

SUMMARY

'Living-Dead: African-Surinamese perceptions, practices and rituals surrounding death and mourning' describes and interprets the death culture of the descendants of African slaves, Creoles and Maroons, in Suriname. The book offers an integrated approach in which a wide range of attitudes comes to the fore, and uncommon (supernatural, bad or tragic) and common (natural, good) death are studied together. In this way, the study presents a comparative and reflexive perspective that reconciles ethnographic detail with middle range theories.

The book is guided by two leitmotifs. The first concerning the coexistence of tradition and modernity or the phenomenon of multitemporal heterogeneity, arguing that African-Surinamese actors always live, on the one hand, in terms of conflicting demands, desires and expectations associated with voices of authority and, on the other, with the idiosyncratic aspirations of the individual. Processes like creolization, syncretization/anti-syncretization and de-/retraditionalization play a prominent role in this dialectic and, consequently, in the construction of African-Surinamese death culture as well as people's changing attitudes towards dying, death and mourning.

Despite this dynamic nature, African-Surinamese culture is characterized by an inevitable constant that forms the second leitmotif of this study: the living-dead. Throughout this study it appears that within the African-Surinamese worldview and spiritual-religious orientation, (biological) death does not necessarily mean the end of life. Death rather implies a continuation of life in another form, in which contacts between the living and the deceased (or their spirits) are still possible. The dead are not dead: they are the living-dead who might interfere in people's lives – as spiritual entities or simply as a lasting remembrance. Living-dead have therefore to be handled with utmost care and respect, while the rituals regarding death, burial and mourning are considered as the most important *rites de passage* of African-Surinamese culture.

Because of the enormous significance of the living-dead and the subsequent transitional rituals, an important part of this book consists of the description, analysis and interpretation of the ritual process that starts at the deathbed or even before the dying hour. In the conceptualization of death as a process and transition, I draw heavily on Van Gennep's model of rites of passage, Hertz's study of liminal rituals as well as his insights into the relationship between corpse, soul and mourners, and several contemporary followers of these founding

fathers. In order to grasp all the different ritual stages that surround the process of dying, death and mourning, one first needs an understanding of the sociocultural and religious-spiritual perceptions behind the ritual practices as well as an outline of the social-economic and political context in which people live, die, bury, grief and mourn.

The introductory chapter of this book discusses therefore not only some key concepts and approaches that molded my notion of conducting ethnographic fieldwork on African-Surinamese death culture, but portrays also the precarious situation in which the Surinamese society found itself during my research (1999, 2000). In brief, the country and a large part of its population suffered enormously by a severe economic crisis and a grinding poverty that, because of political and financial-monetary misgovernment, was becoming structural and most in line with Latin-America. At the edge of a new millennium Suriname had deteriorated into one of the worst functioning economies of the region. The process of marginalization hit many if not all my informants in the field, and caused a chasm between a small and privileged group of rich haves (*gudusma, elite*) and a growing mass of poor have-nots (*tye poti*). The latter increasingly lacked access to health care, suffered various sanitary inconveniences and subsequent diseases, and saw itself exposed to all kinds of life-threatening conditions, 'new' diseases and causes of death.

Surprisingly, the generally felt crisis and continuing decline of the living conditions did not result in shocking mortality rates. Neither did the alarming situation hamper Paramaribo's lively funeral industry. Even when the entire city was at a standstill either because of mass demonstrations against the failing government or because of quiet resignation, the local burial grounds formed scenes of overwhelming activity, conspicuous consumption and enormous vitality. The undertaker's business thrived and not because of a spectacular rising mortality but because the living, at all times, had to 'celebrate' and honor relatives who passed away. The cultural background to this tremendous ritual and spiritual care is nonetheless not so clear-cut, but marked by a history of sociocultural and religious twists and turns narrated in Part I of this book.

Part I has a strong historical character, yet it does not just sketch bygone times, but outlines also the ways in which these times shaped present-day perceptions, identities and actions: the past as living-dead. Chapter 2 tells the story of slavery and Dutch colonialism. I try to discuss the role of this past in contemporary African-Surinamese identifications. The underlying assumption is that there is an interplay between identity construction on the one hand and attitudes towards dying, death and mourning on the other. I argue furthermore that African-Surinamese identifications are for a significant part created by the experience of the history of slavery and oppression as well as the grievances and resistance against it. It becomes clear that, despite their 'shared history', Maroons and Creoles experience their past, their roots and genesis, in very different ways, providing insight into the processual and relative nature of notions like identity, authenticity, ethnicity and ethno-nationalism. Besides an historical interpretation of diverse African-Surinamese identifications, I also present an ana-

lytical-theoretical approach of identity construction in which I underline the important role of change, especially in the guise of creolization. At the same time, however, I do not deny the existence of persistent and sometimes very practical essentialist discourses regarding (ethnic) identity. All actors in the field employed a dual discursive competence by which they switched between alteration and reification to fulfill their needs and realize their goals.

Chapter 3 elaborates this conception further, even though the focus shifts from ethnic identification and creolization to religious identification and syncretization. After a brief theoretical discussion of the concept of syncretism/anti-syncretism, the chapter continues with a description of the different spiritual-religious orientations that shape and structure the death culture of my research population. First, I examine the African-Surinamese 'folk religion' Winti as a varied agglomerate of perceptions, meanings and practices. Second, I describe and analyze the way Dutch colonizers and clergy brought Christianity to Suriname and spread the gospel among African-Surinamese slaves and their descendants. As in the previous chapter, chapter 3 confronts the reader with a history of (forced) assimilation, resistance and ambiguity. As a result, many African-Surinamese 'believers' waver of sheer necessity between Cross (Christianity) and Calabash (Winti), which might seem very confusing, but which illustrates also the competency and agency of particular actors. They cherish often a very pragmatic vision of Christianity and Winti, and construct by synthesis (syncretization) and resistance (anti-syncretization) their own faith and spiritual orientation. Recent developments within the field of religion and spirituality offer clarifying insights into the eclectic, shopping behavior of late-modern African-Surinamese Christians and Winti adherents. It is shown that they increasingly create space for their own individual and spiritual needs and desires. Chapter 3 closes by examining the question to what extent Cross and Calabash have blended. I discuss the role of Christianization and colonization within this process and its possible effects on the development of African-Surinamese attitudes towards death, dying and mourning.

Both 'Colonizer' and 'Church' have affected the way people deal with death, how they grief and mourn. Chapter 4 shows how various authorities and all kinds of observers have created an often negative discourse about the dying Other and mourning relatives. Different historical documents and tracts demonstrate an overt expression of disapproval and disgust concerning 'idolatrous and pagan' death rites. Laws and prohibitions were formulated during Dutch colonial rule to restrict mourners from celebrating and commemorating the living-dead, but certain traditions and practices are too stubborn to be eroded. Rather, the language and practices of rejection have resulted in ambivalent attitudes in which the care for the living-dead, despite feelings of shame and taboo, continue to exist. The second part of chapter 4 describes and interprets the role of the living-dead in the construction of African-Surinamese death culture by studying diverse perceptions about personal and collective immortality. The chapter concludes with an overview of the anthropology of death and death studies. I expound some recent theoretical developments and lessons, after which I propose an integrated approach to understand the ritual process that I began describing and analyzing in Part II.

Chapters 5 and 6 of Part II launch the first series of rites of passage by examining the announcement of death, the ritual and symbolic actions at the deathbed, and the ritual organization and care that follows when somebody dies. These pre-funeral preparations concentrate mainly on the good departure of the deceased and (future) parting between the deceased and the surviving relatives. The chapters show that the planning and organization of the different transitional rituals are frequently frustrated by serious dissonances between ideal and reality. A good farewell and a decent funeral are usually part of a complex negotiation process in which various relatives seek room for maneuver and compromise to realize the dying wish of the deceased and their own private wishes, without disregarding particular prescriptive codes (*kultuur*). Within the context of changing attitudes towards death and dying, and diverging perceptions about 'good' death and a respectable farewell, it is shown that there is no ritual planning without argument. The only thing that seems to be sure is the continued existence of the deceased, which is announced and celebrated in this stage of the ritual process by a variety of immortality constructions. Chapter 6 concludes therefore with an analysis of different obituaries to shed some light on the ways African-Surinamese mourners create immortality, announce the living-dead, and make their grief public. In any case, public mourning and insistence on ceremony are important ingredients of a successful ritual process, which is clearly visible in the extensive burial rites and the wake on the eve of the funeral, the *dede oso*, that is the subject of this book's third part.

Part III gives a detailed description of the first important public ceremony in the mourning period, namely the wake on the eve of the funeral that is called *dede oso* or *singineti*. Chapter 7 and 8 present first of all the context and current interpretations of this chief ritual event. Next, the study introduces a number of influential actors within the *dede oso*: the authorities (*singiman*) who are responsible for the course of the ceremony and lead the singing (lamentations). Chapter 8 deals also with the function and meaning of different symbolic attributes as well as the structure and organization of the wake. It shows that Cross and Calabash (see chapter 3) play a prominent role in the diverse, sometimes conflicting interpretations of mourners and experts like clergymen or *singiman*. Chapter 9 offers an in-depth description of the ceremony itself. It describes the wake from its beginning at eight o'clock in the evening until its final closure at dawn. Within this portrayal there is extensive attention for the different lamentations, mourning songs and prayers that structure the ritual gathering. The chapter shows that these rituals are both for the living and the dead. Loss and attachment, pain and pleasure, sorrow and hope, finiteness and survival are alternately celebrated, commemorated and sung about during the wake. After the performance of the *dede oso*, in which the living-dead are honored and celebrated, the surviving relatives and the deceased are able to part from one another and enter a following phase in the ritual process dealing with a series of separation rites.

Part IV discusses two key separation ceremonies in the African-Surinamese death culture: the combined parting and leave-taking (*prati* and *teki afscheid*), and the funeral (*beri*). Peo-

ple's fear of different forms of pollution has a prominent place in this stage. Chapter 10 starts therefore at the mortuary and introduces the ritual experts, the *dinari*, who wash, embalm and lay out the corpse of the deceased. I present people's different conceptions about the 'dead' body or the corpse as a dangerous source of contagion, and the ways African-Surinamese *dinari* deal with various dimensions of death and disposal. In order to explain their work (*wasi dede* or *dinarinroko*) chapter 10 continues by sketching the historical and organizational context of *dinari* associations as well as their present-day subculture. Furthermore, the chapter gives a thorough description of the *dinari* work in the mortuary, and some recent technological and commercial developments by which the 'traditional' work is affected. Many people complain that *dinarinroko* as a work of charity has turned into a selfish moneymaking business. Nevertheless, a majority of African-Surinamese mourners rely on the ritual expertise of the *dinari*, especially because these 'servants' also guide surviving relatives in some crucial separation rituals, the *teki afscheid* and *prati* at the day of the funeral. Chapter 10 concludes with a depiction of these rites that have strong spiritual, psychological, emotional and social meanings, and aim at the successful parting of the living and the deceased. Again, conflicting religious orientations lead frequently to ambiguity and friction during the performance of the rites, although all kind of syncretic forms and visions are common too. The latter applies also to various burial rituals described in the next chapter.

Chapter 11 follows the funeral procession from the mortuary to the cemetery, and halts at certain spots by way of leave-taking. At the burial place we meet the *dragiman*, the bearers who will carry the coffin to the grave and take a remarkable part in the performance of specific funerary rites. Besides the *dragiman*, the chapter introduces other actors, like gravediggers and clergymen, who shape African-Surinamese death culture, and populate the different graveyards in Paramaribo. The chapter gives also a lively sketch of the most important burial places at the research location, and analyzes several funeral types – varying from sober and 'traditional' to conspicuous, showy, commercialized and retraditionalized. The chapter closes with an analysis of the various separation and burial rites at the graveyard, including the service preceding the burial. Special attention is given to the performance and meanings of the way the *dragiman* dance and carry the coffin to the grave. Although the grave or tomb is often associated with the final resting-place of the deceased, the ritual process is not completed at this stage. A series of post-liminal rituals still has to be performed to separate the surviving relatives from the living-dead, and to incorporate both mourners and deceased into a 'new' existence.

The final Part V of this study mainly examines a number of crucial African-Surinamese incorporation and purification rites, and the closure of the formal period of mourning. First, chapter 12 briefly discusses the theoretical approach of collective mourning and personal grief. Special attention is given to the sociocultural prescriptions and constructions of bereavement. The analysis of the different incorporation rituals shows a shift from a shared liminality between the mourners and the living-dead to disbandment and (therapeutic) enjoy-

ment during final wakes and closing purification rituals. Chapter 12 winds up by describing a typical Maroon ceremony that closes off a long period of mourning. The concluding chapter 13 is devoted to memorial and personal grief that often lasts when the mourning period has officially come to an end. Above all, I ‘commemorate’ the leading actors of this book: the living-dead who oversee the present, past and future. In that way the chapter finally provides for a concluding and recommending reflection in which (the study of) death, once and for all, demands its place in life.