

〈研究ノート〉

Notes on Mortuary Rituals in Modern Urban Jamaica (complete translation)

Shuji Kamimoto

This report briefly summarizes some of the issues for future discussion of funerals in urban Jamaica.¹

More than 90% of people living in Jamaica are descendants of slaves with roots in West and Central Africa. Herskovits (1941) noted the “survival” of African elements in cultures throughout the Americas. This perspective has also been found in subsequent Jamaican cultural anthropological studies. For instance, one of Simpson’s classic studies on funerals discussed *nine night* as a syncretic religious practice (Simpson 1957).² However, the focus of recent studies on funerals in Jamaica is different. Attention has shifted to the extravagance of funerals among common people of African descent, that is, the working-class majority (e.g. Paul 2007, Hope 2010). These funerals are sometimes referred to as flashy or bling funerals. These funerals have several unique characteristics, including a variety of coffin types and designs, the use of luxury SUVs to transport the coffin, and attendees wearing ostentatious clothing as if going to a music event. Hope (2010), whose research focuses on the popular culture of black Jamaicans, notes that this trend is closely associated with the celebrity orientation linked to the individualistic and materialistic orientation represented in Dancehall and argues that the participants attempt to elevate their position in society through spectacular funerals.

Simpson (1957) and Hope (2010) have addressed funerals in Kingston’s capital city. However, little attention has been paid to the role of funeral home already existed in the 1950s. Many funerals involve specialized providers who cater to the demands of bereaved families and stimulate new demands.³ Furthermore, focusing on funeral rites, burials, and how the deceased are remembered reveals that many agents are involved in the practice of death. As Metcalf and Huntington (1991) have stated, “a close relationship exists between deathways and other ideological and social system in a society” (206).

Thus, a short-term preliminary field study was conducted in September 2019 to gain a general understanding of funerals in urban areas. This report summarizes the results from three perspectives: the history of funeral providers and current issues, changes in burial spaces, and individualization and de-individualization.

History of funeral home and current issues

Funeral home first opened their doors in the capital city of Kingston in the 1930s. Currently, funeral directors, casket makers, florists, and other related businesses surround the Kingston Public Hospital in the downtown area. The largest of these is Madden’s Funeral Home, founded in 1934, and Roman’s

Funeral Home, founded in 1939. The founders of both funeral homes have degrees or training from the American Academy McAllister Institute in New York City. This suggests that Jamaican funeral directors have been influenced by the American system and values from the beginning of their history.

However, the lack of legislation restricting entry into the funeral service industry has led to many people without sufficient knowledge or skills entering the industry. A 2015 newspaper article contains comments from a representative of Roman's Funeral Home, in which the representative states that the number of funeral directors has increased from 15 to 20 in the first half of 2005 to more than 170 (Jamaica Gleaner 2015 11/13). Several newspaper articles in 2019 report that funeral directors transport bodies by cab (Jamaica Gleaner 2019 4/14), that incorrect bodies have been cremated, and that the percentage of vendors who are not trained in embalming methods is nearly 90%, indicating that the quality of funeral directors is inadequate (Jamaica Observer 2019 1/22).

The program for funeral workers provided by Humber College in Canada has been available in Kingston since January 2017, and this change is expected to break this trend; however, the program outcomes are unknown at this time.

Burial space changes

After emancipation in the early 19th century, former slaves who gained land on which they congregated began to bury their dead on their land or in the neighborhood. Consequently, the family lands where the deceased were buried came to serve as places to unite relatives (e.g., Besson 1998, Hume 2018). However, not all people live near family land. The author focuses on cities in which many people congregate.

Currently, the shortage of cemeteries in urban areas is a social problem. Consequently, many of the deceased in Kingston are buried in adjacent private cemeteries: Dovecot Memorial Park and Crematorium, founded in 1975, and Meadowrest Memorial Garden, founded in 1994 and located in the suburbs of Spanish Town, St. Catherine Parish.⁴ The former is owned by Madden's Funeral Home, and the latter by the United Church. The concept of the former is that of an "American-style" cemetery with simple evenly spaced headstones, whereas the concept of the latter is unknown.

The author visited both cemeteries on Sunday, September 8, 2019. While there, the author saw many funeral directors in white suits with expensive jackets, luxury SUVs carrying caskets, and attendees in ostentatious costumes and makeup, as if they were going to a dance hall event. On the way to the cemetery, the author observed funeral cars with gospel music and attendees in their cars with the blinkers flashing. Young people leaned out of their car windows and made noises as they drove to the cemetery. Due to a legend that the deceased who are not buried by sunset will become duppies (ghosts), the road leading to the cemetery was jammed before dusk.

Individualization and de-individualization

Most graves in the two large cemeteries mentioned above are simple and featureless. Conversely, burials on private property and in one corner of May Pen Cemetery, which is Kingston's largest public cemetery, contain gravestones that resemble cars and houses and have illustrations related to their occupations and hobbies (Photo 1). All such gravestones are for the recently deceased.



Photo 1: Tombstone with a motorcycle motif (photo by the author, September 2019).

The person who requested her research assistance was from the music industry. Thus, I was able to photograph 16 programs of musicians' funerals that she attended. Some of the programs were modeled after vinyl records. A Funeral program, which summarize the life of the deceased, is a tool used to express their personalities.

The deceased are sometimes remembered by people other than family members or close relatives. In this study, I photographed several murals painted on the walls of houses and stores in Tivoli Garden and Arnett Garden in the poor neighborhoods of Kingston. Many of these illustrations are of community leaders who have passed away or of famous people in the area. For example, according to the neighbors, many music fans still come to take pictures of the mural of famous dancer Bogle, who was killed at a gas station in 2005. Thus, the person subject of the mural serves as a nexus for social relations between the inside and outside of the community.

What research questions can be derived from the limited information we have thus far? The most significant finding of this study is that North American funerals influenced Jamaican funerals. Jamaican funeral directors who seek to learn structured knowledge and techniques tend to study in North America or learn based on North American knowledge. The founder of Madden's Funeral Home, owner of Dovecot Memorial Park and Crematorium, which claims to be an American-style cemetery, also attended the American Academy McAllister Institute of Funeral Service. This raises the question of how Jamaican funerals are changing the way the deceased are mourned, which Simpson (1957) described as a syncretic phenomenon. This question can be partially answered by examining specific



Photo 2: A Mural of the dead (photo by the author, September 2019).

funeral processes, narratives about the dead at funerals, and materials that evoke memories of the dead in the living, such as the deceased's belongings and photographs.

Moreover, this survey revealed the presence of gravestones, elaborate program charts, and murals depicting the dead, all of which were created to be personalized to the deceased. Gravestones, program charts, and murals allow people to remember and imagine the deceased. Gravestones and program charts play a role in personalizing the life of the deceased, regardless of who they were. However, murals of the deceased also have a public role. Studying these murals can provide a comprehensive understanding of social relations, values, and politics, both within and outside the community.

In the future, I intend to examine two aspects: (1) the history and business practices of funeral directors and (2) the transformation of Jamaica's traditional view of the deceased, religious beliefs, and life and death. I hope to shed light on an important aspect of the dynamics of Jamaican society through an analysis of its mortuary practices.

Notes

1 This article is based on a study originally reported in *Black Studies* 89 in Japanese.

- 2 For instance, he describes funerals led by the Revival priests of the syncretistic religion. However, since the 1960s, many Revivalists have converted to Pentecostalism. This change in religious affiliation may have significantly impacted how funerals were conducted.
- 3 The first famous flashy funeral was that of the famous gangster William Augustus Moore (also known as Willie Haggart), held at the National Arena in 2001. The funeral was attended by 5,000 people, including the Minister of Finance. Tommy Thompson of the Brite Lite Funeral Service was in charge of the funeral (Hope 2010: 260).
- 4 According to the websites of these two cemeteries, approximately 1,500 bodies are buried annually in the former and 2,000 in the latter.

Works Cited

- Besson, Jean. 1998. "Religion as Resistance in Jamaican Peasant Life: The Baptist Church, Revival Worldview and Rastafari Worldview." In *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, Edited by Barry Chevannes, Rutgers University Press, pp. 43–76.
- Herskovitz, Melville. 1941. *The Myth of The Negro Past*. Harper and Brothers.
- Hope, Donna. 2010. "From the Stage to the Grave: Exploring Celebrity Funerals in Dancehall Culture." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13 (3): 254–270.
- Hume, Yanique. 2018. "Death and the Construction of Social Space: Land, Kinship, and Identity in the Jamaican Mortuary Cycle." In *Passages & Afterworlds: Anthropological Perspectives on Death in the Caribbean*, Edited by Maarit Forde and Yanique Hume, Duke University Press, pp. 109–138.
- Metcalf, Peter and Huntington, Richard. 1991. *Celebration of Death: An Anthropological of Mortuary Ritual*, Cambridge University Press.
- Paul, Annie. 2007. "No Grave Cannot Hold My Body Down: Ritual of Death and Burial in Postcolonial Jamaica." *Small Axe* 11 (2): 142–162.
- Simpson, George. 1957. "The Nine Night Ceremony in Jamaica." *The Journal of American Folklore* 70: 329–335.