



A Division of the Institute of Jamaica

AFRO-CARIBBEAN CULTURE – DEATH RITUALS IN JAMAICA



**PRODUCED BY: THE AFRICAN CARIBBEAN INSTITUTE OF JAMAICA/JAMAICA
MEMORY BANK (ACIJ/JMB)**

DATE: December 2022

INTRODUCTION

The African Caribbean Institute of Jamaica (ACIJ) was established in 1972 as a division of the Institute of Jamaica to deepen public awareness of African cultural retention and its relationship to the other ethnic groups in Jamaica. In 1990, the Jamaica Memory Bank (JMB) was integrated into the ACIJ, forming the ACIJ/JMB. The JMB documents Jamaica's social history via audiovisual recordings of the memories of senior citizens throughout the country. The ACIJ/JMB has a wealth of resources relating to Afro-Jamaican and other ethnic cultural heritage and a vast area of Jamaica's social history.

In fulfilling its mandate, the ACIJ/JMB has developed a systematic research and documentation programme, thereby establishing its importance as a centre for the study of African presence in Jamaican and Caribbean culture. This programme includes research conducted on traditional dance forms, various aspects of language, traditional and popular music, religions, food, social movement, herbal medicine, festivals, and community histories.

The ACIJ/JMB also maintains a vibrant Publications Unit. Through this medium, the division informs the public of aspects of our culture by producing articles on Afro-Caribbean Culture. These articles are posted on the division's website, and stored in the division's library, and are used by researchers, teachers, students, and the general public. They are also widely distributed to schools and colleges islandwide, as well as to various divisions and affiliate bodies of the Institute of Jamaica.

DEATH RITUALS IN JAMAICA

Death and burial are treated with great reverence by many in Jamaica. They serve as a major opportunity for family gatherings and bring persons together from near and far distances. A burial is usually delayed until as many relatives as possible can arrive from abroad or from remote sections of the island.

Today, death rituals in Jamaica combine African and European customs and Christian practices. In the event of a death, certain rituals are practiced, such as covering mirrors in the house; stopping the clocks; telling the bees; ensuring that the corpse is removed feet first, and rearranging furniture so that the ghost of the dead will not recognise the abode if it returns. The colours of black, purple and white are the approved colours worn at funerals and during the period of mourning by close family members, although this is less observed today.



A funeral service in Jamaica

Remnants of African customs

During the period of enslavement of Africans on the plantations, death observances were not banned; therefore, old customs among African descendants throughout the Americas were preserved. During enslavement, Africans took care of their own people, and burial rites were followed according to the African custom.

Today, most persons are buried according to Christian church rites; however, remnants of African customs still prevail, although not as strictly as centuries ago when preparations for the burial took place at home instead of through a professional undertaker and the corpse remained in the home until the burial. In the old days, before the coffin left the house, the adults would stand on either side of it and pass the young children of the family across it three times to prevent the spirit from harming them. This ritual is still sometimes observed today.

The older persons in the villages across the island knew the way to proceed when a person died and they adhered to the rules in order to not offend the dead. They held on to the African belief in the multiple soul or three components of the individual. This belief purports that while the physical body died, the spirit returned to God and embarked on a journey, while the 'duppy' or shadow lived on and could become a menace to the living if not accorded proper respect. Therefore, funeral rites ensured the safe journey of the spirit and placated the duppy. It was also believed in the old days that, on death, the spirit returned to Africa, therefore messages to loved ones there were sometimes sent with the dead and the process of death and burial became a prolonged event.

Wake-keeping

When someone dies, it is customary throughout the island for family, friends, well-wishers and neighbours to gather at the home of the dead person every night or on specific nights after the death. This is called a 'wake', and what prevails at a wake is modified by the religious beliefs and desires of the family as well as their social status. Nowadays, although all Jamaicans usually observe some modified form of a wake, among the middle and upper classes it is limited to the welcome of guests who visit the home on hearing of the death and a reception for family and close friends immediately after the funeral.

Elaborate wake-keeping is usually undertaken by rural folk. This involves communal singing, testimonies, ring games, riddles, storytelling, ritual music, dancing, eating, and drinking. These elements of the traditional wake vary from one locale to the next.



A wake-keeping ceremony

The wake can be held on one or several nights after the death, or on all the nights leading up to the ninth night. These events are commonly called 'Nine Night', which is possibly based on the belief of the enslaved Africans that it took nine nights for the spirit of the dead to travel back to 'Guinea' or Africa to join the ancestors.

On the first night of the wake, there is a gathering but the night is usually devoid of much activity. This is sometimes called a 'silent wake' and the bereaved are urged to cry and mourn. The third night is critical as this is when the dead person is believed to come out of the grave to join the mourners in the spirit. An all-night vigil is kept on the third night to keep the dead amused and entertained until dawn when he/she must return to the grave.

Activities on other nights may be limited to singing until the Nine Night ceremony. The ninth night is regarded as the night of final separation when rituals are undertaken to convince the dead that it is time for it to leave the world of the living and join the world of the ancestors. Unsalted food is provided for the dead inside the house, and formal leave-taking by family and other participants is followed by activities, such as rearranging the furniture to signify the breaking of ties and to confuse the dead, should it return. In some places, this is done immediately as the body leaves the house. Other activities include speechmaking, singing, ritual dance and music.

Basically, the wake is a vigil kept by the living to not only comfort the bereaved family but to entertain the dead so that it does not linger to harm the living. It serves to convince the dead that proper respect has been paid so that, in the event of final leave-taking on the ninth night, the shadow will remain with the body in its grave and not become a wandering spirit that can do harm or be employed to do harm to the living.

Refreshments are an important element of the wake and, depending on the family resources, food and drink will be provided every night or only on the important nights but, *moreso*, on the ninth night.

It is customary for persons to join hands and contribute to making the wake a success by providing supplies and general assistance with the cooking and serving. The basic foods and drink served at wakes in rural Jamaica include coffee, 'cocoa tea', white proof rum, hard dough bread, fried fish, and *bammy*.

African and European Christian Traditions

The Nine Night draws on both African and European Christian traditions. Based on the Christian belief, the soul's journey to Heaven is emphasised and hymns, sermons, and references to Heaven are included. The African tradition places emphasis on placating the spirit of the dead. However, with both customs, the objective is to provide the deceased with a good departure from this world. Often, the religious ceremony takes place first and is followed by other rituals to ensure that the dead spirit understands that ties have been broken and it should depart from the world of the living. Unless this is done, it is believed that the spirit becomes a malignant *duppy* and will linger to haunt the living.

Generally, older persons in the rural, agricultural areas of the island and the poorer inhabitants of the urban areas are the main practitioners of these rites. Formal education, international travel, and upward

social mobility have contributed to a reluctance by younger middle-class Jamaicans to practice the majority of these rites.

Bibliography

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