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Bereavement Rituals in the Muscogee Creek Tribe

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BEREAVEMENT RITUALS IN THE MUSCOGEE CREEK TRIBE

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A qualitative, collective case study explores bereavement rituals in the Muscogee Creek tribe. Data from interviews with 27 participants, all adult members of the tribe, revealed consensus on participation in certain bereavement rituals. Common rituals included (a) conducting a wake service the night before burial; (b) never leaving the body alone before burial; (c) enclosing personal items and food in the casket; (d) digging graves by hand; (e) each individual throwing a handful of dirt into the grave before covering, called giving a “farewell handshake”; (f) covering the grave completely by hand; (g) building a house over the grave; (h) waiting 4 days before burial; (i) using medicine/purification; and (j) adhering to socialized mourning period. Cultural values of family, community, religion, importance of the number 4, Indian medicine, and the meaning of death contributed to the development of these rituals.

John, a young Muscogee Creek Indian, was employed by a community service agency that openly advertises its policies of cultural sensitivity in the workplace. One day at work his mother phoned him with a message that John’s great-uncle had died. John’s father was also deceased, and as the first-born son he was expected to take care of his mother and younger siblings during times of grieving. The first ritual was to occur in two days at dusk at the tribe’s church. Meetings requiring his participation would follow for a minimum of four days. Understanding his responsibility to his

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family, John immediately contacted his supervisor to notify him of his great-uncle's death. The supervisor assured him that he might be excused from work to attend the funeral. When John informed the supervisor that he would not be returning for a week, however, the supervisor asked, "A full week? Because your great-uncle died?" Suspecting that the young man might be using the death of a somewhat distant relative to get a few extra days off work, the supervisor denied his request and allowed him only two excused days away. Although much of society proclaims cultural sensitivity, this scenario clearly suggests a problem of lack of education and awareness of cultural differences in grieving and bereavement rituals and lack of explicated policies to follow within an organization.

In Okmulgee, Oklahoma, lie the headquarters of what was at one time a dominant force in native North America. Though this nation's lands once comprised a large section of present-day Alabama and Georgia (Debo, 1941), its current lands include a smaller section of central and eastern Oklahoma. Many tribal members were killed in battles with settlers, in the Creek War of 1835–1836, and in the Civil War of the 1860s (Debo, 1941). More recently, Creeks' burial sites have been disturbed by researchers and robbers (T. Thompson, personal communications, July 10, 2006), a spiritual and legal offense that has continued despite passage of the Native American Graves Protection Act in 1990 (Johnson, 1999). The last few centuries of relocation, death, and adjustment to an "intruding" culture have kept Creeks familiar with change and loss. We propose that Creeks are in the process of assimilating to the now dominant culture. The purpose of this article is to explore current Creek bereavement rituals and the influence of culture.

Review of Literature

Although beliefs about death vary greatly among American Indian groups, Van Winkle (2000) identified general beliefs that death is (a) a normal occurrence, (b) part of an ongoing life cycle, and (c) something that does not terminate one's existence but merely transforms it. Hopi Indians are exceptions, in their traditional beliefs that death should be feared and the deceased forgotten as quickly as possible (Mandelbaum, 1959). Navajos, though not afraid of death, also avoided conversation about death and

speaking the name of the deceased (McCabe, 1994). The Mayan Indians in Central America considered widows unclean until the bond with the deceased husband was broken, influencing the widow's attempt to shorten the mourning period (Steele, 1977). As with most cultural groups, there is likely to be much within-group variance due to history, value systems, and acculturation.

Some historical references indicate that Creek bereavement rituals have changed over time. A few centuries ago, Creeks buried their dead in large temple mounds. During the 18th century, Creeks placed the body in a log, built a small structure over it, then set fire to the structure (Wright, 1986). In the early 1900s, the dead were buried in close proximity to their home, often with their personal belongings. Purification ceremonies were performed to prevent those people close to the body from being the next to die; during the epidemics of 1837 and 1838, many bodies were not buried because of this belief (Smithsonian Institution, 1928). Based on how Creeks lived their lives, they were rewarded in the afterlife with being great war leaders. By the 1940s morticians began to be used because of the influence of Christianity and western values. Religious services were held for the four days leading up to the funeral, and the body was constantly in the presence of others. Friends and family members usually dug the grave and built a small covering, or grave house, over it (Watson, 1950). As we will see, these rituals have close similarities to those performed today.

This study identified several values interacting with Creek bereavement rituals. Chaudhuri (2001) warned against merely drawing a linear relationship between variables and encouraged researchers to "capture the inner worlds of Indian life" (p. 129). Changes in Creek society, as evidenced in historical and current accounts of bereavement rituals, result from varying perspectives of different factions of Creeks, including those who are deeply Christian, deeply traditional, and of mixed or partial Creek decent (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). Values of community, family, nature's balance experienced in intervals of "four," meaning of death (understanding of life as a cycle), and the role of Indian medicine have historically and currently influenced bereavement rituals in the Creek culture.

The essential Creek reality is a genderless, universal energy, called *Ibofanga, the One Great Spirit*, of which all beings are a part (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). Like *Ibofanga*, the perception

of health involves unity of mind, body, and spirit, whereas any obstruction of the flow causes sickness. Indian medicine is used to prevent or treat an obstruction and restore the peaceful flow of energy within a person. In this way, purification rituals for bereavement focus on preventing unnatural or prolonged emotional/physical drain which may result in illness. This holistic approach proposes to keep the Creek spirit alive and healthy.

Creek values are inter-related, but the concept of nature in “fours” and perspective of life as a cycle are particularly interwoven. Repeatedly throughout cultural literature, the Creek focus on balance and harmony in diversity is emphasized (Bell, 1990; Chaudhuri, 2001; Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). As the basic four elements—earth, sun, wind, and water—interact and compliment one another, a supreme natural balance is reached. The diversity of extremes, evident also in the dichotomy of genders, promotes a healthy harmony (Bell, 1990). The progression through these natural states of “four,” tends to be action-oriented, to be seasonal, and to promote transition. At the end of winter, spring returns, and after a full moon a new moon begins. This perspective of life and energy in the world promotes a circular notion in life and death. The meaning Creeks associate with death involves transition and impermanence, and some rituals reflect this perspective.

Kalish and Reynolds (1976) characterized cultures as communal/collective or individualistic, with communal de-emphasizing personal autonomy and promoting operation of the group as a whole. This type of structure, emphasizing cooperation and consensus in decision-making is common in American Indians, particularly Navajos (McCabe, 1994). Creeks also have traditionally, before the western influence of hierarchy, exemplified confederacy, equality, cooperation, and circular view of authority (Chaudhuri, 2001). The difference between family and community is ambiguous at best and traditionally may have been indistinguishable. Traditional Creek world view shuns the notion of individuality and separate, distinct souls, making full understanding from mainstream culture, based on individualistic notions, challenging (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001), and some bereavement rituals reflect this value.

The assumptions underlying the traditional and still highly influential psychological theories of bereavement may be inconsistent with Creek culture and may be inadequate to understand

Creek bereavement rituals. For instance, Freud's (1917/1957) psychodynamic concept of grief work, Worden's use of tasks of mourning (Worden, 1982, 2002), and Lindemann's (1944) work with bereaved persons suggest a specific point at which grief is resolved, assuming a linear view of grief uncharacteristic of Creeks' understanding of experience as cyclical and transitional in nature (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001) and focuses on the individual, which is uncharacteristic of traditional Creek structure (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). Corrective efforts aimed at the grief work theory, specifically the dual process model of coping with loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), could be interpreted to emphasize the influence of culture and community, but the emphasis in presentations of this model is upon the response of the individual. Bowlby's (1980) attachment theory focuses on the effects of a primary dyadic relationship on handling loss, nearly ignoring the effects of family or greater community/tribe. In a recent book, *Dead but not Lost* (Goss & Klass, 2005), the authors went beyond individual interpretations of the notion of ongoing attachments and argued that all cultures impose rules either promoting or forbidding continuing bonds with the dead; further, it is clear that sociologists (in particular, Bryant, 2003a, 2003b; Walter, 1999) have argued forcefully that an individual interpretation of bereavement, grief, and mourning misses the fundamental role of culture.

Meaning making and meaning reconstruction (Attig, 1996; Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002) could be seen as part of an overall more inclusive effort to examine shattered assumptions within the wider web of culture and community but has been applied to the individual response (Kauffman, 2002). We will use this perspective as a platform for viewing bereavement rituals in the Muscogee Creeks. Because grief and bereavement in the Creek Nation are not well researched, we cannot make the assumptions about the Creek population that theories emphasizing the individual make.

Method

Participants

We conducted a collective case study, involving 27 Muscogee Creeks and involving multiple sites. Sources of information used

for this study were primarily interviews, and observations and document analyses were made when available. All adults identified themselves as members of the Creek Nation familiar with Creek cultural bereavement practices and rituals. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 79, mean age of 59, with 18 women and 9 men. Seventeen described themselves as having "considerable" or "extensive" experience with loss, 10 with "limited." Religious affiliations of the participants included 12 church members, 4 ceremonial ground members, and 11 members of both.

Interviews

Examples of questions asked in the interview include

1. Describe the tribal events and rituals that occur from the death of a loved one to his or her burial.
2. Describe the tribal events and rituals that occur after the burial of a loved one.
 - a. How frequently do you visit the gravesite?
 - b. Is there a prescribed mourning period? If so, how long is it? If not, what is the typical length of time an individual is in mourning after the loss of a loved one?
3. What does death mean to you?
4. To what degree do you practice traditional burial rituals? Explain.

After interviews were completed, audiotape recordings were transcribed verbatim. Detailed notes were typed for those interviews in which participants objected to being audiotaped. All participants were given the opportunity to review their interview data, make corrections, and provide feedback. Participants were given a thank-you card and a wind chime as a token of their appreciation for their contribution to the study.

Triangulation of methods and of data sources increased the accuracy of data. A human development researcher external to the project verified the logical emergence of the codes used in the analysis. Another outside researcher read the entire project after its completion and verified its face validity.

Results

Creek bereavement rituals vary sharply within the tribe, as well as with other cultures. Some of these variations result from the division between church and ceremonial ground. Ceremonial grounds are traditional Creek structures providing government, spiritual expression, and ritual. Churches were initially built near ceremonial grounds, were often based on the same structure, and incorporated Christian rituals and beliefs. Diversity among ceremonial grounds, churches and families also contributes to the variation in bereavement rituals. As one participant described,

Yeah, usually it's pretty much the same thing, but if you go to another ceremonial ground, they'll tell you something different, or you can go to a church down the road and they have a difference. (A 21-year-old woman)

The division represents sharp differences in religion, social systems, and degrees of acculturation that impact occurrence, duration, and frequency of participation in some bereavement rituals. Participants explained the historical background behind this division, originating with the introduction of Christianity to the tribe. Many Creeks attend both churches and ceremonial grounds, and so many of the beliefs and rituals are also similar. As time has progressed, the separation between the two has become more distinct. Church members perceive that some of the "traditional" Creek beliefs are wrong and defy Christianity. Members of ceremonial grounds perceive that the church is trying to "westernize" the tribe and remove its "traditional" practices, thus robbing the tribe of its cultural identity. Because of the historical roots behind the division, some participants have developed very strong opinions, steeped in emotion.

They used that process to convert the Indians to Christianity. Our people thought that they were God's people. They were so close to nature rather than what was taught to them during this conversion process. Some of the words I don't like to use are "brain washing," but that's what it amounts to. (A 59-year-old man)

Others believe that churches and ceremonial grounds are not contrary and develop beliefs based on the coexistence of the two

systems. To these participants, there are many similarities in the two, including their physical structures.

Way back when the missionaries came over, they wanted to know about the ceremonial grounds. They were told it was the same way they do things in a church. So they got a pastor, an evangelist, and deacons. The ceremonial grounds are the same in that they have a chief, assistant chief, a speaker, and all down through just like a church. Both believe that all go to a resting place, called Paradise, wait for the Creator to come, and proceed to either Heaven or Hell. In the church, they focus on Jesus; ceremonial grounds use a different name, but it's the same person. At the Green Corn dance, they cut green wood and use four woods that represent the cross, just as in the church. (A 66-year-old man)

Although views on spirituality and specific events regarding life after death varied, the core cultural values and meanings assigned to death of a loved one are surprisingly consistent regardless of religious type. Many of the bereavement rituals were performed by Creeks before Christianity and continued in some form by both church and ceremonial ground members after its introduction. There are some exceptions, which will be discussed later in this section, but generally religion does not strongly influence the occurrence of many bereavement rituals; the meaning behind the rituals, however, may vary among tribal members.

Bereavement Rituals and Creek Culture

Despite the religious separation, certain bereavement rituals are characteristic in both churches and ceremonial grounds. These include (a) never leaving the body alone before burial, (b) conducting a wake service the night before burial, (c) enclosing personal items and food in the casket, (d) digging graves by hand, (e) giving a "farewell handshake," (f) covering the grave with dirt completely by hand, and (g) building a house over the grave. Ceremonial ground members nearly unanimously identified rituals of (h) waiting four days before burial, (i) using medicine/purification, and (j) observing a socialized mourning period, though not often mentioned among church members.

BODY NEVER ALONE

This ritual was observed by over half ($n = 16$) the sample. During the four days before burial, particularly during the wake

service, the body of the deceased person is constantly accompanied by a friend or family member until the burial. Some Creeks believe the spirit of the deceased person remains on earth for four days after the death, and they want to provide the spirit company and be with the spirit of their loved ones as long as possible before the burial.

We do not leave the body alone for any reason. It's our custom to stay up with the body. Anybody who wants to stay with the body can, but it's mostly the family members. This is considered the last days with the body. (A 60-year-old woman)

WAKE SERVICE

Almost all participants ($n = 24$) identified this ritual. The night before the burial, a service is held with numerous speakers talking about the dead person. The service may end by 10 p.m. or last into the next morning. This service usually takes place at the church if the family are church members and at the person's home or the ceremonial grounds if ceremonial ground members.

Traditionally, some of those people would take the body back to the residency of that individual, and they would stay with the body all night. That's what they call a wake service. It was a quite humble type service traditionally, you know, but now we have ministers or preachers that come in and preach and sing hymns or songs. But the family members or friends, you know, they just stay up all night that night. (A 59-year-old man)

PERSONAL ITEMS ENCLOSED IN CASKET

More than half ($n = 17$) of the sample indicated that family members and friends of the deceased person enclose the deceased person's favorite items and food in the casket so that he/she will have them on the journey.

We enclosed her Indian jewelry and her glasses. And then we put extra pair of clothes in there for her, for her traveling clothes, and some different shoes. She was buried wearing a nice dress. And we put an Indian blanket in there with her. We also put small portions of food in the casket with the burial. These days we still do that. (A 64-year-old woman)

DIGGING GRAVES BY HAND

More than half ($n = 17$) of the sample indicated that friends of the deceased person often hand dig the grave early in the morning

of the funeral. Grave diggers sometimes fast until breakfast, lunch, or supper following the funeral.

They have the grave diggers . . . that morning they have to get up at sunrise. And they have to also fast, and they stay at the gravesite the whole time. They don't come up for the services or anything. (A 36-year-old woman)

FAREWELL HANDSHAKE

The majority of the participants ($n = 21$) observed this ritual. During the burial service, friends and family of the deceased individually gather a handful of dirt, throw it over the casket as it is being covered, and call this a *farewell handshake*. This ritual symbolizes the expression of a final good-bye to that person.

Before they cover the body up in the grave, they usually get a shovel and get a scoop of dirt, and you walk by and get some of that dirt and sprinkle it into the grave. You're saying farewell to your friend, and letting him go back to the earth. (A 50-year-old man)

COVERING THE GRAVE COMPLETELY

Over half of the participants ($n = 14$) indicated that friends and family of the deceased stay at the gravesite during the burial until the casket has been lowered and is covered completely with the dirt, usually by the grave-diggers. The farewell handshake, explained above, occurs during this process as well.

At the burial ground, we don't leave the body until it's completely covered. I was attending a funeral [at a commercial funeral home], and they placed the coffin on the grave at the burial service. Then the funeral home requested that everyone leave. We were not allowed to cover the grave or congregate. It left me feeling very incomplete. I told my son that he better make sure that I am completely covered at my burial service! (A 53-year-old woman)

BUILDING HOUSES OVER THE GRAVES

About half of the participants ($n = 14$) indicated building a tiny house with a roof directly over the grave; the walls of the house coincide with the four sides of the grave. Diverse explanations were provided for origin of the ritual. Before removal to Oklahoma, Creeks had buried their tribal leaders in mounds and common members directly under their homes where family still lived (Wright, 1986). After the U.S. government outlawed this

practice, Creeks began to build replicas of small houses over individual graves. According to one participant, “if the spirit wanders, then it knows where to come back to. That little house is there.” Another participant explained that the houses at one time kept the animals from digging up the decomposing body.

Consistent with Gilbert’s (1996) constructivist view that family determines the meaning of death, and with Shapiro’s (1996) suggestion that cultural bereavement rituals depict community roles, the previous seven rituals appear to interact with Creek cultural values of family and community. Both family and community represent the collective nature of the tribe’s structure, and their only difference may be size. Perhaps the authors’ distinguishing the two is more a reflection of our culture than Creek culture; traditional Creeks may not see a difference between family and community.

Church and ceremonial ground is our extended family . . . my sister and my brother and my children, and my brother’s children. We make sure we keep in contact with our cousins. Gosh by now, I guess they’re fourth and fifth cousins. But they’re, well they’re just our cousins. And my first and second cousins are more like brothers and sisters. (A 46-year-old woman)

Another participant explained:

In the Creek language there is no such word as ‘first cousin.’ First cousins are considered my brothers and sisters also. Then we have the clan system; if you belong to the same clan you are considered brothers and sisters. (A 63-year-old man)

One participant indicated perceiving that White culture is not very family-oriented because parents would get upset if extended family members or other adults instructed or scolded their children. He stated, “When I visit my nieces, I give them advice like I would my own kids. I treat them like my own, and they treat me the same way.” This participant believed that White families lack family closeness and shared family responsibilities.

An over-arching theme of the bereavement rituals was the closeness of the family to the deceased person and his/her body and participation of “everyone that knows the person, the whole shebang,” church, ceremonial ground, tribal town, and extended

family or clan. The wake service involved numerous speakers, friends, and family staying up all night talking about the person and fond memories together. Someone, usually a family member, stayed with the body constantly until burial so that the spirit and the body “would not be alone.” Enclosing personal items and food in the casket indicated a devotion to and respect for the personal pleasures of the deceased person. Digging and covering the graves by hand, as well as conducting a farewell handshake, indicated a commitment and desire to be with the deceased person as long as possible and required participation of numerous community members. Finally, building a house over the grave represented a symbol of family, home, and a place to which the spirit could return.

There was recognition of my parents, even at the ceremonial grounds when we went back. They didn’t specifically call their name, but I knew they were talking about us. They said, “You belong here. Your people are gone, but you belong here. Always remember that.” (A 22-year-old woman)

Another participant explains:

When you lose somebody, I mean they’re all there for ya. Just like when my grandmother died now, I took her to the [name] gym, there in [town]. And when I did, I worried that, ‘Now how am I going to feed all these people?’ There were a bunch of people down there for the evening meal the night of the wake service. And I told my sister, so we went home and made stew and chili, and I think of course we had sandwich meat and everything. And when we got down there, the people from this community had brought a bunch of stuff down there. I mean, that table was filled with food. (A 52-year-old woman)

FOUR DAYS BEFORE BURIAL

Slightly less than half ($n = 13$) of the participants identified this ritual, but its representation was unanimous among ceremonial ground members. According to Creek ceremonial ground beliefs, the soul remains on the earth for four days after the person’s death. During these four days, the person relives his/her entire life and re-visits all places at which he/she dwelled on earth. One participant explained that Creeks also waited four days to make sure the person was not going to “come back to life.”

I’ve been to a couple of funerals for non-Indian people. It’s over with real short, and we’re gone. That’s one of the differences—we’re a four-day

process. Here in school you get teachers that don't understand this. If you are going to a funeral, [that means] you are gone all week. These are some of the things we have to make them aware of. (A 48-year-old woman)

SOCIALIZED MOURNING PERIOD

Only participants who had an affiliation with ceremonial grounds ($n = 4$) indicated a mourning period of a minimum of four days after the burial, depending upon familial closeness to the deceased and whether or not certain ceremonial rituals were performed. When a member of a ceremonial ground dies, all other members of the ground must wait until the first moon after the four-day period to dance, but immediate family members must wait up to a year, depending upon the rules of their particular ceremonial ground.

Waiting four days before the burial and adhering to a socialized mourning period seem to be highly influenced by the Creek value of the number four, which derived from a historical value of balance and harmony. Creeks traditionally have a close relationship with nature and respect for its cycle of events. Nature operates with four seasons, four phases of the moon, four primary directions, and so on, which operate in balance with one another. The socialized mourning period acknowledged a minimum interval of four days after the burial of a loved one. Whereas the reason for avoiding a prompt burial might have also developed historically from practical reasons, making sure the person was dead or would not return to life, choosing a four-day interval to wait before the burial reflected consciousness and value of nature's balance.

Four is a sacred number for all Native Americans. When you listen to the history and lessons told to the Creek people after day one, everything came in fours; four cardinal directions; four phases of the moon; four fires; four winds; four sacred colors; four seasons. All the healing chants that supposedly came from the Creator and were given to the American people, especially the Muskogee people, were in fours. We do everything symbolically in fours. (A 51-year-old man)

INDIAN MEDICINE

About a third ($n = 8$) of the sample reported participating in this ritual, all of which were affiliated with ceremonial grounds. *Medicine*, consisting of a liquid both ingested and used to wash hands, feet, and face, is used to purify oneself after being in proximity of the body or the dirt under which the body is buried. The

cleansing is usually done as a group ritual for all who have “been around death,” touched the body or the dirt under which the body was buried, to purify them of bad spirits and to prevent arthritis, cramps, depression, and other illnesses. Because of the cleansing and purification process Creeks are able to interact closely with the body and perform rituals consistent with values of closeness to the deceased person while remaining healthy.

Indian medicine is a cultural trait and a traditional method of treatment for spiritual, physical, or emotional problems used for various reasons throughout a person’s life. Treatment is usually administered by an expert in the medicine, called a *micco*, and who had spent considerable time learning the skills from another *micco*. Those participants who were knowledgeable in techniques and herbs used in Indian medicine were opposed to discussing the rituals in detail. Medicine rituals were considered a private custom, the specifics of which were not shared.

She was 98 and 9 months old I guess it was when she passed on a couple of years ago, three years ago. Both of my parents were believers of the herbs and roots, using traditional medicine. When I took her to the hospital for the first time, she was in her 70s pushing 80. The doctor asked me if she was on any medication and I said “No.” He said that she had vital signs that are better than a 40–50 year old lady. He said, “What kind of treatment is she on,” and I said, “Well, she believes that healing medicine and that’s all she uses.” (A 59-year-old man)

Meaning of Death

Surprisingly, certain aspects such as spirituality, ongoing relationship with the deceased, and perspective of death did not differ strongly between church and ceremonial ground members but remained basically consistent. Although opinions about specific factors regarding death differed, the general meaning associated with death was constant. The participants did not see death as the end of a journey but merely a transition. Death was believed to be a natural occurrence and part of the cycle of life. Death was not an event to be feared but one that will reunite Creeks with deceased loved ones.

My uncle passed away last year, or two years ago. And his wife was up with the body a lot, talking to him. We were getting ready to have church

service, and she got sick. Her daughter took her outside, and my uncle's wife said, "Go back in there and tell him I'm coming. I'll see him soon." So they took her to the hospital and she died. So the day of his funeral is when she died. She died early that morning. (A 36-year-old woman)

Another participant explains additional meaning:

To Creeks, death is just another part of life. Under normal circumstances, death is considered neither a terrible tragedy nor a time of celebration. It is simply the next step in the cycle of life. (A 63-year-old man)

To these participants, death does not represent an "end" but a transition. Although the relationship with the deceased did not continue directly, participants believed they will meet their loved ones again. Some participants believe that spirits exist on the earth and visit people on occasion.

Several of the rituals appear to be influenced by beliefs about death. Waiting four days before burial, never allowing the body to be alone, building houses over the graves, and enclosing personal items and favorite foods in the casket are directly associated with the belief that life exists for the deceased after death. The physical intimacy and contact with the earth inherent in rituals such as digging graves by hand, covering graves completely, and the farewell handshake reflect a familiarity and lack of fear of death. These rituals may also reflect a belief in the union of body and earth, implying continuation of the life cycle.

We don't have a word like the white man that says 'goodbye.' We have a word, 'until we meet again,' wherever they are going, in the world beyond... for when we meet again. (A 63-year-old man)

Discussion

Despite the influence of Christianity in the modern Creek world, bereavement rituals have retained some continuity over time. Rituals of never leaving the body until burial, performing a wake service, enclosing personal items in the casket, digging graves by hand, giving a farewell handshake, covering the grave with dirt completely by hand, and building a house over the grave still occur regularly, though in varying degrees. These rituals reflect distinctive cultural characteristics of familial and communal structure that

have been retained through various losses, changes, and acculturation (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). Rituals of waiting four days before burial, using medicine/purification, and observing a socialized mourning period, reflecting cultural values of Indian Medicine and importance of the number four, seem to have undergone the most influence, as these are for the most part performed only by traditional ceremonial ground members in our sample. Finally, participants in this sample reported their meanings associated with death that strongly reflect traditional views of the cyclical nature of life and the impermanence of both life and death (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). Collectively, these results suggest that some of the key values in traditional Creek culture are still alive and influencing bereavement rituals.

Throughout the interviews, participants continually referenced current existence of traditional values of a collective, familial social structure. In keeping with this idea, Neimeyer et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of language, culture, and interactions with others in shaping meaning during bereavement. Meaning making and meaning reconstruction, based on reformulation of life meaning and view of the world following the shattering of assumptions during the loss of significant others, presents the most promising contemporary model for interpreting bereavement in collective or communal cultures. There are clear elements in the findings of this research study into Creek bereavement which have import for meaning making. By synthesizing grief perspectives of sociological, psychological, and psychiatric perspectives, Neimeyer et al. (2002) attempted to expand our individualistic understanding of meaning by implying that even the "most irreducibly personal . . . view of self and the world are anchored in our attachment bonds to significant others" (p. 248). This research presented a causal model in which complicated grief is predicted by childhood attachment styles. Although Creeks in this study were not asked about their childhood attachment styles, the evidence of a tendency toward communal structure still existing in the tribe may present options for multiple attachments with significant others as children. It was not clear at all in any of the interviews that Creeks found that the death of a loved one shattered their assumptions about existence, and very few showed evidence of complicated grief. The inherent structure of a communal culture may therefore present more opportunities for healthy attachments, mitigating the detrimental outcomes of unhealthy attachments.

Another perspective involves a long overlooked explanation of humans confronting distress and identifies community and culture at the center of any individual's struggle with obstacles to growth and well-being. Leighton coordinated a multi-disciplinary examination of the relation between psychiatric disorder and the socio-cultural environment (Hughes, Tremblay, Rapoport, & Leighton, 1960; Leighton, 1959; Leighton, Harding, Macklin, Macmillan, & Leighton, 1963). A primary thesis of Leighton's research project was that social disintegration serves as a primary indicator of stress and that individuals in socially disintegrating communities are at risk for being overwhelmed with stress. He used bereavement as his chief example illustrating people in the midst of a beneficent or toxic social environment dealing with distress. Creek community and culture, embedded within and interacting with the dominant culture, is a clear focus of this research project.

In some senses, Creeks may be living within a toxic social environment and experiencing a type of social disintegration. Integration into western society, oftentimes forced, has been an ongoing source of conflicts and challenges for the Creeks. Historically, bereavement rituals occurred in the ceremonial ground, but now fewer tribal members ascribe to traditional beliefs and customs due to the influence of Christianity and western values of hierarchical authority and individualism. This "watering down" of traditional Creek cultural customs moves beyond bereavement rituals and affects numerous aspects of the culture. A traditional elder in the tribe stated, "Young Creeks don't know the language or the customs anymore. They don't know how to listen" (A 60-year-old man). These words express the frustration and disappointment of a Creek elder watching the gradual, and sometimes abrupt, movement away from tradition over the years. Although still spoken in ceremonial grounds and some traditional Creek circles, the Creek language is quickly being replaced with English, increasing the risk of erosion of meanings inherent in value systems, religious beliefs, and world view.

The dynamic nature of Creek culture, coupled with results of this research that indicate continual adherence to traditional Creek values and world view, suggests that bereavement rituals are continuing to evolve. Through combined influences of acculturation and recent re-identification of Creeks with their native ways

(T. Thompson, personal communications, July 10, 2006), bereavement rituals in the future are likely to develop additional meaning that embodies combination of traditional values of death as natural and cyclical with a more prominent focus on survival by not permitting termination of certain rituals and meanings. The story for the Creeks is thus still unfolding. As the process of negotiations with the dominant culture continues, Creek culture appears to be strengthening. A new college program offering courses in Creek language is now in place, and participation in ceremonial ground events is on the rise (T. Thompson, personal communications, July 10, 2006). Most importantly to this research, several traditional bereavement rituals are still being practiced.

This study entailed certain limitations that need to be mentioned. Cultural differences between this population and the researcher may have inhibited the researcher's ability to understand and correctly record the information provided by the participants. Also, integrating the data from participants of different ages and degrees of acculturation to form an accurate picture of bereavement rituals in Creek culture was challenging. Finally, more data on historical background would have enhanced the understanding of bereavement rituals.

Any further studies on native cultures must be sensitive to tradition and the wishes of members of the population. Wing, Crow and Thompson (1995) suggested that Muscogee Creeks strongly hesitate to trust strangers, and this was true of our traditional Creek participants, particularly regarding personal customs and sacred rituals. One participant explained this hesitation:

Many Creek Indians might be cautious about participating in the study because the researcher is White and because the research is being written down. Some Creeks feel that information should be written down to preserve traditions and culture that may be lost, but others feel that their culture and traditions should not be shared with others because of their sacred, personal nature. They don't want to be made into a "science project" and be observed by others who don't truly understand the spirit from which they developed. (A 39-year-old man)

When conducting research, we must incorporate a global theme of respect for the Creek tribe and its culture. Conducting a study under any other premise will yield misunderstandings of this culture and unproductive results. As with other American

Indian tribes, the sharing of information with outside cultures is an honor, and we must treat it as such.

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