



Grief and Cultural Competence: The African American Diaspora

1 CE Hour

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Final Exam - PREVIEW

Course Name: Grief and Cultural Competence: The African American Diaspora (1 CE Hour)

1. African Americans make up approximately _____ of the United States population.
 - a. 27%
 - b. 22%
 - c. 19%
 - d. 14%

2. Among Christian African Americans, nearly 40% of all African Americans claim affiliation with the _____ tradition.
 - a. Jehovah's Witness
 - b. Baptist
 - c. Catholic
 - d. Agnostic

3. Per Deathbed Rituals and Traditions, the extended family and social network is often _____ the last moments.
 - a. Included in
 - b. Asked to leave during
 - c. Barred from
 - d. Made uncomfortable by

4. Far from being viewed with fear and suspicion, _____ is often incorporated in some fashion, either in a viewing prior to the funeral or the actual funeral itself.
 - a. Immediate family
 - b. Religion
 - c. The community
 - d. The corpse

5. The funeral service itself is usually held either in the funeral home, or moved to the church of the deceased, and is generally held about _____ following the death to allow for funeral arrangements and embalming to occur.

- a. One day
 - b. Ten days
 - c. One week
 - d. Three days
6. Burial beliefs and practices common to the African American community include holding burials _____, as a symbol that the gates to the heavens are open and ready to welcome the deceased.
- a. On weekends
 - b. On Friday evenings
 - c. On sunny days
 - d. At sundown
7. Almost all funerals will have a large funeral repast _____, either at the church or the home of the deceased, with copious amounts of food and drink served to those who attended the service.
- a. During the service
 - b. Following the service
 - c. Prior to the service
 - d. Instead of a formal service
8. Cosmological African beliefs regard time as _____, and the body, spirit and mind as one.
- a. Linear
 - b. A fiction
 - c. A river
 - d. Cyclical
9. Death, uniting both the African diasporic understanding and the scriptures of Exodus, becomes a story of _____.
- a. Redemption and homecoming
 - b. Struggle and strife
 - c. Loss and sorrow
 - d. Fear and avoidance
10. Harkening back to the funerary custom of placing coins in the hands and eyes of the deceased, some people also leave coins _____.
- a. At the church
 - b. On graves
 - c. In the baptismal font
 - d. At the funeral home

CONTINUING EDUCATION

for Funeral Directors

Grief and Cultural Competence: The African American Diaspora

1 CE HOUR

Learning Objectives

This course is intended to increase funeral directors' awareness of, and sensitivity to, African American traditions with regard to grief and mourning. By the end of the course, learners should be familiar with:

- ❑ General demographics, language, and religious beliefs pertaining to the African American diaspora
- ❑ African American attitudes towards sickness, dying, and the deceased
- ❑ Deathbed rituals and traditions in African American culture
- ❑ African American interment traditions
- ❑ Common African American beliefs regarding the afterlife
- ❑ African American mourning and remembrance rituals, including the origin of Memorial Day

PLEASE NOTE:

The facts laid out in this module are presented as a general guideline to dominant cultural characteristics: they are not, and are not intended to be, applicable to all people in the African American diaspora. This module in no way diminishes the diversity of the many different African American populations in the United States.

African American identity in the United States has been highly politicized, as it is identified with the issues of slavery and the resultant and continuing covert (and overt) oppression of those who are direct descendants of former slaves. Additionally, African American identity has come to be highly racialized; many issues of identity have come to be tied to skin color more than ethnic and diasporic identity. For this reason, some more recent immigrants from Africa do not readily align themselves with the African American diaspora, who have survived many years of difficulty and oppression. One should take care to distinguish between African Americans (many of whom have ancestors that have lived longer on the American continent than most Caucasian Americans), and more recent African immigrants, who may not closely align themselves politically or sympathetically with the African American cause.

You will want to ascertain the extent to which African American patrons wish to incorporate cultural beliefs and practices, just as you would with any patron.

Introduction: Demographics, Religious Beliefs

The term African American (sometimes Afro-American or “Black”) is used to describe someone who self-identifies as a descendent of relatives from sub-Saharan Africa or as belonging to the Black race.¹

African Americans make up approximately 14% of the United States population. Traditionally the largest minority group, African Americans have been eclipsed by the Hispanic or Latino population (who currently hold approximately 17%) in the last decade, with African Americans now considered the second-largest minority in the United States. The African American population appears to be slowly growing, increasing in size by half a percentage point every decade; however, this population growth is not as rapid as that of the Hispanic population (who are predicted to reach approximately 30% of the American population by 2060).

Currently 55% of African Americans live in the American South, 18% in the Midwest, 17% in the Northeast, and 10% in the West. States with the largest per capita African American population are New York, Texas, Georgia, Florida, and California.² In contrast, states with the largest percentage of African Americans in relation to other races are Washington D.C. (while a state, D.C. is significant because over half of its population is African American), Maryland, Mississippi, Louisiana, North and South Carolina, and Virginia. The two urban centers with the highest per

capita African American populations are New York and Chicago, and Detroit has the highest density of African Americans, with 84% of its population identifying as African American. Other cities in the United States with a majority African American population are Baltimore, Memphis, New Orleans, and Montgomery and Birmingham, Alabama.³ As can be seen, though African Americans reside across the United States, the more densely populated areas are mainly located in the American South; correspondingly, many of the mortality rates, funeral customs, and grieving patterns in the African American community are deeply integrated with Southern culture.

As a group, African Americans are considered very religious, with approximately 87% of all African Americans claiming some sort of religious affiliation.⁴ The Pew Research Center states, “African-Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation.” The Pew Foundation has found that “eight in ten African-Americans (79%) say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56% among all U.S. adults.”⁵ More than half of African Americans attend church on

exam question...

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1 For more information and to view how the 2010 census defines and understands the African American diaspora, see the 2010 census <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf>, last accessed July 7, 2015.

2 See the 2010 census <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf>, last accessed July 7, 2015.

3 See the 2010 census <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-06.pdf>, last accessed July 7, 2015.

4 Pew Research Center, “A Religious Portrait of African-Americans,” <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/> last accessed July 8, 2015.

5 Ibid.

a weekly basis, and 88% proclaim the certainty that God exists.⁶ (This is in marked contrast to the general population of Americans, who often claim a belief in God, but do not practice or belong to a church itself.) Of the remaining 13% percent of African Americans, eleven percent claim no particular affiliation or religious belief, while a very small percent claim affiliation with Islam or Jehovah's Witness. These numbers, of course, vary between the American census, the Pew Foundation, and the United States Conference of American Bishops, but the important point of these figures is that the majority of African Americans are in fact actively religious, and among those, the majority are Protestant. Thus, funeral directors should be aware that for the majority of African American funerals it will be essential to involve the family's religious community.

Of the religiously active African-American Protestants, three quarters (and 59% of the overall African American population in general) belong to historically black protestant denominations such as the National Baptist Convention or the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Among Christian African Americans, nearly 40% of all African Americans claim affiliation with the Baptist tradition. Baptist churches are generally independent: though they belong to a convention, in which a general set of beliefs and attitudes are affirmed, individual Baptist churches vary widely in their understanding and interpretation of the Bible and Christian teachings. The universal beliefs held by all Baptists, however, are the affirmation of the two ordinances of baptism and the Eucharist (the Lord's supper). Of the remaining Protestants, African Americans tend to belong to either evangelical Protestant churches (15%) or mainline Protestant denominations (4%).⁷

The remaining 12% (though the United States Conference of American Bishops places this number at 13%) of African American Christians claim affiliation with Roman Catholicism. Like African American Protestantism, 24% belong to parishes that are

predominantly African American (these parishes are mostly found in the East and South, in churches east of the Mississippi), while the other 76% belong to more diversely populated parishes (with the majority of these Catholic churches found in the West).⁸

Attitudes towards Sickness, Dying, and the Deceased

Because of a long history of oppression and a basic mistrust of the medical system among the African American community (46% of African Americans express a distrust in doctors⁹), many African Americans have long relied on folk healers and doctors to aid in their care.

Stanford University finds that the African American community generally typologizes its illnesses into three categories: Occult Illness, Physical Illness, and Spiritual Illness.

(1) Occult illness is a result of supernatural, not physical causes. The conjurer uses his or her powers, as well as fetishes to induce and/or ward off illness in specific individuals. (2) While natural causes primarily induce physical illness, conjuration may affect the physical and psychological as well as the spiritual life of the person (Mitchell, 1978). Finally, spiritual illness is a result of a willful violation of sacred beliefs or of sin, such as adultery, theft or murder (Mitchell). Like the occult, spiritual forces can affect all aspects of life, ranging from the physical to the spiritual characteristics of the person (Simpson, 1970; Willer, 1971).¹⁰

This view of sickness, though typologized differently with various medical schools, reveals a persistent attitude that sickness is viewed on a wider level than merely the physical. In a related fourth category, sometimes illnesses are explained as a curse or a hex placed on an individual, which can only be relieved through a supernatural healer. Examples of this are ample in places such as New Orleans, where traditional folk medicine is mixed with examples of witchcraft and supernatural healing practices.

Views of dying are generally holistic, with death seen a natural part of life, and a strong reliance on faith communities and religious beliefs in end of life care. That said, however, some prefer to keep their loved

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 "Demographics," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/demographics/>, last accessed July 8, 2015.

9 W.J. Minniefield, J. Yang, and P.Muti, "Differences in Attitudes toward Organ Donation among African Americans and whites in the United States," *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 2001 Oct; 93(10): 372-379. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2594069/>, last accessed July 10, 2015.

10 Stanford Ethnogeriatric Module: Health and Healthcare of African American Elders, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/ethnoger/african.html>, last accessed July 9, 2015.

exam question...

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ones on life support for as long as physically possible.¹¹ Per the CDC, leading causes of mortality in the African American population are heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, accidents, kidney disease, respiratory illnesses, homicide, septicemia, and Alzheimer's disease.¹² In addition, African Americans have much higher rates of hypertension, diabetes, AIDS, and SIDS than Caucasian Americans, and have a lower life expectancy as well. Sensitivity regarding the effects of systemic poverty must be maintained in regards to mortality rates.¹³

For young African American men ages 15-34, the leading cause of death is homicide – at over 50% – followed by death by accidental injury at around 20% (there is much research that concludes this is actually often death as a result of intentional harm or injury), and then suicide for men between the ages of 15-24, and heart disease for men between 24-34.¹⁴ Nearly 70% of all deaths among young African American men, then, are sudden and often violent. Funeral directors should bear this in mind, as it has repercussions both for the family in terms of grief management, and for the funeral home in terms of possible safety issues surrounding the funeral.

In general, organ donation is not very popular:¹⁵ nearly 40% of all African Americans refuse organ donation, and do not consider it a top priority.¹⁶ In addition to the above-mentioned general distrust of doctors, many African Americans believe that, should they donate their organs, they will not receive proper medical care, or that their organs will not be donated to African Americans in need. This belief (similar to that held by the Hispanic population) is based in fact: African Americans, amongst all ethnic groups in the United

States, are the least likely to receive a kidney from a living donor, and the medical centers that have the highest treatment rate of African Americans also have the highest racial disparities of organ donation.¹⁷ That said, the low rate of organ donation in the African American population, and their unusually high need (due to the prevalence of adrenal failure and diabetes), also contributes to the disparity. There are currently various programs underway to address this issue, and some cities (such as Milwaukee) have already been successful in decreasing organ donation disparities. This is most likely to be an area of change for the future in the African American population.¹⁸

Deathbed Rituals and Traditions

There is a particular emphasis in the African American community on death as liberation from the sufferings of life, which some historians trace to the times of slavery and the continued overt and covert oppression of African Americans in the United States today. Regardless of its origins, many African Americans embrace this attitude, viewing death with a sort of joyful resignation that is not always found in other diasporic communities. In fact, the term most often used to describe death is “homegoing,” which originated in slavery times when it was commonly believed that when one died, one’s soul returned to one’s native home in Africa.¹⁹ Other frequently used phrases in describing death in the African American milieu are “passing over” or “crossing over,” where death is viewed as the soul crossing from one form of existence into another.²⁰ Bolling writes that, for the

11 Numerous studies have been made documenting the tendency of African Americans to seek more aggressive end of life care. For more on this, see Blackhall LJ, Frank G, Murphy ST, Michel V, Palmer JM, Azen SP. “Ethnicity and attitudes towards life sustaining technology.” *Social Science & Medicine*. 1999;48:1779–89; McKinley ED, Garrett JM, Evans AT, Danis M. “Differences in end-of-life decision making among black and white ambulatory cancer patients.” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 1996;11:651–6; Phipps E, True G, Harris D, et al. “Approaching the end of life: attitudes, preferences, and behaviors of African-American and white patients and their family caregivers.” *Journal of Clinical Oncology*. 2003;21:549–54.

12 “Black or African Populations,” Center for Disease Control (CDC), <http://www.cdc.gov/minorityhealth/populations/REMP/black.html> last accessed July 6, 2015.

13 “Culture-Sensitive Health Care: African American,” <http://www.diversityresources.com/health/african.html>, last accessed July 8, 2015.

14 “Leading cause of death by Age Group, Black Males—United States, 2011,” <http://www.cdc.gov/men/lcod/2011/LCODBlackmales2011.pdf>, last accessed July 6, 2015.

15 “Dimensions of Culture: Cross-Culture Communications for Health Care Professionals,” <http://www.dimensionsofculture.com/2011/05/health-care-for-african-american-patientsfamilies/>, last accessed July 10, 2015.

16 Ibid.

17 There are many factors at stake here besides prejudice and racial bias—living kidney donations also require suitable living candidates willing to donate a kidney, who do not already have diabetes, obesity or adrenal failure. However, because of historical treatment disparities and resultant mistrust, the problem has become greatly compounded, and continues to be an issue, with 2012 being the worst year for available donations. “African Americans Least Likely to Receive a Kidney Donation,” May 30, 2012, <https://www.kidney.org/news/newsroom/nr/racial-transplant>, last accessed July 10, 2015.

18 See the latest report of the OPTN/UNOS Minority Committee Report for more on this. http://optn.transplant.hrsa.gov/converge/CommitteeReports/board_main_MinorityAffairsCommittee_6_27_2007_9_5.pdf, last accessed July 10, 2015.

19 “What is a Homegoing,” http://www.pbs.org/pov/homegoings/photo_gallery_background.php?photo=1#gallery-top, last accessed July 16, 2015.

20 John Bolling, “Guinea across the water: The African American approach to death and dying.” *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying and Religion*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall Publishers (1995): 145-9.

African American, death is not an end to a life, but rather a transition and a rite of passage for the soul to leave the material world and enter into the spiritual realm. This view of the end of life is radically different from the dominant Caucasian view of death as an event to be feared, and delayed as much as possible. For this reason, though not necessarily a *taboo* per se, it is often uncommon to utilize the term “die” or “dying” when referring to the death process, with many African American preferring instead the phrases “pass on” or “cross over,” as these terms imply a transition from one state to another, rather than an end to the state itself.²¹

Most African American deathbed rituals are quite similar to the larger American population, with some notable distinctions. Community is very important among African Americans: any death is considered not merely to be a loss of an individual, but a disruption in the general social fabric. Thus the extended family and social network is often included in the last moments, caring for the dying in small ways: for example, family members might wash or groom the skin and hair of the sick. This is not only a sign of respect and love, but also a way to embrace the dying as a still-important community member while simultaneously preparing them to become an ancestor. Mary Adams Sullivan writes, “Since the physical self is not merely physical but manifests the spirit, attending to the body is a means of attending to the spirit. Having successfully assisted the spirit in its transition, the family can more easily reincorporate the deceased into the community as an ancestral member.”²²

Prayer and reliance on the scriptures is very important in the last moments of life, as it is believed that a person should be ready both to meet God, and for a final judgment. While Baptist and evangelical Christians have no common book of prayer or formulaic rituals regarding the last moments of life, a few standard practices exist. Often the family will pray together with the pastor over the dying person, and prayers at this time generally shift from prayers asking for healing to prayers asking for God to accept the person into heaven. If the person is still conscious, the pastor may pray alone with her, asking for forgiveness of her sins and addressing any last concerns or worries she may have, allowing her to die at ease. Those African Americans who are Roman Catholic or belong

to mainline Protestant denominations may also incorporate the priest or pastor in the dying person’s last moments, though the rituals themselves may follow more scripted expectations and written prayers. The Catholic last rites (or Extreme Unction), for example, consists of a blessing and a final confession if the person is still conscious; if not, then the person is forgiven assuming that they would have made the confession if they had been able.

A major difference between Catholic and Protestant (particularly Evangelical) worldviews regarding the final judgment, however, must be underscored. For Evangelicals, and many non-Catholic Protestants, death presents a particularly scary dilemma, bringing with it a final judgment, and a determination that one will either go to heaven or to hell (unlike Catholics who have a middle ground in purgatory).

Interment Traditions

As with many other aspects of African American cultural life in the United States, death management and funeral care has been traditionally segregated, with many African Americans choosing an African American funeral home to manage their funeral. This practice has a long history that began during slavery, continued up until segregation, and then has continued, mostly by default, since the abolition of enforced segregation.²³ Death management has only recently begun to shift towards integration;²⁴ Karla Holloway predicts that this century will mark further departures from African American deaths being the exclusive domain of African American funeral homes. This changing landscape may mark changing funerary practices as well.²⁵

As the deceased person’s church and congregation will

exam question...

3. Per Deathbed Rituals and Traditions, the extended family and social network is often _____ the last moments.
- a. Included in
 - b. Asked to leave during
 - c. Barred from
 - d. Made uncomfortable by

21 Sullivan, Martha Adams. “May the Circle Be Unbroken: The African-American Experience of Death, Dying and Spirituality.” *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying, and Religion*. Eds. Joan K. Parry and Angela Shen Ryan. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1995. 160-71, p.162.

22 Sullivan, Martha Adams. “May the Circle Be Unbroken: The African-American Experience of Death, Dying and Spirituality.” *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying, and Religion*. Eds. Joan K. Parry and Angela Shen Ryan. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1995. 160-71, p.164.

23 Two great sources for the history and culture of the death management among African Americans in addition

to Holloway’s book are the following website and this PBS Special. “Woods Valentine Mortuary,” http://www.woodsvalentinemortuary.com/The_History_of_African-American_Funeral_Service_320351.html, last accessed July 12, 2015, and *Discussions About Death*, <http://www.pbs.org/pov/homegoings/african-american-funeral-director.php#.VaQZikVhpl8>, last accessed July 12, 2015.

24 Holloway, Karla FC. *Passed on: African American mourning stories, a memorial*. Duke University Press, 2002.

25 Holloway, Karla FC. *Passed on: African American mourning stories, a memorial*. Duke University Press, 2002.

most likely be highly involved in the interment process, the funeral director is advised to be in close contact with the pastor of the deceased in addition to the family of the deceased while making funeral arrangements.

African American views of the corpse tend to be more accepting than those of Caucasian Americans: far from being viewed with fear and suspicion, it is often incorporated in some fashion, either in a viewing prior to the funeral or the actual funeral itself. Thus, generally embalming is accepted and usually necessary for the wake, while cremation is not preferred (this is slowly changing, however, and cremation rates among African Americans continue to rise – mainly due to the low cost of cremation).²⁶ Some contemporary African American funerals have even positioned the corpse as though they were still alive – sitting at a table or on a couch, or clasping a drink or a cigarette, for example – to suggest active participation. Accommodating this practice requires flexibility on the part of the funeral home, particularly the embalmer; while extremely rarely requested, it is likely to be of high importance to those families who do request it.

African Americans tend towards the practice of holding a wake, which may last as many as one to two days. The wake, held in either the church of the deceased, or the funeral home, is often open casket, and includes visitation with the entire extended family, including children, as well as friends. It is customary for African Americans to offer large repasts as condolence gifts; often there will be a funeral potluck held both during the wake and following the burial of the deceased. Likewise, extravagant displays of flowers are common, both on the casket and in the funeral home and/or church; funeral directors may wish to direct families to preferred florists in order to facilitate the delivery of these gifts. Obituaries

will usually be requested by the family, with wake and service details included in the obituary.

The funeral service itself is usually held either in the funeral home, or moved to the church of the deceased, and is generally held about one week following the death to allow for funeral arrangements and embalming to occur. African American funerals are distinguished from their Caucasian counterparts by expressive mourning: dramatic displays involving wailing and tears demonstrate that the deceased was beloved, worthy of grieving. (It should be noted that as African American customs become less segregated, the custom of expressive mourning is decreasing.²⁷) When passionate displays of grief are anticipated, nurses or other medically trained persons are sometimes present to offer assistance should mourners be overcome. On the other hand, laughter is frequently expected to play as big a role as wailing in the African American mourning process, with funny stories and jokes about the deceased recalled and recounted.²⁸ For younger deaths, particularly in urban areas and in the border states, it is becoming a popular practice for grieving family and friends to make t-shirts to pass out at the funeral service and/or to wear at the service itself.²⁹

Usually, the deceased's pastor will give a sermon; many such sermons are participatory, including both the personal testimony of others in the community who knew the deceased and music woven together in a way that encourages congregation participation. Depending on the congregation, the sermon is also often seen as an opportunity for the pastor to also minister to the community about developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Both members of the family and close friends (typically male) may be included in the service as pallbearers; likewise, "flower girls" – the

exam questions...

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26 African Americans and Baptists are the two groups with the lowest cremation rates; thus, this may have something to do with the belief that the body is needed intact for resurrection. These rates are changing in the African American community, however, as burial becomes more costly in comparison to cremation rates. For more on this, see Richard L. Williams, "More Blacks Opting for Cremation Over Traditional Burial Services," <http://blackbusinessink.com/2012/02/29/more-blacks-opting-for-cremation-over-traditional-burial-services/>, last accessed July 29, 2015.

27 "African American Funeral Service Rituals," https://www.funeralwise.com/customs/african_american/, last accessed July 13, 2015.

28 Jen Saunders, "African American Funeral Traditions," <http://classroom.synonym.com/african-american-funeral-traditions-5461.html>, last accessed July 14, 2015. Also see Rosenblatt, Paul C., and Beverly R. Wallace. *African American grief*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 29-43.

29 For more information on this newly emerging tradition, see my book *Virtual Afterlives: Mourning the Dead in the Twenty-first Century*, Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014.

female equivalent of the male pallbearer – may also be included. Generally, flower girls are the cousins, nieces, etc., of the deceased, whose job is to arrange the flowers, then help transport the flowers from the wake to the funeral, and finally to the gravesite. They usually sit opposite the family in the service, and are also seen as comforters for the family.

Music is almost always an expected part of an African American funeral, with a participatory cadence that often includes a congregational choir or a call and response. Music also plays a role following the funeral, and sometimes even during the procession from the church or funeral home to the site of burial. In New Orleans, for example, it is extremely common to accompany the funeral procession with jazz music, following the corpse in a horse drawn carriage or a hearse with a jazz band accompanying the funeral party. In standard African American funeral processions, the family generally rides in a car together following the hearse to the funeral, where the family and friends attend the burial of the body.

Burial beliefs and practices common to the African American community include holding burials on sunny days, as a symbol that the gates to the heavens are open and ready to welcome the deceased; burying the dead facing east, so that their bodies may rise for resurrection and judgment day; and placing coins on the eyes of the deceased to show that they are closed, or in their hands (since the deceased may need to pay for their admittance to heaven). In contrast, it is held that if lightning strikes near the house of the deceased, this is a symbol that the devil has come for their soul.³⁰

African American funeral ceremonies can be compared to Irish funerals, in that they are seen as celebrations of life, and often (particularly in New Orleans funeral culture) loud music and alcohol are involved in the celebration and mourning of the life of the deceased. Almost all funerals will have a large funeral repast following the service, either at the church or the home of the deceased, with copious amounts of food and drink served to those who attended the service. Generally, these meals can also be seen as a reflection of the status of the deceased, as the family of the deceased strives to demonstrate the importance of the deceased to the community through generous servings of food. The types of food served vary depending on geographic location and background.

Beliefs Regarding the Afterlife

Much of African American identity has been formulated in response to or in tension with the majority Caucasian culture, and perceptions of the afterlife are no exception. There are two main strands

30 “The History of African American Death: Superstitions, Traditions, and Procedures” <http://northbysouth.kenyon.edu/1998/death/deathhistory.htm>, last accessed July 11, 2015.

pertaining to African American understandings of the afterlife: the Protestant Christian standard, and the popular beliefs passed down through the African American community by word of mouth, common stories, and folktales (generally originating in ancestors’ African roots). These two strands may seem as though they are at odds with one another (which indeed sometimes they are), but having been passed down and propagated through the years, they’ve woven themselves together into a common thread, and often work in tandem. It is vitally important for funeral directors not to dismiss the more popular beliefs as superstition: they are also identity-building, and have helped the diaspora of African Americans to create meaning during times of oppression and suppression. It is also important to remember that some beliefs may be publicly held, while others are privately embraced.

The dominant Protestant, largely evangelical, Christian view of the afterlife is that when one dies, he will be sent before God to have his life reviewed, and then based on his good and bad deeds throughout his life, he will be sent for the rest of eternity to either heaven or hell. The depictions of these eternal places vary, from heaven as a place where one is simply in the presence of God, to elaborate kingdoms where one will be reunited with one’s ancestors and loved ones who have died before, and hell as either simply the eternal metaphysical separation from God, to a depiction of hell as a fiery pit with active and eternal punishment. The timing of the judgment often varies, from a judgment that occurs immediately upon one’s death, to one that is delayed until the second coming of Christ, when all the dead will be resurrected and judged. (This idea of resurrection is important, because the belief that one’s body is central to the resurrection that informs the corresponding belief that one’s body

exam question...

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7. Almost all funerals will have a large funeral repast _____, either at the church or the home of the deceased, with copious amounts of food and drink served to those who attended the service.
 - a. During the service
 - b. Following the service
 - c. Prior to the service
 - d. Instead of a formal service

needs to be intact in order to be able to be resurrected. In other words, it is largely because of the belief that both body and soul are necessary to resurrection that cremation and organ donation are viewed as suspect. For various theological reasons, this view is slowly changing; many now believe that the earthly body will be changed for a new heavenly body.³¹⁾

Cosmological African beliefs regard time as cyclical, and the body, spirit and mind as one. Because of this, there is an emphasis in African religion on the interconnectedness between the ancestors of the past, and the living of today, with a strong belief in the constant communication of the living and the dead. As Martha Adams Sullivan writes, “Day and night, dead and living are viewed as having reciprocal and unifying functions rather than dichotomous ones, which dynamically unite them such that they create a whole, maintaining equilibrium by adjusting each other.”³² For this reason, death is not an event to be feared, but rather a completion that one makes, a coming-full-circle so to speak. It is an opportunity to become an ancestor to those who are living, and the chance to return to one’s true spiritual home where one’s family and ancestors now reside. The influence of this philosophy can be seen in the African American diaspora today: Sullivan goes on to discuss the common belief among African Americans that as one nears death, she will often see and speak to her ancestors, as a sign that she is soon to “return home” and be with her deceased relatives.³³ It is here in this cosmological worldview that one can see the influence of the diasporic African identity – dying is viewed not as merely the end of life, but as a return home to one’s ancestral homeland, one’s ancestors, and one’s true identity.

Death, uniting both the African diasporic understanding and the scriptures of Exodus, becomes a story of redemption and homecoming: the wandering of Moses

and his people in exile for forty years (and likewise, the parallel story of the temptations and trials of Jesus in the wilderness for forty days in the New Testament) is utilized by many African American theologians to explain the suffering and pain of the African American people in their own country; when Moses finally leads his people to the promised land and thereafter dies, the parallel ends in a return home.

Mourning and Remembrance

Practically speaking, African American mourning traditions generally resemble other American mourning customs in that the bereavement period is usually dictated by one’s company or place of work; people are frequently expected to return to their routines fairly quickly. Specific African American mourning customs are both diverse and dependent on aspects such as class, geography, religion, and environment; broadly observed practices (described earlier in this module) involve loud and expressive mourning, extensive floral displays, and large repasts following the funeral.

Memorialization in the African American community is extremely important, as it is through the rituals honoring the dead that the living can reassert the identity of the living, and reaffirm the ties that bind the larger diasporic community. Specific memorialization rituals, however, are similar to the rest of the American population, with a few distinct remembrance customs that seem to be directly linked to the African American community.

Individual Remembrances

African Americans tend to visit the graves of the deceased on a much more regular basis than their Caucasian American counterparts, bringing flowers

exam questions...

8. Cosmological African beliefs regard time as _____, and the body, spirit and mind as one.
- Linear
 - A fiction
 - A river
 - Cyclical

9. Death, uniting both the African diasporic understanding and the scriptures of Exodus, becomes a story of _____.
- Redemption and homecoming
 - Struggle and strife
 - Loss and sorrow
 - Fear and avoidance

31 I am grossly generalizing and reducing the metaphysical argument behind the theology for the sake of simplifying the overall concepts here, but it should be noted that this theological shift is also occurring at a time of great medical advances and a more general acceptance of organ transplantation and donation, in addition to genetic testing. It is, of course, a ‘chicken and the egg’ kind of problem, in that one can trace cultural shifts in attitudes towards death and the afterlife and trace corresponding theological interpretations to medical and cultural advances.

32 Sullivan, Martha Adams. “May the Circle Be Unbroken: The African-American Experience of Death, Dying and Spirituality.” *A Cross-Cultural Look at Death, Dying, and Religion*. Eds. Joan K. Parry and Angela Shen Ryan. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1995. 160-71, p.161.

33 *ibid.*, p. 163.

and other material offerings (most often personal effects owned by the deceased while she was living; this may include such personal and trivial items as a toothbrush, cup, or favorite toy) to leave at the grave marker.³⁴ This tradition may stem back to the fact that under slavery, many African Americans were buried in unmarked and/or mass graves, making the importance of not only marking the grave, but having a place to return to acknowledge the deceased is an important part of contemporary African American grief culture. Harkening back to the funerary custom of placing coins in the hands and eyes of the deceased, some people also leave coins on graves. Multiple explanations exist: some claim that the coins are left for the deceased to “pay” for their entrance into heaven; others, that the coins are a material marker that the griever has visited the grave of the deceased – he has left something to mark that he was *there*. Sometimes, family and friends bring a drink (usually alcohol) to pour directly onto the grave, so that the deceased may once again celebrate with her loved ones. This tradition goes back to older African practices of offering libations at the gravesite of the deceased, and offers a chance for the grieving to somehow “care for the dead” while simultaneously interacting with the dead.

Another common practice in the African American community is setting up informal remembrance “shrines” at the site of death, particularly in the cases of unnatural or unexpected deaths, like homicide victims (especially the young). Material memorials at the site of death include candles, teddy bears, empty alcohol or drink bottles, balloons, or flowers. Though these memorials don’t last long (Shawnee Daniels-Sykes points to the practice of desecration by opposing gang members, or simply sanitation performed by the city to rid itself of the memory of violence), many correlations to these memorials can be found in the practice of small home shrines (usually pictures, flanked by candles, and small favorite personal artifacts), or t-shirts honoring the memory of the deceased.³⁵

Daniels-Sykes makes an interesting critique that these memorials actually are religious memorials that have religious functions. She writes,

“The lighted votive candles or the long stemmed candles can point to the Exodus Event where the Israelites are marching through the hardness of the

*wilderness, as God leads this travelling community “by night in a pillar of fire or light” (Ex 13:21), singing this African American spiritual, This Little Light of Mine.... The multiple numbers of teddy bears and plush stuffed animals are not only toys that comfort children; they can also warn of the need to watch out and care for another that brings Joy, Joy, Joy... that everything will turn out right....”*³⁶

Because of the tendency of Protestantism to emphasize the resurrection of the dead, and therefore, the shift to remembering the dead rather than caring for the dead,³⁷ the rise in popular memorialization reflects a need for the grieving to maintain their bonds with the deceased. By Daniels-Sykes’ understanding, these memorials and popular ways of honoring the dead reflect a deeper religious culture, and are ingrained into the very social fabric of the African American community itself.

Annual Remembrances

Memorial Day in the United States actually started with the African American community, when the bodies of African American Union soldiers and prisoners of war – buried in a mass Confederate grave – were repatriated and buried with honors in a tribute to the dead men. As many as ten thousand African Americans gathered to march in honor of the men who sacrificed their lives and won the freedom of African Americans from slavery, and Memorial Day thus was founded. Though the details are much more interesting, and variously contended, the important aspect of this story is that it is the importance of both honoring and remembering the dead in the African American community that led to the founding of Memorial Day in 1865.³⁸

exam question...

10. Harkening back to the funerary custom of placing coins in the hands and eyes of the deceased, some people also leave coins

- _____.
- a. At the church
- b. On graves
- c. In the baptismal font
- d. At the funeral home

34 “Slaves Brought Burial Customs from Africa to the United States,” *African American Registry*, http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/slaves-brought-burial-customs-africa-united-states, last accessed July 15, 2015.

35 Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, “Erecting Death Shrines/Memorials: Unified Sympathetic Faith Responses, Gunning for Empathy and Compassion in the Second Amendment Debates,” <http://newtheologyreview.org/index.php/ntr/article/viewFile/1034/1578>, last accessed July 16, 2015.

36 Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, “Erecting Death Shrines/Memorials: Unified Sympathetic Faith Responses, Gunning for Empathy and Compassion in the Second Amendment

Debates,” <http://newtheologyreview.org/index.php/ntr/article/viewFile/1034/1578>, last accessed July 16, 2015. This is an interesting and well written.

37 This distinction between remembering and caring for the dead is made by Tony Walter, at the University of Bath.

38 “The First American Memorial Day is Commemorated,” http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/first-american-memorial-day-commemorated, last accessed July 16, 2015. For more details on the various interpretations and more details visit the Snopes website, <http://www.snopes.com/military/memorialday.asp>, last accessed July 16, 2015.