Mackenzie Jones

Final Paper

Comparative Religion

15 December 2016

**Death and Dying in the Ndebele people and Cult of Santa Muerte**

The way groups of people view death and dying are influenced by several things and vary from group to group. Geographical location, culture, religious beliefs and practices, core values, lifestyles, among others can all influence the way in which an individual or group views and interacts with death and dying. A rich, suburban United States citizen will probably have a different attitude and interaction with death than a poor, hungry person in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. The quality of life (i.e. if one is living in poverty), culture, and religious beliefs and practices all have a significant effect on how groups of people view and interact with death. There are other factors that influence one’s view and interaction with death, but the focus of this paper will be on these with regards to the cult of Santa Muerte and the Ndebele people of Southern Africa. Because of their similarities in being historically impoverished and colonized by Christian populates, the Ndebele people and the followers of Santa Muerte have several commonalities in their view and interaction with death and dying, though there are some cultural differences.

The Ndebele people are a group in Southern Africa that split from the Zulu chiefdom in the early 19th century. They are a people group characterized by their belief in “the survival of the personality beyond death and…the spirits of the departed actually communicate with the living. Above all they influence their day to day activities.” (Bozongwana, Foreword) In short, in the Ndebele religion and culture there are the living living and the living dead, the latter being those that have died and transitioned to the next stage of life as an ancestor. “Ancestral spirits are a go-between God and the living, although stress is on the immortality of human beings and their potentiality as gods after death”. (Bozongwana, 17) This belief is complimented by practices rich in the use of symbols (including totems for clans and families), taboos, signs (especially in the form of dreams), omens, prayer to the ancestors and special rituals for healing.

The cult of Santa Muerte is a group of people mostly concentrated in Mexico and the south-western United States who call on and worship the folk saint either as complimentary to their catholic faith or as a faith in and of itself. Followers call on her as a saint who “heals, protects, and delivers devotees to their destinations in the afterlife.” (Chesnut, 7) Followers perform rituals with a shrine to the Bony Lady to ask for favors (like healing, revenge, prolonging of life, etc.) with specially colored candles made for different requests. It is estimated that five percent of the Mexican population are followers of Santa Muerte, reaching about five million people (Chesnut, 9)

Most broadly, there is a similarity between the two groups in that they each have a relatively accepting view of death that has less fear than many other people groups or religions. In the Mexican tradition there is a story of a father searching for a godfather for his child, and on his search he encounters God and Satan and refuses both. However, when he encounters Death, he sees him as a friend. “ ‘I am death, who makes everyone equal.’ The father of thirteen responds enthusiastically, ‘you are the right one. You take away the rich as well as the poor, without distinction. You shall be my child’s godfather.’” (Chesnut, 164) This mindset is mirrored in the followers of Santa Muerte who see death as one who “walks alongside us” (Professor Eduardo Garcia-Villada, Nov. 17) and is not something to fight or be feared. Similarly, the Ndebele people do not see death as an event to be feared because death is “the beginning of a person’s deeper relationship with all of creation” (Anderson, 1). Death begins a new stage of life, hopefully as an ancestor, which an accepted and welcomed aspect of existence.

What’s more, there are many similarities in the interaction with death between the two people groups. In general terms the two groups have a close, usually daily interaction with death through praying, asking for favors (like healing), talking to death or the recently dead, and rituals to death or the living dead. In general, both groups pray and interact with those who are no longer living on this earth through rituals or otherwise. The Ndebele people pray and worship the living dead to ask for guidance, signs, and healing. The followers of Santa Muerte use rituals with shrines to talk to Saint Death and ask her for favors, wisdom, healing, revenge, etc. The everyday lives of both groups are characterized by personal interaction with those who are no longer living (or death itself) for things that they want or need. More specifically, each use certain rituals to ask for healing: the Ndebele have specific actions to take to ask the ancestors for healing, and the followers of Santa Muerte use a colored candle and follow a procedure followed to ask the saint for health and healing. What’s more, both have an emphasis on the use of symbols relating to the dead. The Ndebele people, for example, exalt snakes as a symbol of the dead (Bozongwana, 11) Likewise, the cult of Santa Muerte use shrines with skeleton dolls or figures dressed as the saint to use in worship and rituals. These symbols are essential in the interaction with dead or the recent dead and are seen as ways in which to reach those in a different realm.

The two peoples are also characterized by a special, intimate relationship to death. The followers of Santa Muerte talk directly with death through prayer and ritual and plead for help or thank her for blessings in a personal, emotional way. More specifically, the women in the cult of Santa Muerte perhaps have an even more intimate and personal connection with the saint because of their shared gender. There is a disproportionate amount of women in the cult of Santa Muerte, and one of the core rituals and favors asked of the saint is that of women begging the Body Lady to avenge male lovers gone astray. (Chesnut, 123) This could be evidence that the similarity in gender (which is uncommon for women) provides a special relationship between female followers and the Saint. For the Ndebele people, there is a particular connection between the living living and the living dead because the ancestors are past family members, creating close, personal relationships across the line of death. When a grandmother or grandfather dies one can still communicate with them though they are in a different stage of life, and it is known that they have wisdom and guidance that can help their family.

With each people group there is a similarity in that Christian groups have colonized them at some point, which has caused a mingling of newer Christian culture and beliefs with the respective ancient cultures and religions from each region. As highlighted by Professor Eduardo Garcia-Villada in his Comparison project lecture, modern-day Mexican culture and the cult of Santa Muerte is comprised largely of the mixing of ancient Aztec culture, whose people inhabited the land for most of recorded history, and more recent Roman Catholic culture and beliefs from Christian colonialism in more recent history. There are many similarities in the ancient goddesses of death in the Aztec culture and the folk saint, especially with regards to gender and the entity she personifies (specifically death or dying). Though some worship Saint Death alone, many followers of the Bony Lady see their worship of her as complimentary to their foundationally Catholic faith, like the respect and worship a Catholic pays to any other saint. There is a tension, however, between the predominantly Catholic environment and the cult. Many Catholics who do not believe in Saint Death see those who do as Satanists, that worshiping death is the same as worshiping the Devil and many do not support it. The Ndebele people have a similar tension, in that (especially with regards to western medicine) the healing rituals done by some of the Zulu people are seen as futile and ridiculous by those who are more inclined to Western Christianity and culture. The two groups have a rich history of ancient beliefs and practices that have been intertwined with Christianity at some point and now the two are mingling, but there is some tension between the newer practices and beliefs discrediting the beliefs and practices of the other.

One difference in the views of death and dying between the two groups is the belief in what specifically causes death in an individual. In Herbert Moyo’s lecture he spoke at length that the Ndebele people see time as the cause of death, not a medical mistake or something going wrong. In their view, the ancestors have set a specific time for each person to die and (no matter the circumstances surrounding the death) no one can change that time. Once one has reached their appointed time they will die, and that is accepted as irrefutable. However, it is much less specific in the cult of Santa Muerte and there is much more diversity in opinions from individual to individual (similar to other sects of Christianity, where many people will explain death’s cause in different ways). Some see God as the cause of death through judgment of their actions, others see Santa Muerte as the one taking them (La Santa Muerte, documentary), some see their own actions influencing their death, etc. The view of death in the Ndebele culture is very specific and slightly different than some mainstream Christian views of death, who are usually more intent on freewill being a factor of when one dies, rather than saying that an individual has no control whatsoever and their appointed time will come regardless.

The biggest difference between the two groups is their culture. The two groups are influenced by the ancient cultures and religions that were present on their respective land bases and the way in which Christian colonialism interacted with that culture. The cult of Santa Muerte (and the surrounding Mexican culture) has some aspects of the ancient Aztec culture, especially in its focus on and celebration of death and dying. In popular culture there are many symbols of death and skeletons (things like kids games that have the grim reaper as a common character) and, most famous, the Day of the Dead celebration that is incredibly popular. However, there are large influences of Western Christianity and culture in the way in which people interact with their religion and Deity. The individualism that is pervasive in western culture is also present in the cult of Santa Muerte, and can be seen in the things they ask for from their Saint. Things like revenge, money, health and personal well-being are all quite self-focused, much like the rest of western culture whose core is the freedom of the individual. The saint serves the roles of “physician, employment broker, love doctor…avenging angel and the patron of justice” (Chesnut, 25). However, the Ndebele people and religion revolve around the family or clan, less individualistic and more community oriented. Because of the ancient African culture there is an emphasis on ancestors and lineage instead of the individual like much of western culture. This is also reflected in the things the Ndebele people expect and ask for from their ancestors. Many times it is for guidance for them and their family as a unit, for wisdom and healing. (Bozongwana, 2) There is a significant difference in the culture of the two groups in that the followers of Santa Muerte have a focus on individualism more than the Ndebele people who are focused on a communal, family oriented life.

There are a few possible explanations for the cause of the similarity in the view of death between the two groups (i.e. a more welcoming, accepting view of death, seeing it at something that “walks along side us”). Christian groups who have made efforts to convert and change the culture of the land, as I have stated previously, have colonized both of the people groups. Additionally, both groups of people are relatively impoverished compared to other nations, shown in the low rates of education of the Ndebele people (The Long Search) and the high drug and crime rate in Mexico (La Santa Muerte). The poverty problem is so prevalent in Mexico that the illegal sale of narcotics and the gangs that accompany it are a staple of Mexican culture. It seems as though living in poverty gives these two groups a similar, more accepting view of death. If one is poor, death does not take away much as it does when one is rich, which could account for the intense fear of death present in American culture, where it is uncommon to find someone who is accepting or welcoming of death. Death is almost a taboo in American culture because of the fear that surrounds it. In the section on the Mexican folklore story about the father who chose Death as the godfather of his child, Chesnut specifically highlights that he was poor and that God wasn’t a good choice because God favors “the rich while letting the poor starve.” (164) Death is the one thing that makes everyone equal, the rich and poor alike. When poverty (and, in the case of present-day Mexico, drugs and gang violence) rules one’s life it is much easier to accept death because it is not taking away an abundance of possessions and comfort. The unknown is less scary because there is a possibility that the new realm is better than the life lived on earth. This level of acceptance because of poverty is built on the beliefs the two groups have of a life after death. For the Ndebele, it is the fact that life does not end after death; rather it is the transition into a new and different realm of the living dead in which, hopefully, life continues as an ancestor. For the followers of Santa Muerte, it is the security that their Saint Death will carry them into their new life after they die to a more blissful realm, usually purgatory or heaven (La Santa Muerte). The knowledge that after death one will transition into a better realm of life with the reality that life on earth is difficult and painful for the poor combines for an acceptance of death, sometimes even welcoming its bringing of a change in scenery.

As discussed earlier in short, there is a tension in the beliefs and practices between the Christian influences from colonialism and the ancient beliefs and practices that preceded colonialism. This tension also shapes the current culture of each group, with influences from the different beliefs, practices and histories. Colonization has had a significant impact on the two groups in that the ancient beliefs have been morphed and tainted, the lasting remnants of the beliefs are often discredited by the influences of Christianity, and the mingling of the two gives rise to the current culture in which the groups live. Because of the Christian influences, the ancient beliefs and practices, though still somewhat present, have eroded and often morphed into Christian styles. This was very apparent at Moyo’s lecture, when he often had to differentiate the Ndebele views of death and dying from the Christian beliefs that have seeped into the culture and religion. The presence of Christian colonialism in South Africa has made it difficult to distinguish where the religious attitudes and practices originated because the two have coexisted for so long. There are specific beliefs that can be traced back to the time before colonialism fairly easily (the emphasis on ancestors and their influence in the lives of the living, the belief that time is the cause of death, healing rituals, etc.) but there are new grey areas between the beliefs of the ancient Ndebele wisdom and the more recent Christian influences. The cult of Santa Muerte is even more intertwined with Christianity because of the heavy presence of Roman Catholicism in Mexico and the fact that many followers of the Saint worship her as an addition to their Catholic faith (she is considered a folk saint in the Catholic religion). There is a presence of the ancient Aztec influences (as stated earlier, some follow her without being Catholic and there are many similarities between the Saint and the ancient goddesses of death in Aztec beliefs) yet Catholic culture also saturates Mexico. However, the Christian influence often creates tension when it seeks to discredit the ancient wisdom and practices. For instance, in South Africa, nurses and other medical personnel must take special care to balance between western health care practices and allowing patients to practice the healing rituals of the Zulu people to their ancestors (The Long Search). In Mexico, many priests or other Catholics denounce the worship of Santa Muerte as Satanic worship and don’t consider it a legitimate form of interacting with a deity.

On a more material note, the difference in culture between the two can be explained by a difference in geographical location, like differences between any two groups across a substantial geographical distance. No two cultures are identical and because the two are a great distance apart there is a significant difference in the lifestyles and practices of the two religions. Most significantly, the African emphasis on ancestral and family lineage through clans is not present in the Americas.

It seems that the influence of poverty has a large effect on the similarity in the welcoming view of death as discussed. Whether the poverty is from colonization or other factors, the low standard of living in each group contributes heavily to the more accepting view of death as opposed to the view of death among the rich. The starkest comparison would be to the prevailing attitude of death among Americans, a notoriously rich and privileged country. In the culture at present in the United States, death is seen as terrifying, something not to be talked about at length and, usually, it is something to be avoided at all cost. This can be seen in the medical practices in the United States that doctors are ethically vowed to preserve the life of a person no matter what the circumstances, even keeping patients alive by artificial means for lengthy periods of time until someone makes the decision to end the medical care. If someone dies at a young age it is seen as a tragic waste of life, and usually as some kind of mistake (very different from the Ndebele of time causing death). Because of the higher quality of life and possibility of happiness in living, death is seen as a great evil that snatches away the good things present to those who are rich. The pervading richness in the United States relative to much of the world presents death with a horrible role of stealing away all of the happiness and comfort that is present and taking someone away to a realm that is unknown, a realm that has the possibility of being much worse than the comfortable life here. However, when one is poor the outlook is much different, as seen by the beliefs of the cult of Santa Muerte and the Ndebele people. Death can be a welcome relief to suffering at the extreme end or, at the very least, an inevitable fact of life that has the possibility of bringing about better things to one who is struggling to survive.

Though one’s view of death is influenced by culture and religious beliefs (believing in an afterlife gives a more comforting aura to death than without), one of the main factors of how someone sees and interacts with death is their standing in this life. If life is extremely difficult and a struggle to maintain, death can be a welcome friend to help bring a better situation. However, if most things in life are going well and there is a presence of comfort and stability, death can be a scary change to an otherwise predictable and safe existence. Economic conditions and the quality of one’s life can have a huge impact on the religion, beliefs and practices of a group of people. For example, a person who is poor may depend on their religion or the promise of an afterlife more than one who is rich because the one who is rich does not need the hope of life after death to bring them peace; they have a level of comfort in their everyday life. The poor may interact with death on a more frequent and personal level because it is not as intimidating as it is to the rich. This is clearly seen in the two groups discussed who pray to death or the recent dead frequently and interact with death on a daily basis. The poor are more used to being in a humble position, working to survive and living with the fragility of life on a regular basis. The poor often see death as one who “walks along side” them, one who makes all equal, without the worry that death will take things away from them. The followers of Santa Muerte and the Ndebele people share the fact that they are historically impoverished through means of Christian colonization and other economic and religious factors that lead to their view of death being more accepting and welcoming than groups of people who are living more comfortable lives. There is less fear of death in these two groups relative to many others because of their impoverished situation and their confidence in a better life after death.

Works Cited

Anderson. "African Religions." Encyclopedia of Death and Dying. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. Print.

Bozongwana, W. Ndebele Religion and Customs. Gweru: Mambo in Association with the Literature Bureau, 1983. Print.

Chesnut, R. Andrew. Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint. New York: Oxford U, 2012. Print.

Garcia-Villida, Eduardo. "Prayers to Dead and Dying: A Trivium of Sorts to a “Santa Muerte” Book of Hours." Comparison Project. Sussman Theatre, Des Moines. 17 Nov. 2016. Lecture.

La Santa Muerte. Dir. Eva Aridjis. Perf. Gael Garcia. Fonca, n.d. Web

Moyo, Herbert. "The Ritualization of Death: The Journey from the Living-living to the Living Dead in African Religions." Comparison Project. Sussman Theatre, Des Moines. 06 Oct. 2016. Lecture.

Smart, Ninian. The Long Search. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977. Print.