Don't come crying to my funeral

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Granny’s wake

The morning I heard Granny passed away, I planned to go about my day as I would have otherwise. I figured that I had not known the older woman well. But the woman I lived with decided to take the cassava bread she had made the day before to Granny’s family. She told me that Granny’s daughter was her friend and I should go there too. So, later that night, I made my way to the house where the wake was being held. I approached the outskirts of the yard and called out ‘goodnight’ from where I stood in the dark, but no one responded. I was greeted by the sound of dominoes being slammed forcefully against a wooden table and sporadic reactions to the results. These were primarily masculine voices, men sitting with drinks in hand and an unusually intense focus on the game. I walked past them towards the house, and the sounds of the game began to intermingle with the sounds of the song. As I approached the house, the volume of the song increased. Eventually, I could make out a group of women sitting together, their silhouettes and shaded faces faintly visible through the flickering candlelight in an otherwise dark room. I walked past them and towards the kitchen, the place I had come to know as the entrance to the home through my less macabre visits. I stood in the doorway waiting for the group of women and their children to see me first, peeking inside and calling out ‘goodnight.’ This time, they called back ‘goodnight’ in response and ushered me in warmly, even if more subdued than they would ordinarily have been.

After I entered, Auntie immediately asked me, almost as a matter of routine, if I wanted to see her mother, the woman this wake was centred around. She swiftly turned and began walking towards the back of the house before I knew how to answer, and I followed her. We walked from the kitchen through the hall, where the rest of the women I had made out in shadow before were sitting, resting their breath between songs. We walked past them into a bedroom that Auntie had until now shared with her mother and where, just the night prior, they had gone to sleep. With her headlamp for light, Auntie carefully unwrapped a tarp to reveal her mother’s face. It had turned stiff atop a bed of ice. They had not yet acquired the casket where the woman would be placed to rest.

Within this room, Auntie went on presenting the corpse and explaining how it was that she had found her mother, telling me how her mother had passed away. A couple of her sisters-in-law entered the room and stood on either side of Auntie so that we all faced the body together and put our arms around her when she began to cry. Auntie then resumed, telling us in soft and slow words how the day had gone, practised several times to all those who had made their way here already.

She told us how earlier she had called out to her mother to come and eat. Her mother hadn’t responded, so she called out to her again, and again received no answer. Auntie then paused her activities in the kitchen and went to check on her mother in the bedroom where she had been resting. She called out again while approaching the bedroom, but her mother still did not respond. When Auntie arrived at her mother’s bedside, she pulled the mosquito...
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A woman leaned in to tell me, gesturing to them, that they would continue to do what they
at disconcertedly by the group inside every so often. It seemed to me, in slight annoyance.
cinctly together. Meanwhile, we could still hear the others out in the yard, who were glanced
above the others, each woman, in turn, choosing one, and then their voices would begin suc-
it actively for all of us who were present.
We left the bedroom, and our place was promptly taken by the following set who arrived
to view the body, and I followed Auntie back to the kitchen. Her daughters offered me a plate
with two slices of fresh cassava bread cut into triangle shapes, two pieces of grilled chicken,
customary tone, with two slices of fresh cassava bread cut into triangle shapes, two pieces of grilled chicken,
call was voiced, announcing a number out loud in a tone raised just
of first viewing the body, receiving a plate and perhaps drink, and making their way to one
of two distinct spaces: either the hall where the circle of mostly ‘big women’ were focused on
the song and encompassed by candlelight; or, outside nearer to the home, where
I had first entered and dominoes were played rhythmically.
Simultaneous to these divergent sonic tones, the partner of the deceased woman sporadi-
cally voiced out in eruptions, louder than the women’s song and the domino players’ game:
“Why did you leave me baby! I didn’t beat you! Nothing, I did nothing to my baby! So why
did my baby leave me!” To which no reply was ever given. His speech resolved repetitively
into a constant hum until the next eruption occurred. He was telling all present that there had
been no neglect, no violence, indeed that he had enacted enough care towards his partner
throughout her life. His tone was desperate. He was in mourning, but he was sure to perform
it actively for all of us who were present.
Auntie told me that she would go to the hall to sing. I joined them and sat within the outer
edges of their circle. A call was voiced, announcing a number out loud in a tone raised just
above the others, each woman, in turn, choosing one, and then their voices would begin succ-
cinctly together. Meanwhile, we could still hear the others out in the yard, who were glanced
at disconcertedly by the group inside every so often. It seemed to me, in slight annoyance.
A woman leaned in to tell me, gesturing to them, that they would continue to do what they
have got to do. I observed that this presumably entailed drinking alcoholic beverages (to
questionable excess), slamming dominoes down loudly with force, and raising their voices spontaneously - at least when compared to those of us sitting inside. 1 The contrast in behaviours exhibited by those of us singing in the hall and those located in the yard was further emphasised by another woman who said it was as if they, outside, were instead at a birthday party. However, we were all inside the gate of the family’s home at a wake night.

Introduction

This article is an ethnography of Makushi mourning practices and ideas about death with
particular attention to their affective and sociological dimensions. The scene I have just
described is pulled out from my experience of attending a wake in the Makushi village of Surama, located in Guyana’s Upper Takutu-Upper Essequibo region, during the year 2019. The wake was held for an older woman in the home where she resided with her family until her death. On this occasion, the idea of an internal affective divide within Makushi wakes was first made apparent to me, primarily through the mourners’ comments I recall. Yet it speaks to a dynamic within Makushi wakes more generally, where on some level, hosts might suspect that those attending a wake, but who are not in the same state of mourning, might be having what appears to be a little too much fun at their expense.

It is the tension that death prompts, especially between the family of the deceased and those who live in further household clusters, that is the focus of this article. I draw on anthropological literature from the region to ground this exploration in well-documented ideas about the body and its role in the constitution of personhood (Carneiro de Carvalho 2015; Daly 2015; Grund 2017; G. Mentore 2005; L. Mentore 2012; Stafford-Walter 2018) about death and the social tensions it prompts (Butt Colson 2001; Carneiro de Carvalho 2015; Daly 2015; Grund 2017; Mentore 2004; Rivière 1970, 1984; Stafford-Walter 2018), and funerary practices (Roth 1924; Whitaker 2021), along with how it is that these change, or not, over time; attending especially to significant transformations in village structure, where once semi-nomadic communities are encouraged to become increasingly more stationary (Carneiro de Carvalho 2015). In the past, a clear divide after death was once made evident by a village community’s total dissolution. But, this divide endures - even if rendered internal to the village - in the Makushi wakes of today. Death continues to prompt social tensions, and the transformation of the funeral rite helps people to cope with these.

Within the space of the wake I described at the start, I show that a clear opposition was drawn between mourners and seeming partygoers through corresponding oppositions in bodily dispositions. However, rather than interpret the behaviour of the ‘partygoers’ as evidence of moral disorder, I suggest that the divergence in affective states between the two groups is intentionally produced and allows for expressions of grief to be made and safely circumscribed. That is, mourners are encircled by their still-living wider community. This article further provides an opportunity to reconsider the prevalent notion of ‘funerary forgetting’ in Amazonia. It points to the tensions between remembering and disremembering the dead for Makushi people in Guyana.

While I never set out to study death, throughout my research4 period, I heard about it extensively and participated to various degrees in the discussions and practices surrounding numerous deaths.5 These deaths involved persons across a wide range of ages, such as those of a newborn, a female child, adolescents of both genders, a young woman, and middle-aged men and women, with the majority concentrated amongst elders, both men and women. It included those who died only after prolonged illnesses, those who died suddenly and from unexpected deaths, those who resided within the village community I was a part of, and those who resided outside of it. Individuals were also situated across a range of different status positions, and I was positioned in relation to each of the deceased and their families in different ways, such that some of them I had never met myself, while I had resided closely with others for a period. All these factors became significant, not only in terms of my own access but also in the orchestration itself. My participation in these events as they unfolded through my relations provides a distinct way of accessing these topics. That is, not apart from how they were ingrained within everyday life as it happened and was experienced by me. This provides a situated texture that wouldn’t have been possible to access had I set out to study them apart from such. In addition, had I been a researcher who had meant to focus on death practices from the beginning, my positionality and affective dispositions might not have allowed me to be involved in the ways that I eventually was.
Death rites in Amazonia

Anthropological studies of death speak to the rupture that death brings and the corresponding work of repair that it then necessitates. Both excessive and prolonged grief, as well as insufficient grief, are understood as pathological to social life. Therefore, both the production of grief and its curtailment are deemed socially necessary (Allard 2013, 2018; Conklin 2001). Funerary rites, in this way, designate ritual moments, out of ordinary time, that conduct transformative grief work. They promote both intense respect and remembrance while being temporally bound and enabling the cutting of ties with the dead. The aims surrounding death rites have been described as following a tripartite parallel process that entails removing the dead from the society of the living, placing them correctly in the realm of the dead, and facilitating the alteration of both social and psychological relations around the gaping absence that the deceased person has left behind (Hertz 1960 [1907]). That is, ultimately encouraging the living who remain to return to a designated proper social life (Bloch and Parry 1982; Rosenblatt et al. 1976). Sometimes, preparing such a ceremony works to orient the mourners away from their loss towards the organisation required for hosting the living, working to produce a memory that displaces the memory of the death itself (Lambek 2018). In Amazonia, such efforts emphasise a radical break with the dead.

Broad themes become apparent within Amazonian anthropology of death, where scholarship on it has outlined specific defining characteristics, initially responding to ideas of perceived lack: of ancestor cults, elaborate funeral rituals and tombs, or any long-standing marked spaces dedicated to the dead, nor emphasis on deep temporal genealogies (Carneiro da Cunha 1978; Clastres 1995 [1989]). Indeed, as suggested over and over again, mourning here is about forgetting, and the labour dedicated to such, drawing a repetitive and particular emphasis on ensuring a radical discontinuity between the living and the dead. This is made evident, for example, in the widespread efforts directed towards burning and destroying material remains in the months surrounding a person's death. Commonly burned items might include any personal possessions, cultivated foods, or houses. People may alter frequently used pathways to spark confusion and change, encouraging the now dead to become lost along once familiar routes, and also may avoid saying the personal names associated with the deceased. These efforts somehow give the remnants of the dead person's soul less reason to want to remain amongst the world of the living and those contacts they knew while still alive.

Even given all these examples of how radical discontinuity is fostered in Amazonian life after death, it also seems to be the case that the dead take up a great deal of metaphysical space in the lived worlds of Amerindian peoples. The dead are seemingly transformed into ‘paradigms of sociological foreignness,’ of ‘others,’ often into kinds of ‘non-territorialised neighbouring species’ that are analysed as expressing relations with alterity (Overing 1993; Taylor 1993).

However, it seems worth pointing out some variations of these more general trends within the ethnographic literature (Chaumeil 2007). In work with Wari’ people in Western Brazil, Conklin describes one such case where material possessions, clothing and photographs of a deceased kinsperson were kept, facilitating the remembrance of a daughter and sister. She notes the continued utterance of a name, Ignacia, and recalls a young woman having died far away from home; her body having never returned for proper burial (Conklin 2001). Albeit, these articles of clothing and photographs were kept packed away in a suitcase and only revealed on an occasion prompted by Conklin herself, who participated in a domestic task similar to one that the young woman herself would have been a part of, had it not been for her tragic and somehow unresolved death.

In another case, Allard describes Warao people in Venezuela keeping photographs, noting still that they had been kept carefully apart from ordinary daily life, tucked away into the rafters of homes, only to be pulled out on distinct occasions. Displaced, like the graves...
within cemeteries intentionally located at a site removed from active social living. In this case, photographs and gravestones are suggested as being kept as relics of remembrance that elicit strong emotions, often in the form of tears – intentionally – and as an ethical act. This is made apparent in the claim that Warao people make when they state that they will cry for someone after they are gone. These relics of remembrance are described as tools, only activated periodically to elicit personal personal sorrow by those who continue to grieve for those they knew personally (Allard 2018). Warao do not work to recall the deceased as a former living relative; instead, they elicit sorrow to weep (Allard 2018 quoting Viveiros de Castro [1992, 200]). Remembering and disremembering are simultaneously engaged. Panará people also activated such capacities when rituals that arose would cause relatives to remember their dead kin and cry (Ewart 2013). These tools for remembering or eliciting sorrow are used intentionally for eliciting emotion as an ethical practice but also contained away from everyday sociality.

In the home where I lived throughout my research, the absence of one sister was consistently pointed to by the family. She had died after a long battle with cervical cancer, something which took her far from home, some twenty years before my arrival. I saw remnants of her there still, in the photographs displayed on her parents' hall walls, and in the stuffed toys kept by her infant son, now grown, or in the tea towels she once embroidered with messages of young lustful love and now used carefully by her mother in the kitchen. Or even how her sisters remarked on how beautiful her once-long hair was, telling me how they buried her with it. They turned and motioned down towards their ankles while detailing the monetary value her hair might have procured if they had instead sold it in Brazil, where she had eventually died.

This example was made especially present by the family with whom I lived. Still, it was not unusual for the Makushi people I knew to discuss and remember deceased persons in similar ways. In another instance, I arrived at the village after a period away in town and attended a Sunday morning service at the church. There, the mother of a recently deceased young man immediately left her seat in a pew and walked towards me. At first, she said nothing, moving assuredly into a full hug. I could feel her freshly bathed soft skin warm and heavy against my own. 'You know . . .', she then told me bluntly about her son's death. 'Yes,' I told her, 'I was in town; I had seen it in the papers: Annai teen dies in road mishap' - at which point she cut me off, asking in a seemingly disturbed way, 'Oh, and you didn't bring it for me to keep?' Given the significance placed in the regional literature on forgetting, I felt confused about why she and other Makushi kin seemed to desire these mementos. Perhaps it may be the case that attitudes are changing amongst younger generations, where desires to control memories of the dead are indeed increasingly in tension with desires to remember them (Conklin 2001). While this ambivalence that emerged in my experience of Makushi life around death has been largely undiscovered within more recent Makushi ethnographies, the body and its treatment are central to a consideration of death and related changes, which I will now discuss.

**Mourners and partygoers: bodies, death and change**

It has long been established that the body in Amazonia should be taken as a bundle of affects (Seeger et al. 1979). It has further been shown that the proper Makushi body is carefully constituted by following specific food prescriptions and avoiding particular social relations (Carneiro de Carvalho 2015). As explained by Grund, “being human is an unstable condition that depends on a balance of ‘proper’ food and ‘proper’ dialogue to create sociability” (Grund 2017, 227). However, in contrast to the properly social Makushi person, the category of oma’gon, often translated into English as ‘beast,’ is instead “perceived by their lack of control and moderation . . . They are too violent, greedy, and hungry. They eat too much, talk too much, and make too much noise” (Carneiro de Carvalho 2015, 138). Clear analogies might be drawn between the description herein and mourners’ perception of partygoers during the
wake that I described at the start. While I am not suggesting that the partygoers I described occupied a position of *omágon* in the instance of the wake, I am suggesting that they were possibly perceived similarly by those in mourning.

The opposition made between the affective states of mourners on the one hand and partygoers on the other correlates with related oppositions in bodily practices. This opposition in bodily practices and their correlation with emotional moral states seems to occur throughout the wider region. Barasana people too were said to gain gradual control of the body’s orifices across their lifecycle and as they began to enact the coordinated rhythms of community life (Hugh Jones 1979). Bodily activities signify affective dispositions for Panará people (Ewart 2013). Wari relatives of the deceased subdued activities like eating, singing, shouting, running, dancing, and attending parties. If they did not, they might be accused of not having proper emotional attachment or not having adequately cared for the deceased (Conklin 2001). Furthermore, the dead in Amazonia are frequently considered to be sightless, lonely, or perpetually hungry (Allard 2018; Conklin 2001; Taylor 1993). In the case of the Makushi wake I described at the start, it is precisely by way of feeling hunger or not, of being energetically and vocally subdued or not, that oppositions in affective states were drawn. Those persons in mourning seemed to be experiencing an oscillation in their ordinary perception of these otherwise ideal states of Makushi sociability, ones that their still-living co-villagers continued to enact.

However, if the Makushi person is understood to be made in the ways and through the sorts of actions I have outlined above, the Makushi person is also understood to be unmade by way of specific actions. These are understood as various malevolent agencies within a longstanding and enduring theme related to ideas about death in the anthropology of the Guianas. As Butt Colson writes, Akawaio people did not ask “what caused a particular death, but ‘who killed’ him or her?” (Butt Colson 2001, 226), or as Mentore puts the inevitable question for Waiwai people, “who done it?” (Mentore 2004, 143). And so too for Makushi people, who to this day understand all illness and death as occurring by way of malevolent agency. Daly explains that for Makushi people, “the idea that death results from a ‘natural’ process of bodily degeneration is superseded by the notion that a human life . . . can only be extinguished by a homicidal agent” (Daly 2015, 285). While death throughout the Guianas is always “attributed to some form of causal intervention . . . for the Circum-Roraima people, [this] is associated with kanaima, or kanaimi, as the Makushi call it” (Grund 2017, 225). Perhaps most documented in the work of anthropologist Neil Whitehead, *kanaimî*, a form of “assault sorcery” (Whitehead 2002, 205), refers most generally either to a specific set of ritual practices focused on the mutilation of the body or the practitioners of such techniques themselves, and carries with it corresponding imaginaries of terror and cruelty (Whitehead 2002). It makes good sense, given our understanding of the Makushi body and its relation to personhood, that death-dealing *kanaima* techniques “invert the human condition through an incontinent mouth and incontinent anus (victims of this form of death) become mute, and intestines are usually pulled out through the anus), which mean a lack of sociality through uncontrolled poisons and a denial of social dialogue” (Grund 2017, 227). However, along what I suggest be taken as a gradient of death-dealing agency, *kanaima* seems to occupy its most extreme form.

Stafford-Walter points out that various human and non-human agents are known to inflict death on human persons (Stafford-Walter 2018). It is worth drawing especially on one case this author provides about the heart-wrenching account of a child who drowned in a well in the Wapishana village of Sand Creek (Bacchiddu et al. 2023). In this case, the child’s family lamented having sent the child to fetch water (something that, in my experience, is done routinely in numerous family homes) and not properly listening to the child’s sibling, who tried to warn them of what was happening (again something of frequent occurrence when
caught in the rhythms of the day to day). It is this aspect, the way the family considered their possible fault for the death, that is so poignantly captured in the account provided and one that is under-emphasised within the literature on death in the Guianas. That is, the affective experiences surrounding the loss of loved ones, particularly of those intimate family members and, as I will show, also their efforts in sustaining the values of the wider community in and through these periods of grief. This is not to say that at some level, malevolent agency was not ultimately responsible; rather, death and the many reasons for it are multi-layered, and one explanation does not exclude others. However, the family did not seem to elaborate on *kanaima* in this particular case, only their allocation of care, or possibly lack thereof.

While *kanaima* is certainly an important layer to understanding ideas about death in the region (Butt Colson 2001; Janik 2018; Whitaker 2017, 2020, 2021; Whitehead 2002), it seems to me that it has also overshadowed the possibility of exploring the fuller range of human experiences that surround death. I draw on the above account because it echoes how those Makushi people I know experienced death, where family members frequently questioned to what extent they were responsible for allocating sufficient care or generosity after the loss of a loved one, and co-villagers might even make the same speculations. The co-resident family members of the recently deceased person must convince each other, and villagers from household clusters further away, that they are still persons capable of enacting safe and highly valued sociability, and this is the case especially after death. *Kanaima* is usually relegated to those outside the domain of proper Makushi village social life. I am interested here in attending to the affective states of those most closely related to the deceased person and their efforts at maintaining relations with their still-living resident co-villagers during the moments surrounding death.

It is fundamental, still, to draw on how these ideas about the malevolent agency that surrounds death for Circum-Roraima people “retain it as something to be dealt with at the level of social conflict” (Stafford-Walter 2018, 89). As Butt Colson points out, it is “vital to consider the various types of relationships that give rise to death-dealing activities and to define what, for the communities concerned, constitutes ‘the inside’ and ‘the outside’ (Butt Colson 2001, 230). Death amongst Akawaio communities was said to foster a full-blown political-social context of unravelling. The basic tenet is that communities, however drawn, have outside enemies who intend to separate vitality from its material base. Death upsets the balance between insider friendly relations characterised by the institutionalised proper sharing of food and outsider relations characterised by suspicion and envy.

Village communities were once defined as the basic social unit in the region. They were short-lived, lasting rarely more than ten years, and given the occurrence of dispute or conflict, especially after death, were known to break apart and move to avoid conflict (Rivière 1984, 1995). The village could be taken as a sorcery-free unit (Rivière 1970). However, as Carneiro de Carvalho (2015) points out for the Makushi villages of today, “there is constant pressure to become stationary. Securing land rights and access to public services, such as health care and education, motivate Makushi families to establish less nomadic lifestyles” (2015, 138). I was told that up until the 1980s, people lived in houses right next to the village pond during the dry season when water levels receded, and then when the pond would flood during the rainy season, they would all go away to their farming places at the ‘mountain foot’. But because of school and opportunities for wage labour, everyone began to stay, and people didn’t migrate like they did before. The typical homes of today, for those who can afford them, are made from cement and roofed with zinc, which are materials that are not only acquired through cash purchase but are also meant to endure for much more extended periods of time in villages made stationary due to opportunities for cash employment, health posts and village schools.

Roth describes the death of a middle-aged woman in Nappi village during the mid-nineteenth century, located in the same region I am describing today. Relatives burned all artefacts that

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8. It is important to note here that this refers to the family of the deceased rather than the deceased themselves, which sets it apart from the idea of suicide, something which is altogether very different in the region and beyond the scope of this article.

9. While I focus here on the sociological and affective aspects that surround death, the cosmological aspects that surround death seem to follow a similar logic, namely, that of separating vitality from its material base. These cosmological ideas outline the Makushi person as constituted by a body which encompasses multiple ancillary souls, it is only through the separation of vital life force from the body that death occurs (see Daly 2015; Whitaker 2021).
There are a host of possible reasons why this inversion takes place. It could be related to differences in Waiwai and Makushi responses to social conflict in stationary villages, or it could be the different historical moments in which these ethnographies were produced, and there could, of course, be gendered implications as well. However, both ethnographic offerings demonstrate that indigenous people here are concerned with how to continue living well together after death.

Mentore (2004) describes the Waiwai oho-kari (Fock 1963), a ceremonial dialogue performed after each death, as a response to the predatory words of erem, and one that announces the community’s social solidarity. This formal dialogue of lament entailed a closely related male relative of the deceased, who sat on a low stool not more than a few feet away from another man, voicing a speech that ended in first a rise and then a fall of pitch, speaking in a declarative tone, questioning. His partner responded with a speech of affirmative friendliness. Following this formula, the oho dialogue of lament allowed the relatives of the deceased to interrogate the other household clusters within the village. They, in turn, were given the formal opportunity to affirm their innocence and demonstrate the community’s solidarity in producing collective social harmony. Until this lament for the dead had been performed, everyone beyond the co-resident relatives of the deceased was suspect and “what the close relatives of the dead want most from those outside their household cluster and from those within their village community is reassurance of amicable relations toward their being” (Mentore 2004, 146). While this indicates the commitment to collective social harmony between those most closely related to the deceased and those in further household clusters within the village, the direction the interrogation takes is directly inverse to the one which I consider here. While Mentore considers the interrogation that the deceased’s family directs toward villagers beyond their household, I show that the deceased’s family members strive to prove their innocence to the village community that lives beyond their homes and do so in the space of the wake they host.10

An internal affective divide is evident, however, in the moments that surround death in the stationary villages of today. In Makushi wakes, this is rendered and achieved through carefully manipulating food consumption and corresponding enactments of sociability. This allows for transitory moments to be stressed and also ultimately “enable the social fabric to be cut and resewn . . . the person [in mourning] is not only accepting their insertion into a new realm of social relatedness, they are also reconfiguring the category of person [they] previously occupied” (Carneiro de Carvalho 2015, 138). Death is, throughout the region, a catalyst for profound social change and “the tight web of mutual dependency and availability that makes life good is precisely what needs to be carefully disentangled at the death of a kinsperson in order for it to be rewoven by the living” (Bacchiddu et al. 2023, 18). I will show that it is in the oscillation in the perception of bodily dispositions and their correlative emotional states in the moments surrounding death, along with their subsequent fixing, that this is achieved for Makushi persons in the stationary villages of today. To provide a more situated context for this argument, I will now describe some things I learned about Makushi wakes.

Preparing the burial ground

Death for Makushi people is somewhat familiar and proximate. It happens with some regularity, and to those with whom one is related or with whom one lives and works in some capacity. Yet, after a close family member dies, often described by their body first having started to swell and then becoming eventually short of breath, relatives seem to be overcome with grief. In the village where I worked, a gong was rung, sounding the death to the community of listeners,
and then, depending on the social proximity of the death relative to one's residence, you might also begin to hear screams and shrieks emanating from the women belonging to the household of the deceased. This once happened in the case of a death within the family with whom I lived. We heard wailing from the household kitchen on the hilltop above us. Upon hearing this sound, all the women's children and grandchildren living around her ran to comfort her. Another more distantly related family member had told me coolly that she had known that the death was bound to happen for a long time by then, so she was not sad. And yet, in these moments after death, while those closest to the deceased are overcome with grief, they and their immediate kin, along with their friends, are called to organise funerary arrangements (see also Lambek 2018 on this orientation towards the living). In Amazonia, more broadly, organising seems to have been left mainly to affinal relatives, close kin characterised as being too sad. But in my work with Makushi people, I witnessed the deceased's immediate family drawn into the labour of participating in the organisation of these events in specific tension-filled ways.

Following death, close kinpersons contact living family members of the deceased, some of whom might be far away working in cities or towns, and wait for them to book tickets to return home and see the body before burial. The priest or catechist is contacted, and service is scheduled. There is sometimes difficulty in timing this because only one priest is shared amongst a large region, and sometimes more improvised services must be held. Materials are collected and include wood for the coffin, cement for the above-ground tomb, and a site designated within the burial ground. Efforts are made to reclaim the burial site within the cemetery after a death occurs because the burial ground is otherwise not a place often visited by the community. This involves meticulously cleaning, clearing weeds, pulling and cutting the grass short, erecting shade awnings, and constructing tombs.

On one occasion, I assisted with cleaning and remodelling the tomb within its site, where a father was placed to rest above an infant son who had died several years before. The tomb was fortified with wet cement and made smooth by pulling a piece of wood across it. The name of the deceased and dates were etched into its top, and then it was left to dry and finally painted in a fresh coat of white. While there, the grave sites of other relatives were pointed out to me, and I was told how, at first, one family member had died, and then the next one, and that it kept happening from that point onwards. It was like a curse, each one successively after the first one had occurred. I was also told of dreams where already deceased community members were said to have been waiting for the even more recently deceased members, welcoming them there and perhaps calling out to those severely ill or thought to die soon. People were careful after death, knowing that the dead would call others there to join them. The oldest grave in the burial ground lacked the characteristic above-ground cement-made tomb. Instead, a large portion of the earth had crumbled such that a kayembe tree above the grave had flourished, and I was told that the now-deceased Auntie must have eventually grown into it.

In villages, coffins and tombs were constructed mainly by immediate family members or relatives, depending on who might have supplies and tools. Often, these constructions took on a somewhat improvised nature, and there was one such case where the coffin did not slide into its tomb during a burial as it should have. Hours were then spent simultaneously attempting to force the coffin into it and reconstruct the tomb, so the coffin would fit. All the while, mourners continued to cry and sing softly in a circle around the body, even while a short distance away from the centre, some of us found more shaded places to wait out the ordeal. However, these coffins and tombs, and the overall production of the grave site, were communal efforts and, hence, less commodified than in nearby towns. When a family member passed away in the frontier town, Lethem, the expenses were described as being particularly prohibitive. The arrangements for a proper burial became a source of intensified stress for the responsible family members of the deceased, who explained that back home in the village there would be people to help and that you do not have to pay for everything.
Wake nights

Starting from the period just after the death occurs, continuing throughout the arrangements for a service and burial, and until the burial of the body itself, a wake is held nightly within the home of the deceased and hosted by their co-resident family members. These wake nights are considered to be Anglican and often referred to as ‘nine nights.’ This reference to ‘nine nights’ further points towards the acquisition and blending by Makushi people of funerary practices characteristically practised by Guyanese coastlanders. During this period, the spirit14 of the dead person is said to remain amongst the living. Many Makushi people in the North Rupununi, and particularly in the village where I resided, identify as Anglicans. It is important to note, however, that these Anglican rituals are inflected with a complex history explored in the literature as “shamanically inflected aspects of Christianity” (Whitaker 2021, 83; see also Staats 2003). These wake nights take place for all the community members who come to visit over the course of the wake period. Making an appearance at the home of the deceased and paying respect to the family is not necessarily an index of intimacy, but rather something people living in the community are expected to do. Recall, from the scene I began this article with, how I once felt it inappropriate to attend a wake, given my assumption that it was a highly intimate event. At another moment, I was indirectly reprimanded for not having gone to visit a home hosting a wake night and thus realised the social significance of attendance for all co-resident villagers, regardless of social proximity to the bereaved family.

Wakes for Makushi people are perceptual events. Importantly, they are centred around an emphasis on viewing the body, taken quite literally and at great pains. Each time I attended a wake, the body was placed in its casket on a platform within the room where the deceased person had previously slept. The caskets used for burial have a glass pane built into them to see the face inside the wooden frame, which would otherwise obstruct the view of the body once inside the coffin. All visitors make their way to this sleeping room, a space which is otherwise a more private area of the home. Often, these visitors will take pictures of the visible face and comment on the body’s state. For example, in the case of one woman who died in the Georgetown public hospital but whose body was flown back to her village, it was routinely commented that her body had slid out of the correct position, so she looked crooked. Indeed, another time, I was called to help a woman use a deceased person’s clothes to pack around the body within the coffin so that the body would lie straight and not slide when moved.

That the corpse is presented during the wake only heightens the perceptual quality of the event. Given the climate of the Rupununi, the body’s stench and decomposition become salient features. However, Makushi people make significant efforts to contain the ever-increasing stench of the body and its decomposition. They do so by keeping the body on ice and making efforts to hasten burial preparations before the stench becomes too strong, something that is itself blatantly discussed. In one sudden and unexpected death, a teenage boy was killed in a motorcycle accident on the main road. His death coincided with the most significant annual inter-village football tournament, and the decision to carry on with the event was taken, postponing his funerary arrangements for several days. For all other wakes and funerals that I attended during my time in the village, public meetings and events were cancelled to attend to the death. But, like in other Amazonian contexts, this seems to be related mainly to the deceased’s social age. In the case of a newborn baby who had died, I was told by the mother that hardly anyone participated in the funeral, given that he was only a baby and, therefore, that he barely knew anyone at all. However, in the case of the adolescent boy, the amount of time his body was kept before burial made it impossible for the family to properly control the stench that began to emanate from his body. I did not attend this wake or subsequent burial, being away in the capital city with a friend seeking medical services. Still, I was told by several people afterwards about the stench of the body and about how the church building
had smelled so strongly during the service, his body already decomposing. When I went to his grave later on, bottles of cologne had been brought and laid at the front of his tomb. While the smell of the body and its decomposition were characteristic of wakes, efforts were also taken to avoid the smell of the body, to ‘keep it’, even in the humid and hot temperatures of the Guyanese wetlands, to signal adequate care provision by the family after death.

Crucially, throughout the duration of these wake nights, the hosts must ensure that enough food and drink have been provisioned so that all the guests that might come to visit the home feel adequately hosted. Hosts ensure that the house and its surroundings are maintained and properly cleaned. All of this, of course, can often come at sudden and great expense, and requires intensive effort. I once heard members of a family explaining to each other, almost as motivation, after the death of an immediate co-resident relative about the obligation to open the home, saying that, “They’ll see how we’re keeping our own area, our own ecosystem.”

To host, even when mourning

For families with inadequate access to readily available financial means, these sudden and necessary funeral requirements can be incredibly challenging and especially shame-inducing. Often, families who do not have access to the required funds might otherwise be renowned for having meticulously productive farms or for being especially renowned fishermen. But these activities were explained as being necessarily curtailed after the death of close kinspersons. Family members were expected, not only not to engage in productive work and, therefore, perform proper care and attachment, but also were not considered strong enough. Engaging in these activities would make them further vulnerable to malevolent forces that especially occupy the forest farms or the farther forests of hunting grounds. In one instance, a relative of a recently deceased person had gone to his farm but had come back having caught an intense fright15, and remained in his hammock in his sleeping house for days afterwards. And yet, many families break this taboo to be able to provide appropriately for the wake, it being their only possible means of doing so.

When I once accompanied a family, who went on a fishing trip in the period just before they were expected to host a wake, they hinted that this activity would be disapproved of, however they still went in order to adequately provide. The spirit of the dead person had come to visit them and had come to ask his family for roasted fish in the night. The following morning, when the husband returned home with plenty of fish to host the wake night properly, his wife was angry at him for having gone out and caught so much fish and, in turn, given her plenty of work to do while she was so weak and grief-stricken. While she, her sisters, and daughters did indeed clean and roast the fish, she seemed to do so rather unhappily. The wife, for her part, contributed a multitude of store-bought boxes of saltine crackers as food for the wake, something I had not seen purchased for ordinary consumption on other occasions.

While having a sufficient supply of food and drink becomes a part of adequately hosting and an extension of performing the ability to have properly cared for the deceased before and after death, when possible, store-bought provisions are preferred. Such that even women, who might ordinarily disapprove of high-proof alcohols brought over from Brazil and circulating widely in the community, would purchase these items if they were responsible for hosting a wake instead of or in addition to producing local fermented drink like pari kari, if at all possible. Indeed, attending a wake to eat or drink voraciously was often commented on disapprovingly by hosts, and it was explained that there were always people who would come just to have their little fun.

Foods provided during wakes were often limited in such a way that they were minia-
turised, cut into small portions that signified a snack rather than a meal, like the crackers I

15. Strong emotions cause a Makushi person’s yektong to dislodge from the body and may cause bodily transformation (Bacchiddu et al. 2023; Whitaker 2021).
mentioned, or even pierced with toothpicks to connote delicate finger foods in the form of sugar cane balls made with store-bought sugar, or roasted pieces of chicken, as in the wake I described at the start. If possible, wake foods were somehow set apart from the more common everyday foods that necessitated visiting the farm, pond, or farther hunting grounds and the labour involved in procuring and processing such foods. The expense demanded by holding a proper wake and burial was, in many ways, quite prohibitive. Families did break taboos around productive activities to properly provide as hosts of the wake, especially if they did not have access to cash. However, this was fraught with social tensions, opening those already grief-stricken to further dangers.

The potential financial difficulty felt by families in their efforts to properly host immediately after the death of a close kinsperson was drawn out one day, in particular, by the region’s priest during a Sunday morning service held in the central Annai village Anglican church. He noted, during a kind of rant, that he, in his seventies, was preparing for death, even while he continued to be blessed by God with life, pointing out how it was that youths were dying all around him. In his moral framing, he shared that he wanted to prepare properly for death ahead of time, and so, too, for its corresponding financial commitments. With this foresight, he asked to buy two cattle from the parish herd now, so that when he eventually died, he would be ready for his wake, and everyone would easily eat. However, this was seen as a kind of unethical accumulation of wealth by the parishioners and how they envisioned the purpose of the herd. A woman from the congregation forcefully replied that she did not want this to happen; it was a terrible idea. If they let him purchase the cattle, then everyone would start buying up all the cattle, each person would acquire one, two, for their eventual wake. What they wanted was for the herd to multiply. This example further pointed to the tensions in separating feeding and the corresponding financial commitments surrounding moments of death, significantly when such productive activities should be curtailed.16

However, those most closely related to the deceased strive to provide adequately, especially, as I suggest, because no one is more suspected by the community during the moments surrounding death than the deceased’s family. As I have discussed, death for Makushi people is surrounded by suspicions that, at a minimum, signal neglect or improper care provision, if not more blatant intentional malevolence. Families demonstrate, through the proper provisioning of wake foods, and clean and open space, that it could not be through neglect or lack of adequate care provision that the death occurred, but rather that they instead did everything to ameliorate an externally perceived ‘hit.’ Given this, the opening of the home during the wake is a critically vulnerable moment to open oneself and one’s house, displaying adequate food provisions and overall hygienic standards, all exposed for inspection by the rest of the community. The opening of the home thus further facilitates a dynamic between the hosts and their guests that carries significant implications related to aspects of health and illness.

When Makushi people open their homes as hosts under more lively circumstances, especially in the form of collective work parties, or matraman,17 for clearing farms or repairing houses, but also on the occasion of birthdays, marriages, games and festivals, they go to great lengths to demonstrate that they have sufficient food, drink, seats, and the capacity to host and care for others properly. Doing so necessitates being able to either produce or buy, maintain and distribute a supply of foodstuffs, which unfolds wider networks of reciprocity characterised by respect. Not denying anyone is of central importance, as is ensuring all guests feel adequately hosted. Not properly hosting the attending guests demonstrates a lack of capacity to care adequately and fosters accusations by the guests towards the hosts. Hosts in such cases become increasingly suspected as the cause of the death of close kin members, evident in the present neglect. Furthermore, hosts strive to avoid guests feeling improperly hosted because such feelings are a way of potentially instigating a subsequent hurt. It is this lack of care and generosity that prompts illness and death. When a guest feels improperly hosted or denied,
This is also cause for prompting a further attack. For example, a young wife had once denied an older woman’s request for her cooking pot. She rejected this request because she was newly married, had a child, and only had one cooking pot herself. Regardless of the young woman’s reasons, her denial prompted an attack, the cause of the sickness she carries until this day.

The responsibility that lies upon the family to demonstrate adequate provision of care during life continues during the period immediately following a relative’s death, such that food, drink, and hygienic requirements, burial arrangements, the keeping of the corpse, its decomposition and the control of its stench, the casket with glass pane for viewing, are all aspects that either highlight the ability to have properly cared or not, before and also after, death. The relative success of achieving this then signals the direction of blame either towards or away from the family, and is a big part of why Makushi relatives are drawn into producing the funerary event. The wake works as a venue for ascertaining whether neglect is apparent in the home and, therefore, where blame and causation regarding death should be directed.

However, I also want to emphasise how the hosts feel this pressure to enact such a role after the death of a close kinsmember, with the accompanying sudden expense or the difficulty of obtaining the necessary materials to perform a dignified death for close kin. Sometimes, achieving all these tasks becomes an impossibility, especially given the difficulties in accessing financial means and the curtailment of activities related to subsistence food production. But still, often, because of the significance of not being able to display such evidence of care provision both concerning the individual’s death and its cause, but also the family’s ongoing relationship with the rest of the community, the family strives to provide as best they can.

Drawing a previous time in contrast

Eventually, I asked people if they always remembered deaths, funerals, and wakes like they were now. In response, they recalled a previous time before Christianity had changed everything, and drew contrasts between significant features of the past and the present day. In the past, people would have never gone to eat in the dead person’s house, mainly because their house and all its inhabitants would have been considered dirty. The gradient in affective proximity to the deceased person was not only felt but rendered visible by Makushi people through the use of body paints. Roth (1924) notes that those closest to the deceased would have painted their bodies head to foot in annatto, while those at a next remove, only painted their feet, legs, and arms. Finally, those most distantly related painted only their hands and feet. The deceased’s family were considered dangerous, especially for pregnant women, their unborn foetus, and the foetus’s fathers, who were expected to avoid interacting with them. Physical proximity between these categories of persons would yield negative consequences made apparent by the growing baby’s swelling stomach, diarrhoea, and eventual soft feet, which would cause them to walk neither early nor far. For instance, if someone were walking on the road and about to encounter the deceased’s family, they would have walked far out of the way to avoid them. Furthermore, after someone died during this previous time when they “only had yams to eat,” they would burn the corpse in the middle of the house and then burn down the whole house; that’s when they would all move away. Now, in contrast, people get all close together. They go right into the home of the dead to eat and they hold the wake there every night after the death until the corpse is buried.

In the past, Makushi people attempted to produce a clear rupture between the deceased and the living. This is pointed to in the way community members recalled past deaths and in the account of Makushi death practices provided by Roth (1924). Taken together, these include the destruction of personal possessions, keeping distance from the relatives of the deceased who were marked with paint, speaking roughly to the corpse, and blocking orifices such as the ears and mouth. All of this would have been seemingly in line with more characteristically Amazonian practices surrounding death and facilitating the work of disremembering.

18. This seems a highly-valued characteristic for Makushi people and it is worth considering Carneiro de Carvalho’s (2015) description of practices that would further facilitate this attribute.
The contrast with today’s times also points to a time when such efforts were somehow more possible. While the expression ‘when only yams were eaten’ seems to be somewhat of an exaggeration, it seems to me that the phrase suggests a time when people did not purchase a range of additional foodstuffs with cash, as they do now. But also, a time when homes themselves were more routinely built with forest materials and regularly abandoned and rebuilt as part of routine agricultural cycles. Indeed, in the case described, it is explained that the widower of the deceased Makushi woman was said to mourn for a duration of nine to eleven months, a time explained with reference to how long it takes for a new field of cassava, planted just after the wife’s death, to be harvested and processed into fermented drink, and collectively consumed in celebration of the next marriage (Roth 1924), thus properly drawing mourning to a close.

Conclusion

Makushi persons in Guyana are engaged in tense practices that work both to remember and disremember the dead, and these have changed over time. In the past, an otherwise characteristically Amazonian radical cutting off from the dead was made evident through the destruction of the deceased’s possessions, the burning of the home, and their families eventually moving away. All of which provided a distancing between what were considered to be polluting elements of the dead and the rest of the living community.

I have shown how, in today’s primarily stationary villages, the distance between the living and the dead, particularly their still-living family members and the rest of the still-living community, is rendered much more proximate. Indeed, the deceased’s family will host a wake within their home, which will continue to be used and probably not be abandoned. In doing so, the deceased’s family opens themselves up to the inspection of the entire community. They strive to make wooden coffins that are meant to endure, they embalm corpses and keep them atop beds of ice, they construct cement tombs above ground and mark these tombs with the names of the deceased and the dates they lived, as well as the names of relatives that remain living. Keepsakes like photographs and other nostalgic or commodity goods that once belonged to the deceased are cherished for a whole host of different reasons. However, I also show that specific Makushi ideas about death have endured over time, specifically the social tensions that arise when death is understood to occur only through malevolent agency, as the literature has shown time after time. However, the literature on death for the indigenous peoples of Guyana tends to focus primarily on the issue of kanaima (Janik 2018; Whitaker 2017, 2020, 2021; Whitehead 2002), something that I suggest is an extreme form on a gradient of possible kinds of death. My focus instead has been on describing the more subtle everyday affective and sociological dimensions and tensions that occur between the family of the deceased and the household clusters that continue to live around them. I consider how these groups work to continue living together even after a death occurs and its enduring social tensions play out. While this has been explored in the case of Waiwai people (Mentore 2004), I have also shown that the direction of accusation does not always point from the deceased’s family outwards to those who live beyond them. Instead, it can be pointed from the community towards the deceased’s family. These tensions are especially apparent in the Makushi wake space of today, where the community questions the dead’s home, their still-living family members, hygienic practices, and the capacity to provide foodstuffs. Is the deceased’s family able to enact the care that the living require to go on living? Even in mourning, the deceased’s relatives strive to host adequately, announcing to all that sufficient care was indeed provided at home and will continue to be. Simultaneously, however, a charged notion may also arise: is it possible that co-villagers in divergent affective states are having too much fun at the expense of mourning family members of the deceased?
Ultimately, I show how an internal affective divide between the family of the deceased and those living in further household clusters is produced during the wake within the space of the home, and that this divide is itself produced through the enactment of opposed bodily dispositions, namely, those associated with either mourning or party-going. I have argued, however, that rather than being a form of moral disorder, the divergence in affective states produces safely circumscribed expressions of grief by encircling mourners with those who continue to enact Makushi people’s most highly valued social capacities. I argue, furthermore, that this affective divide is an enduring feature that remains in the grief work of Makushi people, even given otherwise significant changes in funerary practices. That is, the affective boundary of grief that in the past was kept spatially apart through distance, destruction, and movement, is today rendered proximate in the space of the wake held at home, and its transformation helps people cope with these changes.
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