

A Comparison of African and African American Funeral Customs and Rites with Specific Examples from Zimbabwe and Louisiana States

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Abstract: This is a paper which looks at funeral rites in two different places, Zimbabwe and America. There is an attempt to trace common origin if possible as black people in America were taken in as slaves from Africa. The paper looks at folklore. There are many forms of folklore but this paper looks at social customs. This category includes rites of passage, rituals, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, death ceremonies, marriage customs, harvest festivals and other celebrations of life and venerations of death. The way people treat, revere, and bury their departed loved ones shows their beliefs about life and death. The paper relied mainly on participatory observations and interviews conducted in the two places under study. The results are that there are both similarities and differences in the manner in which people from the two worlds pay homage to the deceased.

Keywords: Funeral rites, folklore, customs, America and Zimbabwe

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

There are basically four broad categories or types of folklore which modern folklorist find pertinent. The first one is oral literature or orature which is to do with folk narratives, folk song, riddles, proverbs, poetry and epics and the griots or imbongi, (depending on which part of Africa one is focusing on) are the folklore bards or encyclopedias of this oral knowledge. The importance of this oral body of knowledge can be seen in the reverence given to these griots or praise singers. They were the “organic intellectuals” of their artistic and cultural communities. Their role and relevance is succinctly put by Birago Diop as, “they were the repositories of oral tradition and history, transmitters of the musical and artistic heritage of the people as singers, performers, story-tellers and chroniclers of myth and legends. Essentially, they were glaring examples of artistry in harmony with the socio-cultural milieu that produces it and no wonder why the death of one of these oral gurus was as devastating to his community as the burning down of a library to the modern society.

Ruth Finnegan has already written extensively on African orature, oracity, orality, aurality or verbal art. On the other hand, Henry Louis Gates Jr[2]. has attempted to put the oral word or a phonocentric tradition at the center of any theory of understanding black literature in general and African American written expression in particular. His observation that black literature is “vocally” written is plausible to say the

least. Zora Neale Hurston’s arduous collections of folktales that are constantly threatened by modernity help make connections between the blacks in America and their African counterparts. Arguably the main actors may vary between the African American tales in Hurston’s collections and the African ones but the recurring thematic motifs of gullibility, cunningness, avarice, dishonesty, cowardice, stupidity and dishonesty almost suggests a common cradle and show folklore’s retention ability.

The second folkloric grouping is interested in the material culture like quilting, basket weaving, sculpture, pottery, vernacular architecture, hand-crafts, and traditional costume designing. It is more to do with the visual aspects of folklore. The argument of the Finis method or comparative study of these cultural artifacts is to establish connections between seemingly disparate geographical and historical entities. Like in the diffusion of oral tales, movements from Africa created new material demands and black people adapted to ensure their survival. Quilting is one art shared by both Africans and their African American counterparts but may be for different purposes. Where the former prioritizes aesthetics, the latter, because of inhospitable climatic conditions thinks of a utilitarian function like warmth provision.

Also closely linked to the material of the folks are the performing arts. Convincing studies have already been put forward suggesting the influence of

African music and dances in the evolution of Negro spirituals, jazz and blues. The functional and collective characteristics, where improvisation, antiphony and polyphony are key features remain shared values of the music from the two continents. Even the dance patterns are the same as both African and African American dances can be said to be centrifugal as they explode outward from the hips. Joyce Jackson is currently working on the “ring-shout,” a quasi-secular way of worship which has survived many years of socio-pious attrition in Louisiana. Her main motivation is to get to the historicity of this phenomenon, and trace it to its African roots, where the sacred and secular realms blur together. What emerges in all these assumptions about folklore is the discipline’s centrality in cross-cultural studies. Through the study of folk culture one can rediscover his long lost clansmen and hence our endeavors in this study.

The last group of folklore, which is the focus of this research paper concerns social folk customs. This category includes rites of passage, rituals, naming ceremonies, initiation rites, death ceremonies, marriage customs, harvest festivals and other celebrations of life and veneration of death. The way people treat, revere, and bury their departed loved ones shows their beliefs about life and death. Much has been written about African beliefs about death by such scholars as Mbiti and Bourdillon, on one hand, and cultural insiders and traditionalists like the Zimbabwean born Joshua Nkomo[5], on the other. The shared belief is that the African cosmology consists of three realms, namely the world of the unborn, the world of the living and the world of the ancestors or the “living dead” as they are called. Certain rituals have to be performed at the crossing of every path from one world to the other. Wole Soyinka has popularized this path as the “chthonic realm”. Life is a full cycle between all these three worlds and there is mutual interdependence at all stages between the inhabitants of these worlds. Those who are dead have a duty to perform to those who are living, and vice-versa.

Positioning the study within the academic convention: Literature review

Joshua Nkomo’s [5] book talks at length about ancestor reverence; what has been anomalously called “ancestor worship.” We would like to reiterate, as an adherent of this culture and ritual, that the dead or ancestors are not worshipped. Again, they are not believed to be dead at all but rather “spiritual beings” hovering over the living with potent powers to cause harm or good to them if they neglect their duties. For instance, before leaving home for studies in America, one has to gather all the clansmen, brew beer, and have a big party for all. By all, it implies the whole family which includes the dead and the living, and sacrifices like pouring of beer onto the ground and spreading of snuff on the ground symbolically takes care of the

dead’s hunger and thirst for food. The officiate of this ceremony goes through an incantation through which he informs everybody about the purpose of the gathering. He goes through the list of the dead, as we all knew them in their earthly lives, and invites them to guide, protect, and accompany the new traveler as they did in the days of old and in hunting trips. A representative incantation speech will go like:

Sintren, Madlodlo, Bova and all those I am too young to know your child, “Thinkwell”, who has decided to widen his hunting terrain...we humbly ask you to open the ways and deliver him safely to America...and even in that jungle where we are told... (Bad things), let him always remember home and come back in due course.

The pouring of beer on the ground and the spreading of snuff is done simultaneously with these incantations. Essentially, Joshua Nkomo’s[5] argument is that death is viewed as a transitional phase from one state to another and does not free one from all other forms of duties and social responsibilities.

The other interesting research on African funerary art we acquainted ourselves with is from Thierry Secretan[6]. Secretan confined his research to the Ga ethnic community of Ghana, just close to the capital of Accra, and focused on coffin making and a few other funerary paraphernalia. What comes out clear in this study is the belief that the departed is not dead as such but should be given all the material comforts he worked for to continue with his life in the next world. The choice of the coffin becomes a very important decision in the whole burial procession. Coffins take different shapes. For example, the lion or eagle-shape is for the chief, the Mercedes Benz-shape is for a rich motorist, a sport boot-shape is for an athlete, a bird-shape is for academics, and a plane-shape is for those who loved traveling by air or aspired to fly. Secretan recalls one conversation with Kane Kwei, a coffin carpenter: “The children of a well-known university lecturer were debating what shape of coffin to choose for their father [...]. I suggested a parrot holding a pen in its beak.” (9) And he concludes by saying, “Kane’s learned parrot has become the favorite design with the families of academics (9).

Katherine Ashenburg’s[1] book, *The Mourner’s Dance*, makes refreshing observations on the symbolic dances which accompany funeral ceremonies, the wailing, gender roles in these rituals, and the dress codes before falling into the trap of generalizing and universalizing bereavement. Lastly, Geoffrey Gorer’s [3] *Death, Grief, and Mourning* gives the best breakdown to a topic of this nature, and has helped us a lot in structuring our research. He discusses funeral rites under these very convenient subheadings: the bereaved,

the house of mourning, and telling the children under one heading, "A death in the family." Then denominations, the afterlife and the clergy under "religion," before looking at public signs of mourning, condolences, styles of mourning under one topic, "grief and mourning." For him the disposal of the body, the family gathering, and the gravestones are "the real funeral" and he ends with a lengthy discussion on "types of bereavement" which include death of father, mother, husband, wife, brother or sister and child.

HYPOTHESIS AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

While it is clear, from the randomly cited library resources, that death ceremonies and other funerary paraphernalia has attracted much attention, what makes this research unique and worth doing is its geographical specificity. We are keen academics who have knowledge of the African American and African expressive culture, and who observed the American rites with a vital mission of establishing "broken connections" with "our people" (Too sentimental). It is thus our belief that the way people relate to the departed: i.e. the way they bury them, the songs they sing at these funerals, how they relate to the property of the deceased; particularly clothes and other personal belongings, and how they mourn, and the words they utter when mourning, and their proverbs about death, (all of which will be summarily called funeral customs and rites in this paper) constitutes a vital reservoir of a people's identity, history, and cosmic outlook. Of all folkloric residues death ceremonies are the most conservative and resistant to change as they work on people's beliefs. It is, therefore, our assumption in this research that African Americans of a place like Louisiana, which, during slavery times, had big agricultural compounds and dynamic black ethnic populations involved in the primary environment, retained certain ways of burying and relating to the dead which can find similarities in Africa and more specifically in Zimbabwe. New Orleans in Louisiana State is reputed for having been and is still a cultural melting pot or conglomerate of some sort and it was interesting to find an ethnic grouping calling itself the Zulus which is a common ethnicity, one of the largest ethnic groups in South Africa. If we bear in mind that slaves were sold "down the river" from all over the Americas then New Orleans and Louisiana's socio-cultural centrality and diversity cannot be overemphasized. By a stroke of luck the researchers may end up "reconnecting with long lost kith and kin." From our experience in Zimbabwe, death ceremonies, like their opposite number, birth rituals are not only ethnic specific but also clan and family specific. In this logic any people who bury their dead or treat the umbilical code of their newly born in the same way belong to the same clan and hence are the same people.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Our method of research relied more on two approaches namely interviews and observations at funerals. We were able to attend three funerals from different ethnic groups in Zimbabwe, visit one bereaved family and one funeral church service in Louisiana, watch one funeral movie and interview a couple of black students in Louisiana State University who proved a very vital source of information. Evidently our key instruments for eliciting information were the participant-observer technique and the questionnaire. It is not easy to jot down notes in an emotional and somber place like a funeral setting so we had to do most of the recording and note making in retrospect. The interviewees had to be people who had experienced a family loss as our interest was those secret beliefs that an individual holds about the departed one at that personalized level.

The research objectives and the questionnaires clearly outlined some of the wanted information and the following is the random list and possible answers found on the research tools. Whose funeral is this? Where answers were expected to be the title of the deceased like mother, father, sister, brother, husband, granny, child, brother or sister-in-law or wife, assuming the rituals will differ depending on the title and status of the dead. Then the cause of the death which expected answers to range from natural causes, accidents, sicknesses, and mysterious deaths and this accounted for the people's psychological preparedness to handle the death and usually accounted for the presence or absence of loud wailings and mourning. In short the cause of the death shaped the styles of mourning. How is the death announced to the next of kin, to the children, to the neighbors etc? It could be through loud mourning, public notices, flyers, church announcements or physical signs like removal of curtains or hanging by the gate of a red or black flag. Who will officiate the ceremony and recite the incantations if any? And the answers were expected to cover next of kin, clansman, and brother of the dead, priest, deacon, chief, secular leaders or spiritual leaders. What rites are the survivors expected to perform and when? What specific rites for what specific group of people depending on their closeness to the deceased e.g. wife, husband, child etc. on the dead or on the grave?

The second group of questions pertained to the gravesite. Where is the burial site--City or family cemetery? How long does the burial process take, i.e. the time between death and burial and the burial schedule on the day of the burial itself? In Islamic world this time is a matter of hours and in non Islamic Africa this could take a week or so. It becomes important then to ask what rituals are performed in the meantime before final burial or where is the body kept? For instance, in public mortuaries or private funeral homes and who dresses the body and how? What

happens immediately after burial, or a week later, and a year or so later? How do the living keep communion with the dead? Who chooses the coffin and what other personal artifacts are interred with the dead, in the same coffin or grave? What happens to the property of the dead and when can the estate be shared? How should the mourners dress or the bereaved family and who is responsible for feeding the helpers?

The last group of questions was concerned with other social activities meant to comfort or distract attention away from this sad loss. What role does the church helpers, or in-laws perform in a funeral? What roles do the friends of the deceased perform and what type of humor is socially acceptable in this somber atmosphere? What role does the griot, praise singer, imbongi, black preacher, or even clown or toastmasters perform to relax this tense atmosphere? In general what mechanisms are culturally put in place to create lighter moments and some comic relief? In a nutshell the whole research was an attempt to provide answers to these and other questions and what follows are the observations and results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Zimbabwe we attended and observed three funerals though it should be noted that we had prior knowledge of the country and its culture. We are satisfied that the sample was representative enough to allow generalizations on death ceremonies and rituals in this Southern African state. The first funeral was that of a father, a prosperous man but a promiscuous husband. He died in the capital city, Harare but was buried in his remote rural home in Mtoko, about two hundred kilometers from the capital. As relatives to the deceased it was mandatory for us to accompany the dead man to his final destination, sitting beside the coffin and singing all the way to the rural areas. Rural family cemeteries are still very important despite great strides in urbanization. People still believe in finally resting with all their kith and kin far away from the hassles of city life and at heart people still romanticize, idealize and sentimentalize the rural charm in Zimbabwe.

The duties and rituals were clearly defined on the basis of the relationship between the individual performers and the dead man. Co-workers and in-laws were active pallbearers who should accompany “one of them” to his final rest place. The first born son stood by the head of the dead man throughout the mourning and burial and had to be “man enough” to show no sign of emotion. He held the traditional spear, a phallic symbol of continuity and protection as he becomes the heir apparent. It is his duty to console his mother and all the other siblings. In other words the death of the father is a symbolic initiation into manhood for the first born son; hence it is a rite of passage for both. For the dead man it is a passage through the “chthonic realm” into ancestor hood and for the young boy a passage into adulthood

and the responsibilities that come with it. Everybody around helps the young boy to ease into this new role.

The wife of the dead man is the most bereaved and her face should be covered with a black cloth or veil which remotely echoes a marriage ceremony. Her clans women like sisters play the equivalent of the best girl, (maid of honor) always there for her, and answering questions on her behalf. It is as much her day as a wedding day is to the bride. A Zimbabwean funeral is the exact opposite of a wedding ceremony in terms of dress code and ethics. The bereaved has to dress in black from hair to toe and should remain in this attire until after twelve months when a ceremony called “umbuyiso,” or “Kurova guva” which, loosely translated means “bringing back the dead” is performed. This is a great ceremony which is accompanied by a lot of celebration, ululation, dancing, eating, feasting and jubilation as the dead is welcomed back to the living as a spiritual guide. The widow is now relieved of the mourning gowns and these are burnt with certain incense and rituals of cleansing are performed on her so that she can now go on with her life. Only after this ritual cleansing which takes place exactly a year after the death of the husband and is timed to take place after harvest can the lady marry again or indulge in any sexual activity without bringing shame to her former husband and clansmen. Apart from the wife who dresses in complete black as a visual sign of mourning close relatives of the dead carry black arm bands or black cloths during the mourning period and shave their hair immediately after the burial ceremony. The visual signs of mourning are significant manifestations that one is going through an emotionally disturbing period and hence will need all the moral support and tolerance from colleagues or bosses at work places.

The co-workers and the in-laws of the dead are the socially designated pallbearers. On top of this special function they have two more equally crucial roles in a funeral ceremony. They are responsible for the whole burial of their colleague and for providing lighter moments. They should make jokes; laugh loud and carelessly at their expense and at the expense of their dead buddy so as to relax everybody. When nobody least expects it they withdraw and dress one of their numbers in the late person’s attire and assume all his mannerisms before coming back to the gathered mourners. It is this practical joke on the dead which is the climax of the funeral as it is the moment of truth. The real life led by the dead will be chronicled at times in the form of questions. He is arraigned, scolded, and reminded about what and who he owes. The mourners take turns to fire questions and crude jokes on this “reincarnation.” For instance: “Why did you go to the city of death, we warned you but... we warned you against over indulgence, debauchery etc.” depending on what is perceived to be the cause of the death. These days when HIV/AIDS is the main killer this phase is

littered with such pornographic jokes as: “You thought you will screw all the women? Now you are gone and they are still here and looking for more men?” In essence, therefore, this is a cathartic moment and gives relief to the mourners after days of wailing and is strategically positioned before the final body viewing and burial which are emotionally tense moments.

After the final opening and closing of the coffin it is left for the in-laws or co-workers of the dead to lower the body into the grave. When the body lies in the grave a manifesto of all the good works of the dead person, his achievements and dedication to the family is reiterated by the chief, brother or any other elder of the same clan as the dead. At this moment only the good is mentioned and nothing negative is uttered. Then the next of kin go round the grave, pick soil from the shovel, spit on it and curse it before throwing it into the grave. When they have finished everybody else follows suit and once again it is left for the in-laws to completely cover the grave with soil and stones and any rubbish before everybody troops back to the homestead where food will be provided. No more crying is allowed after the body is buried and from the grave people queue to wash hands with water mixed with herbs so as to leave the spirit of the deceased at his grave. A week or month later there is a small gathering together which is called “feast to wash the shovels.” People come to eat and enjoy themselves and encourage each other to face life as it comes.

A funeral is a big communal event and stops all work and co-operation is encouraged. People make donations of money, food, grain, labor, firewood, etc. to the bereaved family. The people who attend a funeral are counted by means of two bowels, one full of grain/corn and the other empty. As people go to the grave the two bowels are put in front of them to pick one grain/corn and deposit it on the empty bowel and later when everybody goes back to the homestead from the gravesite which is usually behind the home the numbers are computed and people told how many attended the funeral. This is the same counting mechanism used in weddings or any other mass gatherings. The more people attend one’s funeral the more socially acceptable the dead man was and his family. The more you go to other people’s funerals the more people will come to your own bereavement. Closed communities take stock of all the little things we do in reciprocity and one’s whole life style becomes a cultural validation.

We have described at length this one funeral so that the other two observed simply become gap fillers or highlight differences if any and hence will be taken for granted that it is only the peculiar that will be highlighted. The first is almost a standard Zimbabwean funeral. The next funeral gives a glimpse into spinsterhood and bachelorhood. When one dies without

a child he or she is buried with a rat or mouse and this is the lowest or worst one can do for his/ her people. It is a public disgrace and brings shame to the bereaved when they have to run around looking for a rat to accompany the deceased. The assumption is that the departed’s spirit will come back to haunt the living so they have to bury a rat as a sign that you are not welcome back as your only “child” was the rat you were buried with. Basically, they are two types of spirits in Zimbabwean superstition. The good spirits are those of the “mudzimu,” “amadlozi,” or generally referred to as ancestors. These are people who lived full lives and left behind progeny and have, therefore, interest of the living at heart and all the ceremonies and rituals at their death were performed to perfection. And the other spirits are called “mashavi” or “evil spirits” and these are people who did not get adequate funeral rites and rituals and usually come back as ghosts of vengeance. So people who die without kids can come back as evil spirits if they are not given their “child” or rat/mouse at burial.

The only two things worth commenting about on the last funeral ceremony attended in Zimbabwe, in Mutare, a border town with Mozambique are to do with the burial site and other paraphernalia put on top of the grave. The grave was dug on top of an anthill far away from the homestead and out in the bush. There are a lot of songs in this culture whose theme is to do with what should the living do to the body of the singer after death and there is an insistence on being buried on an anthill. The second thing is that they did not use any coffins but rather used reed mats to rap over the dead body. It didn’t look like a decent funeral at all but everybody of this culture was satisfied that it was indeed a good burial. On top of the grave were put different kitchen utensils, broken plates, leaking cups and a long reed was buried as if to ventilate the grave. The purpose of the reed was to allow the spirit of the dead to escape and the plates and other utensils were for use in the future world and these were the plates the deceased was fond of, particularly towards her last days on earth. These utensils have to be tempered with to deter thieves from stealing them. The choice of the anthill is because it is a strong soil as compared to the sandy soils in the area; therefore, the people shun mushrooms which grow on anthills because of the assumed connection with the dead.

Armed with this knowledge of death ceremonies from Zimbabwe a co-researcher attended one bereaved family in Louisiana and one church funeral service over and above interviewees to see if any similarities could be forged and by implication trace a common origin. The number of people in the bereaved home was alarmingly low. People seemed to know each other very well making it almost a family event rather than a communal one. One other thing which came out clear was that most of the work, burial,

and dressing of the dead were left to the hands of the funeral home. The name of the funeral home, Winnfield Funeral Home, and their whole schedule of the funerary itinerary, showing Honorary Pallbearers and Active Pallbearers, as indicated by the obituary. The obituary shows the "Order of Service" in church and gives a list of who is going to perform what ritual. The good works of the dead and his achievements were written on this "obituary" for all to read at the church service. In short this is the death of William Wells known to many as "Papa Joe" and "Bill" born in 1929 and received Christ in 1960 and this already made it a Christian burial rather than an African American burial in a society that do not mix the secular and the ecclesiastic roles.

The pictorial face of the dead and brief caption of his life on earth and the pallbearers is shown. Still in the obituary the accompanying song is given. "A Tribute to Our Father" is an emotional address to the dead from the children indicating their belief that wherever the dead is he is "alive" and can see them but everything is couched in Christian ideology and symbolism and not in African or African American folklore.

The sample is not exhaustive enough to justify any rushed conclusions but the observed funerals shared some of the songs. For instance, "His Eye is on the Sparrow," "Precious lord," and "Troubles of the World." In church the front row was reserved for the next of kin of the dead and the priest and the funeral home ran the show. According to Stacy, one of our interviewees, you just have to pay \$5,000 to the funeral home and they will handle everything. Urbanization also means urban cemeteries, funeral policies and life insurances as opposed to rural family cemeteries, which are for free. Also according to Latonya Guilroy they are hospitality teams that come to help the bereaved with food and other necessities, and these could be fellow church members. That in the African American community the church is the community's nerve center is as obvious as the fact that kinship ties still play vital roles in Africa. Where the funeral is a clan event in Africa it is a church event here in Louisiana as the church service preceded the burial. Any differences in the litanies, rituals, and ceremonies become more of differences between religious affiliation of the particular families like Baptist, Methodist, and Catholics rather than uniquely "black ways" which the researchers were eager for.

To reiterate one of our key assumptions in this research on rites of passage in general and death ceremonies in particular before assessing our results. The way people perform these social customs and the similarities between these rites over disparate geographical spaces can be used to forge a common origin or ontology. The most extreme form of this folkloric binding has given birth to nationhood. The

obvious example, is Hitler's insistent harp on aggressively nationalist feelings on "lebensraum for the Aryan race" and such claims as "Czechoslovakia is Germany ... Poland is Germany etc." which led to the out break of the Second World War. It was propagandist politicking to say the least but at the fundamental core of such claims were common folklore between these "different nations." Western scholars are right to see animist rites of passage in Africa as the core of cultural validation. An animal is evoked at every stage of an African life, right from birth to death. In Leopold Sedar Senghor's catchy words, "we are a totemic people" (9).

We will use my personal life to briefly explain the essence of the totemic realm. My clan name is "Ngwenya" which is Zulu language for the "crocodile or alligator." It means I am an extension of the crocodile natural world order and hence I am supposed to act in harmony with them. When I was born my umbilical code was cut and thrown to the water to establish an organic bond with my ancestry world. Because of this symbolic gesture all animals which live in water including the water itself become part of my family, clan, and ethnicity. Hence other totems or water creatures like "Hove," (fish) "Siziba," (water), "mvubu," (hippopotamus) and a whole lot of others tracing back to water are my clansmen. Ngwenya can not marry from any of the listed totems and it does not matter the country of origin of the other person. What make us "one people" are not the geographical space but the history and the shared folklore; our social customs and beliefs of who we are in relation to the same ancestor animal.

Languages differ all over the black African continent but before we ask a lady out it is mandatory to ask her totemic animal because this is what joins us into one people, one clan, and one identity. As we have said of Ngwenya at his birth the water world and particularly the alligators were alerted and the same will happen at his death. The coffin can take the shape of an alligator or certain parts of this animal should be put in the coffin with the body. Only people of this totem can be the pallbearers and only an elder of this totemic group can recite the incantations and ritual rites because they are common for all of the Ngwenyas. No outsider like a religious pastor can know this privileged information. If aliens bury the body the spirit will hover and torment the clansmen until they perform certain rituals to appease the dead. Normally, the totemic animal is the most common animal in that region. A place like Louisiana, with its attractive swamps is home for alligators, clansmen and hence the desire to pick them out through observance of their rites of passage. This then was the key question--"which animal was evoked at the burial incantations?" We were not happy with the Louisiana sample. It is too urbanized and generally focused on the young and modern generation. The

church and funeral homes are at the center of black people's rites of passage. Efforts to penetrate the highly secretive and suspicious Zulu tribe in New Orleans have not yet materialized. It is the safest bet to say there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that there are no similarities between Zimbabwean death ceremonies and Louisiana ones. African Americans may not have totems and may not be clustered along clan lines but the prevalence of animal fables in Zora Hurston's[4] collection may still suggest a certain kinship with the animal world that may still be explored. May be the last missing link in this research will be observing white funeral ceremonies which will help put the whole comparison into perspective. For now, they may be a peculiarly African American way of burying, relating, and keeping communion with the dead but it is not the same as what we have experienced in Zimbabwe.

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