

"Tricks and Fun": Subversive Pleasures at Newfoundland Wakes

A man was visiting a funeral parlour to see and sympathize with the bereaved. He entered the room and went right up to the casket to view his old friend. He stood there for a minute or so and then burst out laughing. All the mourners looked at him but said nothing. He spent a respectable time talking with the relatives of the deceased and then, before he left, he went to the casket once more for a last look at his old friend. The same thing happened - he burst out laughing. A man came over to him and said, "This is no place for laughing."

"Why that fella in the casket, he didn't believe in heaven or hell and here he is all dressed up and no place to go."

- Jennifer Canning <http://www.educ.mun.ca/educ4142/canning3.htm>

Terms you should know

Wake: to hold a vigil over the body of somebody who has died.

Counter-Hegemony: a confrontation and/or opposition to the existing status quo

Jouissance: enjoyment or pleasure, particularly over-the-top

Introduction

- Through the first half of 20th century, and on rare occasions even into the 1980's, the traditional house wake in Newfoundland has been "an important social context for the enactment of forms of mediation and magical agency"
 - House wakes would typically take place in the parlour room at the front of the house. When the room was used for the wake, it was considered to be a temporary sacred space in which a series of rites of separation were enacted.
 - The wake room housed the deceased for three days and two nights with the funeral taking place on the third day.
 - During late night vigils, young people "enjoyed the unusual opportunities and freedoms available in the special context, and engaged in "pranks, drinking, and courtship "
 - There are varying reports on the atmosphere of Newfoundland wakes, ranging from "sombre" to "characterized with disorder, ridicule, and laughter."
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Placating the Dead

- Began as a pre-Christian Celtic belief.
 - Fear of the dead is the main motive.
 - Some who placated the dead may have honoured the dead by behaving normally, acting as though the deceased was still alive and part of the crowd.
 - This was done through activities that either directly or indirectly animated the deceased.
 - In understanding the disorderly and rowdy part of many of these activities, one should recognize the social significance of humorous attack in the contexts of Newfoundland friendship; passivity in the face of humorous attacks and teasing has traditionally conferred respect and therefore has elevated one's status within one's circle of friends.
 - There are many accounts of pranks and practical jokes involving mourners, the deceased, and pranksters.
 - The majority of practical jokes show that the deceased was an active participant in an alliance with prankster-protagonists.
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Counter-Hegemony

- The traditional opposition between Irish religion and official religion (Catholic) was "part of a struggle between the subordinated cultures of local communities and the hegemonic culture of the state."
 - The counter-hegemony argument wasn't enough to explain why the Newfoundland wake tradition endured as long as it did.
 - The reasons for the various practices during the wake may have been more practical and less to do with placating the dead. For example the smoking may have been to mask the odour of the decaying body and the activities were to pass the time.
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Jouissance

- *Jouissance* played a significant role in the enduring tradition of the Newfoundland house wake.
 - In terms of courtship, young men would play pranks on the young women to try to impress them.
 - Certain house wakes offered a sanctioned context for courtship, mainly the wakes for the elderly as their deaths were not as tragic as those of a young person. Some of the youth would look forward to an elderly person nearing death so they could have fun during the wake.
 - A "scoff" i.e. a large feast was eaten at a wake at midnight.
 - Parents often sanctioned to behaviour of the youth during wakes.
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End of a Tradition

- When the (Catholic) Church demanded that the deceased be brought to the church the night before the interment, much of the festivities and games ended.
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Merry Wakes in Pop Culture

- The tradition lives on through the re-enactments by the Newfoundland dramatic group CODCO.

If pleasure, rather than placation of the dead, was the primary social function here, then "tricks and fun" at Newfoundland wakes may be regarded as part of a traditional struggle between those adhering to traditional customs of pleasure versus the hegemony of official religion, for an oppositional spirit framed the pleasurable qualities of these practices.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the article, Narváez says "Death used to be an integral part of life that united home and community, but today we deny it." What are your thoughts on this statement?
2. What rituals or customs do you practice at funerals that are similar or different to the ones discussed in class?
3. Was there any part of the discussion that really stood out for you?

