been unable to cope with the many invading foreign cultures. At present, many Hawaiians are still unable to better themselves economically. Thus many turn to a cult-sect type of church which satisfies some personal need. It may also be a means of intensifying the group sentiments.

6. This Hawaiian church tries to recapture some of the Hawaiian group feeling. This it does by reverting back to the remnants of the Old Hawaiian ideas under Hawaiian leadership and with no connections with Haole-dominated churches. Thus it seems possible to term this group as a Hawaiian nativistic religious movement.