A proper funeral: contextualizing community among Caribbean migrants

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On the basis of an ethnographic narrative of the funeral of a Caribbean migrant in Britain, the argument is made that, while ‘a Caribbean community’ constituted itself through this life-cycle ritual, it comprised a complexity of relations of varying personal significance, historical depth, and geographical dimension. By thus looking at a Caribbean ‘community’ through the lens of a constitutive ritual act, this analysis raises questions concerning the meaning of ‘ethnic community’, a concept designating a social collectivity defined by a shared place of origin that is increasingly used to identify migrants and contextualize migration studies. These questions point to the need to assess critically how ethnographic studies of immigrants are contextualized, and the categorical thinking, connections, and disconnections that this contextualization implicates.

The notion of community has become of central importance in migration studies as they have shifted focus from documenting migrants’ moves, settlement, and integration in relation to various migration destinations to exploring migrants’ notions of belonging, cultural identity, and continued ties to their place of origin (Chamberlain 1998: 7; R. Cohen 1998: 21; Foner 2000: 183-6). It has thus become common to conceptualize immigrants in terms of communities of co-ethnics, identified by a common place of origin, rather than as new members of the migration destination’s society. This research concern has led to an emphasis on concepts such as ‘diasporic identity’, designating the continued attachment to a homeland of origin while living in a distant migration destination; ‘transnational networks’, pointing to the existence of ongoing social and economic relations between migrants’ country of origin and country of residence; and ‘cultural hybridity’, referring to the mixing of cultures, usually that of the country of origin and the migration destination. It has been pointed out, however, that it is often not clear whether these terms refer to conscious expressions of cultural identification and political commitment by well-established communities or whether they merely designate unconscious, everyday social practices of people sharing common origins in a foreign place (Amit 2002a; Clifford 1994: 303; Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004: 1006; Tölokyan 1996: 4-5; Werbner 1997: 4). This lack of
clarity raises questions concerning the nature of these communities, their grounding in the place of origin by which they are identified, and their significance to those identified with them.

In a recent book (Olwig 2007) I have developed an ethnographic method for examining Caribbean migration processes from the perspective of individuals and families, rather than from that of ethnic communities. In this essay I will extend this method through an analysis of a ritual whereby individual and family networks become linked into self-perceived communities. The character of migrants’ communities becomes a pressing concern in the case of migrants from the Caribbean, an area of the world with a long colonial history involving extensive population movements and the development of culturally complex societies. It has been suggested that the Caribbean lacks strong communities, partly because the local institutional structure is weakly developed through being tied to a divisive colonial structure, partly because much of the population is orientated towards opportunities outside the confines of the island society (Abrahams 1983: 10; Carnegie 1987: 41; Thomas 2004: 96; Wilson 1969: 80). Indeed, it has been proposed that Caribbean social life is best understood in terms of extensive networks of relations where individuals continually seek to link up with new people (Horst & Miller 2005).

If communities are fluid and open in the Caribbean, the question arises as to what the notion of ‘Caribbean communities’ can signify in the context of dispersal to disparate migration destinations. In this article I suggest that rather than assuming the existence of well-established and clearly defined Caribbean communities comprising an important context of life for Caribbean migrants, ethnographic research should be directed towards exploring how migrants from the Caribbean, through statements and practices, create and sustain different forms of relatedness (cf. Carsten 2000; Olwig 2007) that may generate a sense of community. I explore the constitution of community through an ethnographic analysis of the funeral of a Caribbean immigrant in Britain. Since a funeral is a life-cycle ritual, and therefore not necessarily ethnically charged, its analysis enables the significance of a ‘Caribbean community’ to emerge, and permits the exploration of the shape and meaning of community to a particular group of people. This is in accordance with Bruner’s suggestion to ‘leave the definition of the unit of investigation up to the people, rather than imposing categories derived from our own ever-shifting theoretical frames’ (1986: 9).

Rituals have been an important focus of study in ethnographic literature because they offer a window on social order and people’s understanding of this order, as well as their position within it (Turner 1967). In the context of migration, anthropologists have viewed rituals as complex and multi-vocal events where various cultural understandings and practices are presented, challenged, and given new meaning (Gardner & Grillo 2002). It has further been suggested that rituals among minorities can attain special meaning as manifestations of the participants’ cultural background and position in society as a minority (Baumann 1992; Colson 1977: 190; Myerhoff 1985: 266; Werbner 1996). More specifically, Meredith Chesson notes that funeral rituals are ‘a sensuous arena in which the dead are mourned, social memories are created and (re)asserted, social bonds are renewed, forged, or broken, and individuals make claims for individual identities and group memberships’ (2001: 1). They therefore provide a context for reflecting on the meaning of belonging associated with both experiences and relationships that are connected with a place of origin. By examining people’s practices and ideas as they participate in specific rituals, it is therefore possible to explore how
communities are constituted in concrete situations and to analyse the meaning of these communities.

This ethnographic analysis shows that the burial of a Caribbean immigrant provided a framework for asserting a ‘Caribbean community’. This was, however, a loosely structured and multi-faceted community, grounded in social relations of varying personal significance, historical depth, and geographic dimension. The community that constituted itself at the funeral ritual, therefore, was not a single, well-bounded, clearly defined collectivity of people, but a partial community centred on the specific ritual of the funeral. While, at a concrete level of social practice, this particular burial ritual was shared by a community of people who identified themselves with their Caribbean origins, at a much more general level the funeral ritual was shared by a much more inclusive community of fellow Christians. The ritual therefore also pointed to the complex character of the participants’ belonging in the wider British society. If the notion of community that was expressed at this funeral involved different levels of inclusion and exclusion that pointed to different contexts of belonging, this calls into question whether the notion of ‘Caribbean community’ provides a useful way of contextualizing ethnographic research on Caribbean migration. At a more general level, the article therefore points to the need critically to assess the ways in which ethnographic studies of immigrants are contextualized and the sort of connections and disconnections that they imply (cf. Dilley 1999).

A funeral
In the mid-1990s I visited a family in Leeds who had migrated from the former British West Indian island of Nevis to Great Britain in 1961, as part of the migratory move that brought more than 500,000 Caribbean people to Britain after the Second World War (Chamberlain 1998: 6). When I arrived, the parents, Edwin and Syvilla, told me that they were going to a funeral in Birmingham and asked me whether I would like to join them. The funeral was that of a man in his late sixties who had been one of the first migrants to Britain from Richmond Village, their village of origin on Nevis. When I asked what this funeral involved, they explained that at Caribbean funerals people may first gather in the home of the bereaved family to see the deceased before the casket is closed. From the home they go to the church, where the burial ceremony takes place, and then to the cemetery, where the deceased is interred and the grave is filled while the funeral train sings psalms. Finally, there is food for everybody afterwards in a hall. They noted that they went to a great number of funerals every year – Syvilla claimed that Edwin might even attend several in a week – funerals being important social events that drew many people. They emphasized that it would be no problem for me to attend this particular funeral in Birmingham, even if I did not know the deceased, as long as I was dressed in black. I could travel in a coach rented for Nevisians from Leeds who were going to the funeral, if I paid my share of the costs. I quickly accepted the invitation and congratulated myself for being lucky enough to be included in this important social event.

On a rainy Friday morning I went with Edwin and Syvilla to the gathering place where the coach was going to pick up the group going to the funeral. There was not a soul in sight, but a large, modern coach was parked in the area. Syvilla expressed her pleasant surprise that we were going to travel in such luxury, but when we attempted to enter the coach the English driver informed us that he was not headed for any funeral in Birmingham and drove off. After what seemed a long wait in the rain, the
organizer of the trip turned up and said that we probably would be a little late. Edwin mumbled sourly, ‘Black people have a bad attitude. You try to support them and then they let you down!’ When a while later a rather older coach hired from a Jamaican company came to the meeting place, Syvilla remarked annoyedly that such coaches broke down all the time and that she never would have rented one like that if she was organizing something.

A good half-hour after the agreed time, the coach left with about twenty passengers. Edwin and Syvilla introduced me as ‘Karen – she is from Denmark, but she has lived a lot on Nevis, especially in Richmond Village’. This introduction seemed to be a satisfactory explanation as to why I participated in the funeral; at least nobody made further enquiries as to why I had joined the group. It turned out that the trip was organized by a cousin of the deceased who lived in Leeds. As we drove off, he made a little speech, standing in the front of the coach, thanking us for coming. He added that he regretted he had to charge a little more than anticipated because several of those who had signed up for the trip had not come, and finished by saying that he hoped we would have ‘a really good funeral’.

Nobody complained about the higher fare, but many expressed disappointment that so few had showed up. Since the deceased had died three weeks prior to the funeral, they thought everybody had plenty of time to make arrangements for getting the day off. When I asked my travel companions why it was so imperative to undertake the long trip from Leeds to Birmingham to participate in the funeral, they explained that this was because it was a way to show their last respects to a Nevisian and his family. Most emphasized that attending the funeral was especially important for them because they came from the same village on Nevis as the deceased. A few stated that they did not know the dead man personally, among them a woman who explained that she had decided to come in order to support her friend who knew him really well. My travel companions generally were of the opinion that everybody from Richmond Village ought to participate in the funeral, and they added that if all the villagers who lived in Leeds had come, the coach would have been full.

When we came to the outskirts of Birmingham we were met by a Nevisian who lived in the city and had agreed to help us find the Baptist church where the funeral service was going to take place. Nobody in the coach knew our guide particularly well, since he was from another village on Nevis and had rarely visited Leeds. He got us safely to the church, but just as we were parking on a nearby side road, somebody opened a car door right into the coach. There was little material damage, but the question of who had caused the accident became the topic of a passionate discussion involving everybody, and this delayed us even further. We therefore arrived just as the funeral ceremony was beginning, led by an elderly English female minister, and there was only standing room in the packed church.

The printed programme with the psalms that we received at the entrance to the church had a picture of the deceased on the frontispiece. I realized that it must be a passport photo and found the formal portrait with the traces of the authorities’ stamp on the right side in stark contrast to the personal text below the photograph: ‘In Loving Memory of Our Dear Departed Husband, Dad and Granddad’. The family and friends of the deceased played a central role in the funeral service. A daughter read the scripture, while a granddaughter recited a poem, but broke down in tears before she finished and was helped by her mother. A friend of the deceased – Syvilla whispered that this was a cousin of hers who lived in Birmingham – gave the eulogy, a short
description of the life course of the deceased, while a friend of the family – another Nevisian – offered a more personal tribute in which, among other things, he noted that the deceased had become ‘Christian’ in Birmingham. In this context that meant that he had become a member of the Baptist Church, having probably left one of the established Protestant churches on Nevis such as the Anglicans or Methodists.

During the last psalm all filed past the casket, which had been opened so that it was possible to see the deceased one last time. Afterwards the funeral train drove to the large municipal cemetery where the interment was to take place. When the minister had administered the rite of interment, and the casket had been lowered into the ground, the male members of the family filled the grave while the mourners sang several hymns. The young in particular – I noticed that two of them had dreadlocks – worked hard to shovel the heavy, wet dirt into the grave. When it was filled up, flowers were placed on top. We then all went to a community centre, where we were placed around long tables and offered a buffet with curried goat, chicken and rice, salad, three different kinds of cake, fruit salad and tea. There was plenty of food for all and people were clearly having a good time. It was also possible to purchase beer and liquor, but I noted that several sipped from their own bottles kept under the table. The ambiance became more and more lively, and at a certain point a rather voluminous lady got up and began swinging her hips, accompanied by loud shouts and bursts of laughter. My travel companion from Leeds who had come along to support her friend commented happily that she really liked to go to funerals because they were almost like weddings. She added that it also gave a nice opportunity to get away from home, experience other places, and meet people whom one did not see otherwise.

As soon as we had eaten, several of the women from Leeds, among them Syvilla, took a local bus to the Bullring, which they had been told was a market with inexpensive tropical fish difficult to purchase in Leeds. Several had brought coolers so that the fish would be able to keep during the long trip back. Quite a few men went upstairs in the building to a little clubroom where they were able to play dominoes and drink. Late in the afternoon we boarded the coach again and our Nevisian guide helped us out of the city. Before he left, he offered to bring fish from the Bullring the next time he went to Leeds and he accepted various orders from people in the bus. Syvilla explained that he did this as a favour to them, because he lived in Birmingham.

In the coach my travel companions’ good spirits became even more elevated, fuelled by whisky and cola for the women, beer for the men. We had to stop twice during the approximately three-hour trip back to Leeds so that various people could relieve themselves. The cousin of the deceased, who had organized the trip, became more and more animated, and when we reached Leeds he announced that he was going to organize a trip to the seaside for all his friends who had supported him so well at this funeral. When we separated in Leeds, several asked me whether I had enjoyed the day. I could only reply with a whole-hearted ‘Yes!’

A Caribbean community
This funeral ritual can be interpreted as Caribbean in the sense that the overwhelming majority of the participants were of Caribbean origin. This ‘ethnic’ character of the burial of an immigrant of Caribbean origin is not unusual. When I discussed the funeral later with a Methodist minister in Leeds who had a large Caribbean congregation, I learned that English people rarely attend funerals of elderly Caribbean immigrants.4
It was apparent that a Caribbean burial tradition had become established in Britain. While I was able to attend only this funeral during my fieldwork in Britain, it clearly followed a set pattern. Thus, it was evident that all participants were familiar with the form of the ritual. Furthermore, when I asked Edwin and Syvilla about the funeral in Birmingham, they had clear expectations as to how it was going to take place. Edwin explained that it would basically follow funeral practices known from the Caribbean except that a social gathering in a community hall after the interment had become common practice among Caribbean migrants in Britain. As Edwin explained, ‘Before you would just go to see the bereaved family in the home after the burial, but now it is on a big scale with a plentitude of food and drinks’. There was an awareness of the importance of maintaining the funeral as a Caribbean tradition. After the funeral, the cousin who organized the coach trip thus remarked that he was happy to see that the young members of the family had participated so actively in the filling of the grave because this was ‘a West Indian custom’. Furthermore, if the social gathering after interment of the body was a new addition to the ritual, it was very much organized as a Caribbean event, with the serving of food usually offered on Caribbean festive occasions. Furthermore, at a less conscious level, the social gathering followed the structure of Caribbean secular rituals identified by Roger Abrahams (1983). It took the form of a formal sit-down dinner centred on the bereaved family and the minister, though this respectable framework was challenged by the clandestine sipping of liquor, the increasingly spirited gathering, and the games of dominoes in the clubroom. The event thus took place in a delicate balance between the two oppositional value systems of respectability, associated with formal societal institutions such as the church, and reputation, associated with the local African-Caribbean communities (see Wilson 1969; 1973).

The funeral can also be interpreted as a demonstration of cultural values associated with an ethnic minority in British society. In an analysis of rituals among immigrants and their descendants in Britain, Gerd Baumann (1992) has argued that rituals imply ‘others’ in relation to which the participants in the ritual wish to demarcate themselves, the ‘others’ being in the case of these immigrants mainstream British society. Within the context of this funeral, this suggests that Caribbean immigrants, by organizing large funerals where they support each other in a difficult situation, assert positive aspects of Caribbean immigrant life not usually associated with ‘the Caribbean community’ in dominant discourse in white majority society, where they have been viewed as a problem minority (Chamberlain 1998: 6). With their self-conscious display of support and solidarity, these funerals would thus serve to demarcate the Caribbean immigrants as a community of caring people who assume responsibility for the proper burial of their loved ones and are prepared to travel far to show their last respects to a bereaved family. As such, the funeral can be interpreted as ‘a defining ritual’ (Meyerhoff 1985: 272) that calls attention to the ‘moral superiority’ of a minority community placed in a position of structural inferiority.

A celebratory community
While it can be reasonably argued that this was a self-consciously Caribbean celebration that confirmed the existence of a morally superior community of Caribbean co-ethnics, it is noteworthy that none of the Nevisians referred to the funeral as a celebration of Caribbean culture or a Caribbean community of high(er) moral value. Rather they described it as basically a celebration of the deceased. Syvilla explained:
‘You mourn when you hear about a death, but when the funeral is being held we celebrate that a person has lived his life’. My fellow travellers said that the reason why they attended the funeral was that they came from the same village on Nevis as the deceased and therefore wanted to pay their last respects to him and the bereaved family. ‘We all grew up together and were schoolmates’ was the only explanation they prof- fered. At a basic level the funeral ritual, in other words, constituted a community of people who, by virtue of their shared past in Richmond Village, all had a moral obligation to celebrate the lives of those who derived from this village.

While my co-travellers’ community of identification was centred on Richmond Village, it was an inclusive one because it comprised not just those who had, in fact, grown up with the deceased in the village but also their friends who wanted to support them in this acknowledgement of a lived life. The community even embraced me, a foreign visitor who had lived in the village of the deceased for a long period and was eager to participate in the celebration. At the same time as the community of people travelling together to the funeral in Birmingham represented temporality and continuity grounded in a specific Nevisian village of origin, it therefore could take many shapes and forms, depending on the network of relations that was mobilized around these villagers in particular situations. Even though the Nevisians pointed to their personal tie to the deceased as the reason why they participated in the funeral, it was quite apparent that the key figure in the network of people who had gathered was the cousin who had organized the trip. The community gathered to celebrate a deceased schoolmate from Nevis, therefore, was very much shaped by the long residence in Leeds. Indeed, if it had not been for this cousin, few might have attended the funeral because it turned out that most of the participants had all but lost contact with the deceased since he moved to Birmingham. They had only seen him on the rare occasions when he attended the West Indian carnival in Leeds. Furthermore, they did not know his family at all, because he had married a Jamaican woman who had never visited Leeds.

The cousin realized that he was the central person in the group, and he therefore began and concluded the trip by thanking us for supporting him at this funeral. This support clearly was not merely of an emotional character, but also social. Thus, by joining him on the trip he had organized to the funeral of a close relative of his, we showed him our respect. It could therefore be regarded as somewhat embarrassing for this cousin that fewer than anticipated showed up. However, when I asked him afterwards whether he was disappointed about the turnout, he replied that he was very pleased about everything. He would rather have a small group of people who knew how to behave than ‘fill up the coach with all kinds of people’. He thereby dismissed those who did not come as persons of lesser moral calibre, thus questioning whether they really belonged in the community of people who gathered at the funeral.

A community conferring social status
While the group of mourners the cousin could gather for the coach trip reflected his position among Caribbean immigrants in Leeds, the number of people who attended the funeral as such reflected the esteem held towards the deceased and his family in their particular network of social relations. A poorly attended funeral would have been humiliating, especially because it would have been so unusual in a Caribbean context. According to the Methodist minister in Leeds, Caribbean funerals are huge by definition: ‘If there are only 60-70 people in the church it feels empty. [My] Church has
seating capacity for 200-250 people, but with extra chairs it can hold up to 300-350 people, and this happens often at funerals. Large funerals reflect the existence of an extensive network of people who wish to show their last respects to a particular family. They therefore reveal the social position of a particular family in the relevant Caribbean field of social relations. Funerals also confer prestige and status in the community of people who participate in the ritual. This may have been one of the reasons why Caribbean funerals in Great Britain have turned into important events involving a major feast in rented halls. The participants in the funeral clearly appreciated the festive aspects of the funeral, and there is no doubt that the anticipation of a good party after the interment tempted many to attend a funeral even when they had a fairly tenuous relationship to the deceased.

The significance of the funeral as an occasion for the family to demonstrate its social worth and thus gain prestige was quite apparent at the funeral in Birmingham. With its well-organized burial service in the church, where female family members played a central role, and with the efficient filling of the grave by young and old male family members, it demonstrated that this was a financially well-consolidated and united family. During the interment, however, as we were waiting for the grave to be filled, gossip was circulating on the periphery of the large group congregated around the grave that the deceased had been far from a perfect husband, father, and grandfather. He had drunk away all his money, and the only reason why the widow had not left him was that she would have to divide her savings with him if they got divorced, enabling him to drink even more. Nobody questioned the validity of this rumour in the light of the fact that the family was staging such a large and impressive funeral. Having endured a bad marriage for many years, the husband’s parting might have constituted a good reason for celebration. More importantly, perhaps, it also presented a good occasion to assert the resilience of the family left behind and its position of respect in the community of people that formed at the funeral. I did not hear any of the Nevisians confronting the cousin with this rumour of poor family relations. Syvilla reasoned, ‘Either he doesn’t know himself, or he doesn’t want us to know. Either way I don’t want to bring it up.’

I learned after the funeral that the bereaved family in Birmingham had been worried whether the funeral would be attended by a respectable number of people because the deceased was from Nevis, but married to a Jamaican woman and settled in a primarily Jamaican area in Birmingham. This meant that the funeral entailed two different networks of migrants and there was therefore a danger that no one would feel responsible for coming. I was told that this fear of poor attendance was one of the reasons why the cousin in Leeds decided to rent a coach for the trip. An organized coach trip would make it easier to travel to Birmingham, at the same time as it would create an enjoyable social occasion and a concrete context where a group of people would take it upon themselves to support the cousin in Leeds and thereby, by extension, the bereaved family in Birmingham. The family thus made an effort to mobilize its networks of relations to make sure that there would be a respectable turnout at the funeral.

So far I have sought to illustrate how the funeral can be seen to be an important ritual maintained by people in Britain who identify themselves with their Caribbean origins. These origins were both highly specific, signifying individuals’ ties to a particular Caribbean island – even village – and more general, referring to the wider region identified as a shared place of origin by virtue of common customs and traditions. While these two notions of Caribbean origins both point to the importance of being
from the Caribbean, they attained special significance through the migrants’ experiences in Britain, whether in the form of continued personal relations with people from the same specific place of origin or through the maintaining of customs and traditions demarcated as ‘Caribbean’ in British society, such as the serving of particular dishes at celebrations. I have further shown how the funeral ritual is regulated by moral obligations that affirm community among those participating in the ritual. The ritual is therefore able to accommodate several different aspects of community construction among people sharing an identification with their Caribbean origins. These aspects include the wish to honour Caribbean traditions as a means of asserting among themselves the positive cultural and moral values associated with people of Caribbean origin as well as the desire to demonstrate, and gain recognition for, the social, economic, and moral worth of Caribbean people in the wider British society. I propose that the funeral also had a deeper meaning tied to its legacy as a ritual developed within a Caribbean historical context. This particular legacy accounts for the ability of the ritual to accommodate a host of different interests and values.

The Caribbean legacy

Anthropologists have described funerals as major social events in the Caribbean, attended by large numbers of people. Peter Wilson (1992 [1974]: 48-53) describes how on ‘Providencia’ the entire island society seemed to congregate at the wake and burial of a young woman. Jean Besson depicts the elaborate funeral customs in Jamaica with particular focus on the African-Jamaican magico-religious complex of Obeah and Myal (Besson 2002: 256; see also Davis-Palmer 2004).

I became aware of the great significance of funeral rituals in the Caribbean when, during my fieldwork in Richmond Village, a man died but no funeral was held. The denial of a proper burial concerned a man whose family life and health had been ruined by his heavy drinking. His wife had left him many years prior to his death and he had had only sporadic contact with a daughter abroad. He was living alone in an unkempt house that was reported to smell so badly that nobody would come close to it. He did not show up when he promised to help his relatives cultivate their land – even when they were offering to pay him to do so – and most of the time he could be found at the rum shop in an alcoholic stupor. When he finally went into a coma, the villagers called the ambulance and had him shipped off to the hospital, where he died alone several days later. The local authorities attempted to locate relatives who would ‘response for him’, that is, assume responsibility for arranging and paying for a proper funeral, but found nobody who was willing to do so. He ended up being buried by the government in an unmarked spot in the public graveyard. Nobody was informed about this burial, and only a minister and gravediggers were present to perform the necessary work. The villagers regarded this interment of a deceased villager as entirely lacking in dignity. The fact that no one had felt morally obliged to celebrate the deceased’s life signified that he had not been a good member of his family, a respectable member of the community, or even a decent human being. Furthermore, this was not just a personal matter, it reflected badly on the family and the entire village, threatening the notion of solidarity believed to characterize the local community. ‘It has been a long time since this happened to Richmond Village’, one of the villagers lamented.

The notion of the funeral as an important ritual in community-building is deeply rooted in the Caribbean historical experience. The literature on slavery describes the condition of the slave as one of social death in the sense that the slave from a formal
point of view has no independent identity as a social being, but is only socially acknowledged as the property of his or her owner (Patterson 1982: 38). Studies of Caribbean slave societies have shown, however, that the slaves created informal social relations with each other and with their owners that gradually undermined their status as socially dead. While the slave owners were hesitant to acknowledge the existence of social relations and social identities among the living slaves, they were willing to do so for the dead slaves. Thus, according to historical sources from the Caribbean, the African slaves and their descendants were allowed to celebrate the dead at funerals where they sang, drank, danced, and related stories in honour of the deceased (see, e.g., Olwig 1993: 54).

Central in the funeral ritual were the persons who took it upon themselves to organize the event and ask the slave owner for the rum that was usually donated for the occasion. Court records from the former Danish West Indies (the current US Virgin Islands) show that these persons were usually close relatives such as the children of the deceased, but if the deceased had no biological kin a funeral might be organized by other close relations who had attained a kin-like status. During the period of the slave trade (effectively abolished in the Danish and British colonies in 1807), such relations often were fellow slaves who had arrived on the same ship from Africa to the West Indies, or the children of such slaves. The Danish West Indian court records thus include an example of a funeral organized by the slave Martha because the deceased slave had arrived with her parents on the same slave ship from Africa (Olwig 1985: 79).

By staging the funeral, Martha validated the special relationship that she felt towards the deceased because of this shared past, at the same time as she made sure that a group of mourners was gathered who would celebrate the deceased. Since the slave owners accepted the funeral, and even supported it with a donation of rum, it became a recognized social institution, where the slaves could celebrate the deceased as a social being and affirm their community of relations. In this way they rejected, in the presence of physical death, the formal position of the slave as socially dead labour in the plantation society.

When the slaves and their free descendants became Christian, they adopted the Christian burial custom. This meant that the churches became a central part of the funeral ritual, and elaborate funerals became an important way for the upwardly mobile, free population to demonstrate their superior social status (Olwig 1993). Parallel with this development, however, the ritual of the wake was maintained, and in the case of rural Jamaica it could include as many as three different celebrations held at different points in time after the death had occurred (Besson 2002: 257). Furthermore, as the freed slaves and their descendants began to establish villages of their own, encouraged by the missionaries, they often buried the dead on family land in the village, and it was not before the twentieth century that it became generally customary to bury the dead in the church or municipal cemeteries. The funeral ritual thus marked the increasing incorporation of the African-Caribbean population into the wider society as well as the continuous building and maintaining of community relations in this population (cf. Besson 2002).

**A differentiated community**

I suggest that the funeral in Birmingham reflected the complexity of the African-Caribbean burial custom as a ritual context of community construction of varying meaning, scale, and form within a wider societal context. The people who gathered in
Birmingham in order to show the deceased Caribbean migrant their last respects were, at a basic level, concerned with celebrating a life by acknowledging him as a person of social import in a community of people. At the centre was the close-knit community of the family. Thus, the funeral programme introduced the deceased as a ‘Dear Departed Husband, Dad and Granddad’, an affectionate relationship that was underscored by the close and – at times – emotional involvement of the family in all phases of the burial ritual. This image of a caring and close family, however, was somewhat challenged by the accompanying official passport photo, indicating that the family had no other image of the deceased and that he therefore might have been a more marginal figure in the social life of the family than they wished to admit in public.

Surrounding this family was a community of friends of the deceased and his family who had come to show their last respects. As already shown, this community consisted of a loosely connected network of relations where the widow and the deceased were key figures. The widow’s network was strongly represented in the form of the large Baptist congregation that belonged to the church where the funeral was held. The importance of this group of people was recognized in the tribute to the deceased, in which it was mentioned that he had become ‘Christian’ in Birmingham, that is, converted to the more fundamentalist Baptist religion of his wife’s church. The network of the deceased, associated with his place of origin in the Caribbean, was much smaller. Nevertheless, its importance was acknowledged by inviting Nevisians living in Birmingham to do the eulogy and the tribute at the funeral ceremony.

While these two networks of people were able to form a loosely knit community of people within the framework of the well-known funeral ceremony, they did not intermingle. Thus, during the interment, while the family and friends from Birmingham stood in a tight circle around the grave singing hymns as it was being filled, most of my Nevisian fellow travellers positioned themselves on the periphery, where they were looking for people from ‘back home’. In the majority of cases they initiated conversations with people they already knew, but at other times they just started talking to people who seemed familiar. Syvilla became involved in a long conversation with two women after she had established that they were from a neighbouring village on Nevis where her parents had lived and several of her older siblings were born. At one point a woman approached Syvilla and asked her whether she was a friend of the deceased or the widow. When she learned that Syvilla was a friend of the deceased, she made faces and told Syvilla that he had been a real problem for the family in Birmingham, and then moved on. Only the deceased’s cousin and Edwin, his best friend, talked to the widow and stayed close to the grave when it was being filled, in case the family needed help. At no point did the rest of us go up to the widow or other members of the bereaved family in Birmingham to offer our condolences. Perhaps they did not expect this. It may have been more important for them that we attended the funeral and in this way helped make it a significant social event.

This sharp division into two separate sub-communities was a logical consequence of the fact that two very different, tenuously connected social networks congregated at this funeral. The link between the two networks was made even more precarious by the fact that they were grounded in two different Caribbean islands. While Caribbean islands share a long colonial history, they were settled and governed as separate entities by the European colonizers. There therefore developed only relatively weak ties between most islands, even when they belonged to the same British empire, as is the case with Jamaica and Nevis (Lowenthal 1972). The Caribbean immigrants in Britain identify themselves...
strongly with their own island of origin. However, since migrants from the large Caribbean island of Jamaica comprise by far the largest Caribbean population segment in Britain, and migrants from the tiny island of Nevis constitute a miniscule minority, there is a tendency among the British to regard all Caribbean migrants as Jamaicans. This is greatly resented by immigrants from the other Caribbean islands, who wish to maintain their own island identity. This is not merely because they do not want to be subjected to what they regard as an alien identity, but also because they think that Jamaicans, the best-known group of Caribbean islanders in Britain, have given West Indians a tainted image in British society. By presenting themselves as different from Jamaicans, other Caribbeans attempt to distance themselves from this image. The relationship between migrants from Jamaica and the smaller Eastern Caribbean islands is also influenced by a big island-small island divide. Thus, migrants from big islands, such as Jamaica, are believed to look down on migrants from the small islands in the Eastern Caribbean, regarding them as backwards and insular, if not stupid. This animosity between Nevisians and Jamaicans was reflected in Sylva’s gut reaction against travelling in a coach rented from a Jamaican company. The funeral therefore generated a community of people united in their deep-seated feeling of obligation towards celebrating the life of a person who was part of their personal social field of relations, but divided by their mutual stereotypes.

At a still more general level, the funeral can be seen to be a shared ritual in a religious fellowship of people who wished to give the deceased a Christian burial. As such, the funeral situates the Caribbean immigrants within the mainstream of British society – and that of Western society, for that matter. In a British context it is interesting that the funeral took place in a Baptist church, because the Baptist denomination was brought to Jamaica by British missionaries towards the end of the slave period and played a major role in the establishment of free villages in Jamaica after the abolishment of slavery (Besson 2002; Davis-Palmer 2004; 2005). Many of the Baptist missionaries came from Birmingham, where an ‘Antislavery Society’ had been formed in 1826 (Bryan 2003: 138–9). The Baptist Jamaicans who migrated to Britain about 125 years later joined British Baptist churches like the one where the funeral took place. They found, however, that the British members tended to leave the church within a few years, and the congregation thereby became Jamaican. If the Baptist Church, where the funeral ceremony took place in Birmingham, seemed Jamaican, this was not because the Jamaicans wished to have their own church, but rather because the British did not want to share a church with them or be a part of their religious community. It is thus important to bear in mind that, despite this tendency towards congregational segregation, Caribbean migrants very much belong to the overall Christian community in Britain.

**A community of social recognition**

I have argued that rituals may constitute useful sites of ethnographic research on community-building among migrants, because they are cultural expressions, generated by people themselves, where they reflect upon their social relations and notions of belonging and sites of identification. They therefore allow the ethnographer to analyse the different kinds of contexts emerging in the course of the ritual. This ethnographic analysis has shown that a complexity of community relations was constituted within the framework of a single Caribbean funeral ritual. These relations were based on varying notions of solidarity, different kinds of oppositions, and shared
historical experiences that transcended the generations and united geographically dis-
persed people linked to disparate parts of the Caribbean and Britain. The relations
were rooted in the overriding moral community that emphasized the importance of
celebrating a life by giving a deceased person a proper funeral. This moral community,
in turn, was expressed through more specific networks of social relations formed
around the deceased and his close family on the basis of personal ties to particular
places and persons in the Caribbean and Britain and the particular forms of social
obligation that this generated. While the community of people came to pay their last
respects to the deceased, most did so gladly because the funeral ritual had become an
occasion for the bereaved family to show its social worth by offering an elaborate and
enjoyable celebration.

The burial ritual represents temporality and continuity in community-constructing
among African-Caribbean people. This community-constructing, however, has
changed through time from the early period of slavery, when relatives and friends held
wakes over deceased slaves, to the post-emancipation period, when Christian burial
rituals became a central part of the funeral practices, to the modern period, when major
celebrations are staged in various migration destinations abroad. As Caribbean people
settle abroad, the question arises whether these funeral rituals will continue to be an
important site of African-Caribbean community construction. For my fellow travellers
to the funeral in Birmingham, a Nevisian community was important because they had
shared memories from the same village in Nevis; they had all journeyed as young
people to Britain within the span of approximately ten years; they had settled in the
Chapeltown area of Leeds; they had found similar work in the industrial and service
sector; they had all belonged to the Anglican, Methodist, or Methodist Holiness
Church; and virtually everybody left with the intention to move back to Nevis as soon
as possible. All this meant that their everyday life was infused with Nevisian relations
and modes of talking and acting. By the time the funeral was held in Birmingham,
however, most of the Nevisian immigrants in Leeds had lived there for thirty-five to
forty years. Many had moved out of Chapeltown to less West Indian neighbourhoods;
they had changed jobs several times and were on the verge of retiring; and a large
number had changed religious affiliation, whether to one of the black Pentecostal
churches or to the primarily white Jehovah’s Witnesses. All had been back to Nevis to
visit and, in many cases, to bury their parents. Many were considering returning to
Nevis, some had already left, whereas others were settled in Britain and had no desire
to leave.

Nobody talked about all these aspects of life because this would have divided the
small group of Nevisians travelling together to the funeral. Rather they celebrated their
shared past and mutual desire to show their last respects to a departed fellow Nevisian.
They did express concern about the fellow villagers who should have been there but did
not come. No reason for their absence was given, but an obvious explanation seemed to
be that they were withdrawing from the Nevisian community of relations and social
obligations that was affirmed through this ritual. If the migrants had no strong desire
to be part of this community, there were no powerful sanctions that could enforce their
continued participation in the burial ritual.

If the participants would have liked more fellow villagers to join them at the funeral,
they did not expect to see any young participants from Leeds. Young people did attend
funerals of close relatives in the elder generation, as was clearly demonstrated at the
funeral in Birmingham, but they felt no obligation to show their last respects to friends

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or distant relatives of their parents. The young, however, came out in great numbers at funerals of peers – whether or not these derived from their parents’ island of origin. As noted by the Methodist minister in Leeds, ‘If the deceased is young ..., the whole young Black community will also come’. He added that families therefore often chose to hold such funerals in the Anglican church in the outskirts of Chapeltown, because it could accommodate more than 1,000 people. The community of people that the second generation affirmed at funerals was a much broader one which disregarded island origins. In this generation, local ties created in Britain were more important than ties to the parental place of origin. Thus, a woman living in a village some distance from Leeds related that when her son died, ‘the whole village mourned’. While the descendants of the immigrants continue to maintain a strong funeral tradition, the community that is affirmed through this ritual seems to be shifting in character. It may therefore no longer be useful to call it a Caribbean community.

**Migrants’ communities**

The term ‘community’ is increasingly being used in migration research to refer to migrants who share a particular place of origin. This focus on migrants’ communities can be related to the dovetailing of what Gerd Baumann (1996; 1997) terms a dominant discourse linked to European nationalist thinking that equates people, place of origin, and ethnic community and a more global frame of thinking that emphasizes the growing importance of transnational movements, linkages, and areas of belonging (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996). These very different modes of thinking have the consequence of identifying communities with distant places of origin as important contexts of life for migrants. This convergence of thinking has led a number of anthropologists to caution that it is necessary to question the way in which the notion of community is employed in migration research. In his study of a London suburb with a large immigrant population, Baumann, for example, has argued that if dominant discourse equates ‘community, culture, and ethnic identity’, it is easy for the protagonists of this discourse to ‘reduce anybody’s behaviour to a symptom of this equation’ (1996: 6). He therefore admonishes researchers to distinguish between ‘social groups and social categories’ (1996: 7) and to be aware of the fact that ‘[c]ommunities are not self-evident collectivities’ (1996: 187), but imagined and practised in different ways by various protagonists.

From the perspective of transnational theory, Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2003) have also noted the need to investigate further the nature of migrants’ communities. In a critical discussion of the transnational approach in migration studies, they state:

> Much of transnational migration studies overstates the internal homogeneity and boundedness of transnational communities, overestimates the binding power for individual action, overlooks the importance of cross-community interactions as well as the internal divisions of class, gender, religion and politics, and is conceptually blind to those cases where no transnational communities form among migrants or where existing ones cease to be meaningful for individuals (2003: 598).

From a similar perspective, Peggy Levitt and Glick Schiller call for migration researchers to explore the ‘multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed’ (2004: 1009). They further emphasize the importance of distinguishing between ways
of being, ‘the actual social relations and practices that individuals are engaged in’, and ways of belonging, ‘the identities associated with their actions’ (2004: 1010).

One of the main difficulties of studying migrants’ communities inheres in the communities’ elusive character. As noted by Vered Amit (2002b: 2), the notion of community became an important concept in anthropology when anthropologists began to do research in large, complex societies and needed to delineate smaller units of study in the form of local collectivities that could be subjected to ethnographic research and analysis. Since then the concept has become part of general parlance, and today, as Anthony Cohen has pointed out, the meaning of ‘community’ has become extended to indicate ‘collectivity or communality or even just similarity of a sort’ that can be ‘at any level from the global to the local’ (2002: 167). Community, he argues, has become a way of designating that ‘something is shared among a group of people at a time when we no longer assume that anything is shared’ (2002: 169). If the notion of community has become an important means of capturing ‘collectivity’, ‘communality’, and ‘similarity’, rooted in a shared existence of some sort, it is important that anthropologists turn their attention to exploring just what kinds of sharing this may entail and which kinds of imagined and practised communities of belonging this sharing may generate. If, for example, a shared place of origin can generate a community of belonging, an important task would be to investigate how ‘ways of being’ connected with this shared origin may generate particular communities of belonging (cf. Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004).

By arguing for the need to make the very construction of community among migrants a central subject of inquiry, I am, by implication, suggesting that anthropologists reconsider the ways in which we contextualize our studies of migrants. According to Roy Dilley (1999: 25), contextualizing entails exploring the significance of various aspects of human life by linking them to the ‘context of situation’, a phrase that he traces back to Malinowski. In the local field sites where anthropology developed as a discipline, context came to mean a ‘culture’ – ‘that which is local, particular and distinctive, compared to the global, general and common’, as Dilley has stated (1999: 26). The focus in recent migration research on connections that cross-cut cultural entities and localities can be seen as an attempt to break out of this local-global divide and to explore that which is ‘particular and distinctive’ to migrants whose context of life includes more than one locality. By conceptualizing these migrants in terms of communities defined in terms of shared background in a distant place of origin, it is easy to forget, however, that the existence of such communities, and their significance to individual migrants, must be demonstrated. I have here suggested that if research takes a point of departure in specific situations such as life-cycle rituals, where contexts are generated, it may be possible to question and explore unexpected connections and disconnections in the lives of migrants and their descendants. Rituals are, of course, only one example of such specific situations. Indeed, it is important to recognize that immigrants become involved in a wide variety of situations that generate a complexity of contexts. By studying migration processes through the lens of ethnic communities, we may therefore limit our gaze unnecessarily.

NOTES

The essay represents a further development of an earlier Danish article, ‘Fællesskabets begravelse? Oprindelse og forbundethed blandt caribiske migranter’ (‘The burial of the community? Origins and relatedness among Caribbean migrants’) (Olwig 2006). The ethnographic fieldwork was supported by a grant from the
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De bonnes funérailles : contextualisation de la communauté chez les migrants des Caraïbes

Résumé

À partir du récit ethnographique des obsèques d’un migrant des Caraïbes en Grande-Bretagne, l’auteure avance que bien que la « communauté caraïbe » se constitue à travers ce rituel du cycle de vie, elle est aussi traversée d’un ensemble complexe de relations qui revêtent une signification personnelle, une profondeur historique et une dimension géographique variables. En examinant ainsi une « communauté » caraïbe par le biais d’un acte rituel constitutif, l’analyse soulève des questions concernant la signification de la notion de « communauté ethnique », concept qui désigne une collectivité sociale définie par un lieu d’origine commun et qui est de plus en plus utilisé pour identifier les migrants et contextualiser les études sur les migrations. Ces questions renvoient à la nécessité d’évaluer de façon critique la manière dont les études ethnographiques des immigrés sont contextualisées, et la réflexion catégorielle, les liens et les distinctions qu’implique cette contextualisation.

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