**AEME 2019**

**Workshop: Critical Events Studies strand**

**Title:** '*Rituals, like all social conventions, must be at some point be invented…*' (Rothenbuhler 50:1998): Death, design and the funeral event

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Disclaimer: *please note that this is a very short, and a remotely delivered workshop - neither aspects are perhaps ideal for a discussion about death! But, as I work 90% online, teaching event studies to postgraduates based all around the world, I shall try to use some of those methods here.*

*So, I invite you all to all to consider the one life event that we all share – that is, its end.*

1. **Lets begin SLIDES 1-4**

What do you think of when you hear the term death or funeral ritual? How about these:

**The Ga 'okadi adekai' (Atta Oko, funeral maker, in 1960, famous maker Kane Kwei's workshop, and coffin by Pa Jo, Kwei's assistant)**

How about these fantasy coffins of the Ga people of southern Ghana? They are called proverbial coffins *(abebuu adekai*) in the Ga language "*okadi adekai*". The Ga believe that death is not the end and that life continues in the next world in the same way it did on earth. The dead journey to the next world represented the way they lived in this life and their status there will depend primarily on the coffin, as a means of evidencing their role in family and society. Practcie adopted by Christians in mid 20th century, though Ga practice is much older.

**Perhaps the 'funeral with music' of New Orleans?**

Immortalised in Bond film, Live and Let Die, the *funeral with music* or *jazz funeral* of New Orleans, begins with a march to the cemetery by the deceaseds family, friends and a brass band playing dirges. Then, when the body is cut loose (i.e. interred), the tenor switches, to raucous music and cathartic dancing courtesy of the parasol twirling second liners

**Or the three day Mexican festival *Día de Muertos?***
Día de Muertos is a Mexican holiday, which involves family and friends gathering to pray for and remember dead friends and family members. In Mexican culture, death is considered a natural part of the human cycle, and at Día de Muertos the dead are believed to wake and join celebrations.

'On October 31, All Hallows Eve, the children make a children's altar to invite the angelitos (spirits of dead children) to come back for a visit.

November 1 is All Saints Day, and the adult spirits will come to visit.

November 2 is All Souls Day, when families go to the cemetery to decorate the graves and tombs of their relatives.

The three-day fiesta is filled with marigolds, the flowers of the dead; muertos (the bread of the dead); sugar skulls; cardboard skeletons; tissue paper decorations; fruit and nuts; incense, and other traditional foods and decorations'. Day, Frances Ann (2003). *Latina and Latino Voices in Literature*. Greenwood Publishing Group. p. 72'

But what of the rituals of the 21st century funeral in post Christian worlds, in our increasingly secular societies? That's what I would like us to consider here today

## 2. Inform learners of objectives – SLIDE 5

In this workshop, we will:

- Explore current ritual elements of the 21st century funeral in post-Christian society
- Contemplate the dynamic between a need for a tradition of collective ritual and the evolution of 'deadly individualism', deeply personalised funeral experiences (Singleton 2014)
- Consider experience design and death in Event Management education

*Let me give you a little background to this workshop:*

As you will all no doubt be aware, the study of funeral events and rituals is not new; they have been the object of scrutiny in a number of disciplines for many years, most notably perhaps, social anthropology. In stark contrast, 21st century event management professional practice has stood accused of having sacrificed awareness, understanding and inclusion of ritualistic elements in favour of artificially manufacturing events (Brown & James 2004). In events scholarship, the study of the funeral as event has only really gathered pace in the last 5 years.

In April this year, I spent a day delivering an undergraduate workshop on experience design to support research collaborative Moth's graphic design project, *An Extra Place at the Table: Food and Funeral Feasting,* something I'll be sharing in more depth later today. Students were encouraged to consider loss of things as well as life: they discussed a favourite pair of ripped jeans which finally showed too much; the loss of a lover; and their virginity.

We explored experience design practically, using activities to consider immersivity, inclusivity and co-creativity and also conceptually, discussing the role of ritual, liminality and tradition in the design of funerary experiences, alongside nostalgia and authenticity, commensality and habitus. The workshop encouraged them to consider the design of events for loss, which might result, alongside drunken tears and rebound sex, in potentially deeply existential dialogue and thought.

In this 30 minute workshop, I just want to focus on ritual and tradition for 21st century.

## 3. Stimulate recall of prior learning – NO SLIDE

**TASK:** First I would like to ask you to first share the ritual elements of which you are aware that take place in the 21st century funeral of increasingly secular society. In pairs / small groups, please share any examples, whether from recollection of funerals attended, or general societal awareness (5 minutes)

**TASK:** Collect feedback to and from whole group (5 minutes)

## 4. Present the content – SLIDES 6-7

Let's briefly consider the notions of ritual and tradition.

Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennap's 1909 seminal work, *The Rites of Passage*, though over a century old, remains instructive. He observes that *'changes of condition [deaths] do not occur without disturbing the life of society and the individual, and it is the function of the rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects'* (13: 1960).

The funeral is the site of '*certain things [which] must be done'* (Mandelbaum 1959), where rituals, regulators of social life, are performed, performance being '*an aesthetically marked*

*and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display'* (Bauman cited in Rothenbuhler 8:1998).

Even rejection of the customary in the modern funeral I would argue remains ritualistic. I recall the specific funeral instructions of a theatre director, a performance meticulously designed as part of his preparations for suicide.
- '*There should be dancing like on every Monday night'*.
- The players costume: no black, but as if for a party or wedding.

Each request opposed tradition yet remained instantly recognizable in their ritual typology.

The ritual form is a means of conducting the social order. The funeral is a social and transitional event where those who have left behind carry out the rites and rituals to help mend the torn fabric of the social order, to carefully move the dead into a socially collectively constructed mythologized narrative.

Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of *invented tradition* is also useful to consider in light of societal change.

Hobsbawm states that *'invented tradition is … a set of practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior'* (1:1983).

The process of invention occurs particularly when there has been a rapid transformation of society, when society is weakened and altered, when social patterns for which the 'old' traditions had been designed change. Consider the impact of WW1 and WW11 on public and performed funeral rituals in the UK – during these conflicts, death was so frequent an occurrence that visual mourning practices, including the wearing of black, were rejected, their prevalence considered too demoralizing to a fragile society.

So are our old traditions, our old rituals, no longer fit for purpose? Do we no longer need agreed collective behaviours to help us mourn and recover in these times of individualism? Or do we need new ones? And to whom do we turn for these? As Hobsbawn notes, the actual process of creating such ritual and symbolic complexes has not been adequately studied (4: 1983).

In 21st century post-Christian secular societies, where discourse around death has been *'privatized, secularized and medicalized'* (Simpson 7:2018), perhaps it is the role of experience designers and scholars to explore what new meaningful and performed rituals are needed in order to mark death. Before we do this, …

## 5. Provide "learning guidance" - SLIDE 9

I'd like to share an account from Annastacia, a postgraduate student on my MA Creative Events Management. Annastacia was born in Jamaica, and now lives in the UK. She shared her experiences of the Caribbean ritual of Nine Night with me for this workshop.

**Nine Night** is the last night of the period of mourning after a death, and is followed on the 10th day by the funeral, the final element. Family and community normally gather in the deceased's house to eat and celebrate and conduct various rituals to help the spirit, the duppy, pass to the next place.

The following is a collection of her thoughts shared with me in conversation:

*I remember my first nine night, my grandmother's. The women were there, in their white head scarves and robes, doing the kumina, dancing for the spirit. You see them at nine nights, women from the poca churches, the revivalist churches, the ones who believe that they can interact with the dead. All I could think was when is the food! Laid out in front of me were these traditional Jamaican dishes, curried goat, white rice and rum, lots of rum, lots – and the strongest rum too. But its only served at midnight, and first to the dead.*

*Nine night is a celebration – there is no sadness, there is no grief – that is all saved for the funeral. I don't know how but the tears are switched off for nine night. There's drums, and traditional dancing, calling the spirits. Games are always there, lots of games, card games. Dominos is mandatory. Why? To keep things going!*

*It all relates to social class. The 'posh' nights are held by the people in the hills, they are more private and quiet. Nine nights in the countryside are more traditional, but ghetto nights are loud, with sound systems and other music played.*

*There's too much pressure on nine nights now. They are too expensive. They are free, everyone is there, and respect for the dead is shown by how much you spend on the food. If your yard isn't big enough you have to hire a venue. All contribute to costs and bring food, but it's too much now.*

*I haven't been to a nine night since being in my 20's, and not one since I moved to London. I've never heard of one being done in London. I went to them as a child and a teenager. Someone dies every day in Jamaica, so there are lots of nine nights. You know, someone says 'Oh, John's died', so we know the nine night is coming. Everyone in the community is there.*

*Nine night will always exist. It will always be there. You just got to go.*

(Steele, A. 2019)

## 6. Elicit performance (NO SLIDE)

For event designers then, how might we reconcile the '*deadly individualism'* of personalised rites with the collective needs of those left behind to restore the integrity of social fabric through rituals? We can co-create but what might we need to ensure is involved for the sake of societal cohesion?

Commensality? Performance, dancing, storytelling? And whose story are we telling? That of the living? Or that of the dead?

Or, do we need to do this? Is there another way entirely?

**TASK:** ask participants what rituals might we still need from our disappearing traditions? What might we need to devise to support the transition? (5 minutes)

## 7. Provide feedback (NO SLIDE)

**TASK:** Collect answers and respond to whole group (5 minutes)

## 8. Assess performance (NO SLIDE)

**TASK:** thank you all for sharing and participating.

## 9. Enhance retention and transfer to the job (SLIDE 10)

Lastly, we should here note the persistence of a pervasive reluctance to openly engage with such existentially charged dialogue, despite the efforts of increasing numbers of communal initiatives, including Swiss sociologist Bernard Cretz's Café Mortels, Jon Underwood's subsequent Death Cafés, and Hebb and Macklin's Death over Dinner phenomenon and Caitlin Doughty's The Order of the Good Death.

If we accept that funerary experiences provide (admittedly sometimes rejected) sites for collective acceptance of loss, where the dead are '*reassembled, resurrected and regenerated in ways that are meaningful to those who have been left behind'* (Simpson 5:2018), perhaps we in event management education should be supporting through active discussion with those for whom a future career might well be in the realm of death.