



Culture,

spirituality,

reflexivity

and

funeral rituals



Valda Swinton describes the impact of culture on her beliefs

'Culture is like the air we breathe, we are not aware of it until it is missing.'¹

One of the influences on my decision to engage in a qualitative research methodology was reading a number of books by Moustakas, particularly his study on loneliness and love.² I was drawn to Moustakas' ability to engage with his own loneliness and his experience of similar phenomena in other people. Moustakas' idea that something 'calls to us' when we begin a research journey proved prophetic in my own experience of doing my doctorate research.³ I discovered there was something to intuit about my own personal experience that needed to become known and opened up areas of my experience that I had taken for granted or not really engaged with in any significant way. There was a great deal of self-discovery, making connections to childhood experiences and aspects of cultural influences that had hitherto been out of my conscious awareness. The research was a journey of discovery, bringing to the fore things that I did not consciously realise about myself, the culture from which I came and my understanding of the spiritual heritage from my African ancestry.

In an article in *The Sunday Times Magazine* on near-death experiences, titled 'The Living Dead', Bryan Appleyard reports that 'before the rise of secular materialism over the past 200 years ... humans always lived with the conviction that the world was made of far more than brick-stuff'. He goes on to say that people 'also lived with a lively sense of the presence of the dead'.⁴ This lively sense of the presence of the dead characterises my experience as a child. There



The research was a journey of discovery bringing to the fore things that I did not consciously realise about myself, the culture from which I came and my understanding of the spiritual heritage from my African ancestry



were endless ghost stories being told of encounters with these entities, or talking generally about family members who had died. My sister and my grandfather appeared to have an ability to see these ghosts, so I was constantly drawn into what they were experiencing.

Episodes of listening to ghost stories, or ghosts being pointed out to me, (which I couldn't see, to the other person's frustration), were so common in my childhood that there was this 'lively sense of living with the presence of the dead'.³ I believe that this everyday sense of the spiritual may characterise many individuals' present or past experience. Yet, for me, this was not a very comfortable co-existence and it was only while I was doing the research for my professional doctorate that I began to grapple with, and try to make some sense of, the cultural significance of living with such a lively sense of the presence of the dead.

Mbiti writes that the spiritual world of African peoples is populated with spiritual beings, and their insight of spiritual realities is extremely sharp.⁵ He identified spiritual beings, spirits and those he referred to as the 'living dead'. The living dead are the spirits with which African peoples are most concerned. These are the family members who have died, to whom individuals are still attached in some way. These are the individuals with whom we share continuing bonds. Mbiti discusses a number of eyewitness reports, not unlike the above discussion, of encounters with spirits. His stories, although set in Africa, could be stories told by people living in Jamaica, as many of them have a familiar ring. It is true to say that much of this cultural heritage has been lost, but much of it still remains. The writer says that every African living in a village can tell an almost endless number of such stories which, to an outsider, might sound more like fiction than reality. The difference that pervades an African village is the psychic atmosphere, with belief in this mystical power. This can be transferred to every Jamaican living in a village, or in a town for that matter, who can tell an endless number of similar stories, as well as hold a belief in the mystical power of the universe.

In referring to African philosophy and religious practice, Bell, in a book about postcolonial African philosophy, writes that 'character and spirit are connecting features of human life that finds expression in family, individual and community strivings ... spirit is a feature of life that was understood as a religious concept that stimulates a human hunger for God'. The spiritual in all human beings lies in the connectedness of such phenomena as death, birth, and sexual life, and in our way of acting that expresses the depth of joys, sufferings, hopes and desires, associated with these phenomena. Character and spirit are

interconnected with and shaped by community, by its ceremonies, and in individual moral lives. Although it is true that most Africans are Christians or Muslims, traditional life and indigenous religious movement remain important. There is an acceptance of God being present among, and sometimes within, the environment of people's daily lives.⁶

My early childhood experiences instilled the idea that there was this thin veil that separated the living from the dead, human from the divine. Our whole lives were bound up in spirituality in one form or another. Clarke refers to spirituality in this way: 'whole person in relation to God and the rest of the community – the total person in a total context': a spirituality that is not cerebral and intellectual but comes alive in song, dance and in folklore. This is a lived experience, filled with contradictions of suffering, pain, tears, of laughter, of joy and sadness, of life and death.⁷ On reflection, during those early years of my childhood spent in Jamaica, I was so a-washed with the culture, like the ghost stories I heard as a child and subsequently, I did not see any cultural significance in these experiences or that this was part of a heritage that went back not just to Jamaica, but to Africa itself. The 'lively sense of the presence of the dead' was matched by the fervour for a living spiritual encounter with the divine – namely God. So there were these two cultures that co-existed without any sense of the impact that each had on the other.

An article in the *Jamaica Gleaner* (2007) reports that if the funerals of popular culture in Jamaica were scrutinised, there would be similarities with Jamaica's Ghanaian ancestral heritage. Although Jamaican funeral rites reflect a greater cultural diversity, there are some cultural values that have remained consistent: the diverse cultural mixture includes European, Chinese, Indian and African.⁸ In addition, Jamaican funeral rites reflect some historical practices from a number of ancient African traditions that survived enslavement, which are still part of the psyche of the culture. One such belief is that death is not the end of life, as following death there is an active spirit life. Therefore, ritual and customs, of what is referred to as a proper burial, are an important part of African cosmology.

Although there is a different mixture of cultures, the specific African cosmology from which these funeral rites spring is Akan: the largest cultural group in Ghana. Akan funeral rites are an attempt to make sense, not only of ancestral, but spiritual, culture and reality in the universe, which then provide a basis for the ritual practices associated with death and how the dead are buried. One interesting belief that has resonance is that how the deceased are treated in the other world is dependent on the treatment they receive from relatives and friends. The writers continue that Jamaican popular funeral culture now has its own cosmology but is borrowing from Akan ideas about a meaningful life: that is, 'maintaining harmony' with one's dead relatives, the 'living dead'. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that everything is arranged in such a way that the funeral is fitting for the deceased relatives.

I had imbibed the worldview of my grandparents that spirituality was to do with being religious, and any experiences that fell outside that domain were to be ignored. So all the spiritual experiences of my childhood and everyday cultural experiences were just taken for granted and largely discounted – the rich tapestry of experiences and rituals that gave meaning and purpose to life; for example, the hunch that made me ring my mother following the second research group session that I was conducting for my doctorate. This experience gave me the opportunity to have a last fateful conversation with her before she died. At the time, the discussion in the research group seemed to take on huge spiritual significance that appeared difficult to decipher. Some might say this was just a coincidence and there is nothing that can be learned in terms of spiritual realities.

Yet my mother's death was also a significant experience during the research process. It was then that those cultural rites took on much greater personal significance, because, for Jamaicans, death is not a quiet family affair and the community of people that settled in the UK still carry on the rituals that they knew in Jamaica when someone died; rites that were very important to my mother, while she was alive, as over the years she had participated in so many of

“

The researcher has to reflect on how their values, experiences and social identity impact the research process. There must be a sense of how the research process has affected and changed the researcher

”



these for her friends and neighbours who had died. Some of these, like the Irish wake or the nine nights, gave friends and neighbours the opportunity to visit the home of the deceased to pay their last respects: singing hymns, having a drink, playing dominoes etc and generally making sure that the family was not alone. There is one ritual that is such an important part of performing a last service for the person who has died: namely, it is the family that fills in the grave. This has been such a long-standing tradition that the grave diggers usually leave the shovels and the earth for the family to do this last ritual for their deceased relative. What remains in my memory is that ritual of all my mother's grandsons filling in her grave. These are referred to as 'sacred transitions', performed in many cultures, and it is a time when loved ones can share their deepest feelings of grief and loss.⁹ These 'sacred transitions' or 'formfulness' of the grief process can make the grief bearable, as the individual is supported by the community.¹⁰

It was the reflexivity of carrying out the research process for my doctorate in counselling that began to unlock these experiences as spiritual and an important element in my cultural identity. Reflexivity invites us to explore our reactions to the research context and the data that made it possible for the insights and understandings that emerged. This is our emotional response, how we have been changed by the research. The researcher has to reflect on how their values, experiences and social identity impact the research process. There must be a sense of how the research process has affected and changed the researcher. McLeod says that in counselling research it is about working together to develop understanding and it is these personal factors, drawing upon our feelings, emotional reactions as well as a 'felt' quality, that lead to this understanding. To some extent, this understanding is arrived at in an intuitive way, utilising multiple strands of knowledge – awareness, imagery, memory, theories and stories. McLeod describes a moving beyond describing phenomena and attempting to make sense of the phenomena. This involves a capacity to reflect on self in role that is personal and also informed by an appreciation of social and cultural meanings.¹¹

As the research journey unfolded, it opened avenues and doors that had been locked for a very long time; particularly the door into my childhood that I thought I had left behind. This door opened into reflecting on the years spent living with my grandparents, who were long dead, and the spiritual realities that characterised my early childhood. When discussing the unique self of the counsellor, Thorne highlights that the 'counsellor's gifts' may not be apparent when they first begin practising. It may take time to identify and express these unique gifts that spring from one's personality and experience. In reading Thorne's account of coming to trust part of his own being that previously had little impact on his counselling work, I realised that this was a goal I desired to set for myself: to learn to trust my own feelings, however 'mysterious or inexplicable'; holding on and not dismissing

them as not being of value to the process. It is through this process that Thorne discovered access to unique resources for himself and his client. Actually doing the research was the first step towards acknowledging my 'spiritual experience or reality and to capitalise on the many hours spent in prayer and worship'.¹² My own zeal for not proselytising, like Thorne, may have caused a deprivation in using these resources in relating to my clients and my work as a trainer. My hope after completing the research, writing my thesis and now this article, contributed and continues to contribute to the process of helping me to realise that there is now 'no need to whisper' about my cultural heritage.⁸

References

1. Robbins S, Chatterjee P, Canda E. Contemporary human behaviour theory: critical perspective for social work. London: Pearson; 1998.
2. Moustakas C. Loneliness. London: Prentice Hall; 1961.
3. Moustakas C (ed). Heuristic research design, methodology, and applications. London: Sage Publication; 1990.
4. Appleyard B. Near death experiences. The Sunday Times 2008; 13 July: 5.
5. Mbiti JS (ed). Introduction to African religion. Oxford: Heinemann International; 1975.
6. Chukwudi Eze E (ed). Postcolonial African philosophy. A critical reader. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers; 1997.
7. Clarke C (ed). The reason why we sing: introducing black Pentecostal spirituality. Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd; 1997.
8. The Public Theology Forum. Funeral rites and popular culture. Jamaica Gleaner. Kingston: Jamaica; 2007.
9. Pargament KI (ed). Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: understanding and addressing the sacred. New York: The Guilford Press; 2007.
10. Brueggemann W (ed). The Psalms and the life of faith. Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 1995.
11. McLeod J (ed). Practitioner research in counselling. London: Sage; 1999.
12. Mearns D, Thorne B (ed). Person-centred counselling in action (3rd ed). London: Sage; 2007.

Biography

Dr Valda Swinton is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for the MA in Clinical Counselling at the University of Chester. Valda also has a small private practice of counselling and supervision. Her professional doctorate examined the spiritual in counselling training and she is a member of the BACP Spirituality Executive.

