



CLIMBING THE TRAIL TO HEAVEN: TRADITIONAL FUNERALS AND BURIAL PRACTICES IN DANE-ZAA TERRITORY-AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT FROM NORTHEASTERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research is to investigate two customary funerals conducted by the Dane-zaa First Nation of Northeastern British Columbia, known as the Doig River First Nation. Both funerals included a lot of drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire in keeping with the Dane-zaa custom. Still, there was one key distinction between the two rituals. The funeral held in 2019 for Janice Askoty was a hybrid service that included a Christian liturgy and customary rituals. Such a ritual highlighted the conflicts that already existed among community members over faith and belief systems. There were no conflicts throughout the Christian service that was part of Annie Oker's 2020 funeral. In this paper, the researcher use the notion of syncretism and my observations to illustrate how Christian practices have been merged with indigenous cultural practices, symbols, and beliefs to create new blended practices. Simultaneously, the researcher highlight how certain customs (such as drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire) have endured to this day because they have not been altered by outside forces. Finally, the researcher discuss how the history of colonialism continues to show itself in funerary celebrations and how the community members view, confront, and resist it.

Keywords: dane-zaa, indigenous peoples, tea dance, traditional funeral, traditional belief system

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INTRODUCTION

Dane-zaa was the first nation to use the Athabaskan language in the area (Testani, 2020). The customs they have implemented from the past until now are very good among other tribes in other communities. They live in the area of the River called the Peace River, namely in Alberta and British Columbia, Canada (Muckle, 2014). They use their own language, which has also been passed down from generation to generation. This is a form of their respect for tradition because this custom has been around for a long time and was formed by their ancestors.

The formation of the Dane-zaa tribe, namely the history of the formation of the First Nation in Canada (Duncanson et al., 2023). Those who carry out funeral rituals in accordance with their ancestors by carrying out the same rituals as their ancestors used to hold parties that can make them feel calmer in letting go of their loved ones. For the last time they saw him in the world, they made this ceremony according to customs usually carried out. They carried out this custom so that they could honor their ancestors who had painstakingly made so many rituals at the funerals of their deceased family or relatives. However, it differs in one important way. At a time when the Cree, the Iroquoian nations of Quebec and Ontario, and many other First Nations were adapting their own customs (or, in the case of the Beothuk of Newfoundland, being destroyed by them), the Dane-zaa would not do so they would

continue to follow in the footsteps of their grandmothers (McCormack, 2017). Their ancestors. Their first knowledge of customs in traditional Funerals occurred in the late eighteenth century when the Dreamers predicted the coming of the white man. The loss of traditional lands and culture, developments that began affecting indigenous peoples in eastern Canada three and a half centuries ago, has been a challenge for the Dane-zaa for more than a hundred years (Ridington & Ridington, 2013; Ney et al., 2014). They built their fort on the eastern side of the Dane-zaa region, and the Mackenzie tribe passed through the region but did not remain silent. They really appreciate customs that have existed for a long time. The historical story they remember is about the customs at funerals, which are very good in carrying out the event because this will be the last time they have a good party for relatives or family members who have died.

When Billy Attachie told them this, he was talking about the stories his grandmother, Nachę, told him and her other grandchildren. However, he was also talking about stories that had existed. Has been told for centuries by the Danezaa people (Ridington & Ridington, 2013). Does Dane-zaa mean "native people" in Dane-zaa Záágé? Or Beaver, an Athapaskan language. Nachę learned these customs from people close to them in the early years of the twentieth century. He told Billy and his brothers about it many years ago when they were kids. This is the essence of history. The formation of their funeral customs and all the history carried out by their ancestors over the years. They must always carry them out so that these customs always run well and can appreciate what was built by their ancestors because history is a series of stories that have a background that everyone cannot do.

They have applied according to the teachings they know. They also follow their relatives together yaak'ihts'é? Atanii, the way to heaven (Amatulli, 2022). The elders said that heaven is like Su Na chii k'chige, a gathering place for people who have died, both family or relatives and the community in their place (Knickerbocker, 2015). They assume that all those who have died are able to renew their relationship in heaven. Lana Wolf translates Su Na chii k'chige as "the place where happiness resides" (Ridington & Ridington, 2013).

In the past, funerals were social occasions. It is a chance to find out if the family is valued and loved outside of their own family, as one Doig member informed me (Field Notes, July 29, 2019). A bereaved family's respect grows with the number of attendees at the funeral.

Drumming is typically played at the beginning of a traditional funeral in order to honor the departed and greet guests. A traditional funeral involves a number of activities, the first of which is drumming. These include the following:

- The Tea dance, which involves drumming, singing, and dancing around a fire;
- The wearing of moccasins;
- The liturgy, which in Christian funerals is followed by drumming, singing, dancing, and a feast;
- The burial procedure.

The Tea Dance: drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire

They were circling the fire while chanting, drumming, and dancing. An essential component of customary Dane-zaa celebrations is tea dancing. Members have the chance to honor the memories of the departed while praying for them through drumming, singing, and dancing when dances are done during traditional funerals. According to Amber Ridington's documentation, the Dane-zaa in northeastern British Columbia ceased holding Tea Dances following the passing of their final leader, Charlie Yahey, in 1976 and the passing of songwriter Jack Acko in 1979 (Bénézet, 2013). The Tea Dance was revived in 1981 after a five-year break caused by the loss of a young member, Mackenzie Ben. The community felt obligated to assist the youngster in opening the Path to Heaven. During the Tea Dance, family members and community members come together to remember the departed while

grieving, praying, and offering support to one another. It is a significant time for introspection and prayer (Ehineni, 2017). Reuniting family and friends creates a pleasant energy that many members say can be used by everyone, making the Tea Dance an opportunity to benefit from that. There are no rigid rules about how the dance should be performed, and everyone is welcome to participate in the laid-back attitude that characterizes the Tea Dance. Seldom do Danes state that someone is incapable of performing a task in this section. Rather, the majority of the time, they demonstrate. People danced, and a four-year-old child played and bounced around the fire during Janice's funeral. The young child had complete freedom to behave as he pleased, even while the group was engaged in a significant task (Amatulli, 2023).

The moccasins' wearing procedure

The tea dance revolves around the drums because they aid the deceased in reaching paradise. For ages, it can be argued that singing, dancing, and drumming have symbolized the ancestors' form of prayer (Redmond, 2021; Mabingo, 2020). Drumming holds a special significance for the community, as it does for many other indigenous peoples in North America, and individuals who can drum and sing are highly esteemed members. There are two kinds of songs among the Dane-zaa people: dream songs and prayer songs. The first is private healing music that is obtained through vision quests and is best kept private or performed in public. The latter are petitions in songs that the Dreamers heard in heaven and are intended to help Dane-zaa deal with life and death. Male vocalists perform the Dreamers' songs repeatedly during Tea Dance, frequently with drum accompaniment. In order for the vocalist to follow the drummer's rhythm, the drumming needs to start before the singing. The single-headed snare drum and the double-headed snare drum are the two different kinds of drums used in Dane-zaa heritage. Typically, these kinds are constructed from raw deerskin, stretched over a spherical wooden frame, and hammered with sticks no longer than 20 centimeters to generate the intended sound. Trenches, sometimes known as snare drums, are located inside the frame at the rear of the drum and may be stretched or contracted by the fingers to generate a variety of sounds. Because the structure of the deerskin used to construct the drum changes when heated, it is crucial to warm the drum before shaking.

As a result, heated drums make a softer and more intriguing sound than cold drums (Field Notes, 30 July - 9 August 2019). As the researcher watched the drummers, the researcher saw that a few of them were wearing moccasins instead of shoes. In the same way, the person seated beside me also began donning moccasins. According to him, the custom of wearing moccasins helps the departed dance toward the sky, clears the path, and travels with the soul. Before being buried, the deceased is given a brand-new pair of moccasins, and one of the family puts the shoes on their feet (Field Notes, July 29, 2019). This is highly symbolic because our goal is to facilitate the departed's spirit's swift entry into heaven. Thus, it will be simpler to enter paradise if you sing and dance while wearing a new pair of moccasins. The soul departs the body upon death. People have mental confusion and are unsure of what to do.

For this reason, we dance and sing, and by wearing moccasins, we assist in these spirits' journey to paradise. Dancing is just as crucial as wearing moccasins; the more you dance, the safer and more smoothly you assist the person on their journey and the faster they reach heaven. Dreamers and prophets implore their people to jump in the cardinal directions in order to restore equilibrium equal to the circle of life, and they warn them of the changes that will happen after the first contact. In this way, dance has two meanings: first, it is a cultural practice meant to oppose colonialism; second, it is the first instance of cultural syncretism, as Christian cosmology gradually seeps into it. Christian teachings, such as living life with humility and honesty, love and forgiveness in order to enjoy redemption and enter paradise, were blended with indigenous shamanic concepts connected to life cycle renewal (Porter et al., 2021).

The liturgy

With Christian components, Janice's funeral was a typical funeral with a priest invited to conduct the ritual. Adding Christian symbols to a conventional funeral might lead to conflict both before and after the service and throughout the community. In fact, the researcher saw some members debating whether or not to celebrate the liturgy before to Janice's burial. Due to the pastor's attitude and the sermon, there were moments during the liturgy when tensions increased. However, these moments faded as the pastor left and the congregation assembled for the funeral (Field Notes, 29 July 2019). Garry talked to Janice's daughter before tea. Since he was uncertain if a priest would conduct the liturgy, he substituted a Christian funeral for the customary one. The fact that priests were still requested to officiate Christian liturgy at funerals for Aboriginal people was something he did not like. He claimed that the pastors and missionaries never respected the conventional belief system but rather took advantage of the occasion to proclaim the superiority of their own faith. He did not like how Christianity permeated the First Nation's beliefs and made some of its people feel inferior to their ancient religious practices. In response, Janice's daughter stated that she was attempting to honor her mother's desires (Field Notes, 29 July 2019).

The talk came to an end when Janice's daughter mentioned that she had discussed what to say during the ceremony with the pastor and did not want to talk about it anymore. the researcher gained a deeper understanding of the profound differences in religious beliefs among community members and the function of pastors and preachers in specific rituals, such as funerals, by listening to this discourse. Despite attending Tra Vu, the pastor refrained from participating in the singing and dancing around the bonfire with the locals. His tone was tight when he began the liturgy. the researcher wondered if that was because he had previously participated in a tea ceremony (Field Notes, 29 July 2019). That might have made the harshness, incongruity, and disrespect for indigenous beliefs in the sermon's content worse because the Khatib was obviously uncomfortable in such a setting. Hugh Brody's observations in *Maps and Dreams* about the conflicts and friction between missionaries and locals are hardly dissimilar.

The researcher believed the pastor was there to evangelize the congregation and provide them with the "truth" when the researcher conducted the funeral in a formal capacity. The researcher recall being really disappointed, and as the service went on and the pastor started making powerful remarks that startled me, my displeasure only deepened. The researcher recall being really disappointed, and as the service went on and the pastor started making powerful remarks that startled me, my displeasure only deepened. During the Lord's Supper, this surreal scenario got even stranger as the missionary began urging others to come to him. It was evident that many churchgoers were being urged to make decisions they were unhappy with when, initially, few people came to see him. He urged the assembly to pick Jesus by telling others in the nearby areas, "You are doing it right!" Between those who "rejected" Jesus and those who "needed" Jesus, he sowed discord in the community (Schaber, 2020). He started touching everyone, beginning with Jack, Janice's husband, and uttering comforting words like "Jesus will come to you now. He will heal you right now." (Forest notes, July 30, 2019). In our conversation following the service, a Doig staff member underlined that everyone in the community is free to practice or hold any religious views they choose. However, we are unable to argue otherwise, as the pastor showed by acting intolerantly both during the funeral and in his sermon. Annie's funeral was not marked with a liturgy, in contrast to Janice's. A congregant of Doig's stepped in and started talking about how he felt about his trust in Jesus. The turning point was when she recalled one of her. The telling of a dream in which Jesus asked her to go to the hospital and wake up a sick friend set off the climax. She claimed that Jesus had given her strength, appeared at the hospital, and roused her with stern words. She cried

aloud and declared, "Lord Jesus, you have risen from the dead." The female narrator then remarked in English, "You are a powerful world power; show them how you can help them so that when they die, they can go to heaven," with great emphasis, and she screamed something with an otter tongue as if she were in a state of ecstasy.

The burial procedure

The manner in which the coffin is handled throughout the ceremony and funeral is another distinction between Christian and traditional customs. The burial container is often positioned next to the drummers (as was the case at Annie's funeral); thus, it was unique for Janice's funeral that the coffin was put in the tepee. On the other hand, under certain extraordinary circumstances—such as when members sense an external threat, such as the presence of a priest—putting the burial container within the tepee might confirm the validity of traditional customs. A shrine beside the coffin holds pictures of Janice along with a new pair of moccasins she will get before being buried. The deceased's head should face west, toward the setting sun, when the coffin is placed within the tent, according to the members. This alignment with the sun, as one participant stated, highlights the Dane-zaa people's connection to the land and its surrounds and shows a strong connection to nature and the elements of the ground (Field Notes, 29–30 July 2019). As a compromise between Christian faith and tradition, the researcher described the coffin-sealing procedure (Field Notes, July 30, 2019). In a traditional funeral, the coffin is placed on the ground and handled only by members of the community, who normally organize the event without outside help. However, much like at Janice's funeral, the coffin must be sealed by the funeral attendant in attendance before the public is permitted to touch it (field notes, July 30, 2019).

Legal laws required that the coffin be sealed. Following that, the attendant gave it to the tribe to be buried in their customary territory—anywhere in the forest—by the tribe. In exchange for putting the body in a sealed casket, the researcher assume the funeral crew has consented to this. To be sure, it is not customary to place the body in a coffin. Field Notes, July 30, 2019: It was said by one member that placing the body in a casket and sealing it before burial is a more modern tradition and that it is a remnant of colonialism. Death, as a Doig member informed us during the casket burial, is but a phase. You can reestablish contact with your ancestors and enter the spiritual realm through it. The Tea Ceremony, the feast, the burial plans, and the overall ambiance are all comparable to the descriptions Hugh Brody gives in *Maps and Dreams*' "Funerals" chapter. Many things have not changed in over 40 years, and customs continue to be followed. One thing that attracted my attention during the burial was the members' attire since they were assigned different colored shirts (purple and light blue) based on their roles. The researcher saw the pallbearers had on light blue shirts. Some had on purple shirts (Field Notes, July 30, 2019). Despite the lack of a formal dress requirement, donning these shirts is an additional way to honor the deceased in their last moments. The researcher talked about the dress code and the customs of traditional funeral attire with a few members that morning. Doig River First Nation elder Sam Acko informed me that although it used to be required, the traditional custom of dressing has been abandoned. According to him, purchasing traditional attire solely for funerals would be prohibitively expensive (Field Notes, July 30, 2019). Before the burial begins, three ropes are fastened to the burial container when everything is prepared. For several minutes, the drummers begin to beatbox and sing as roses are distributed. Shaking the coffin is a custom connected to life, death, and rebirth that is prevalent in many indigenous cultures worldwide. The coffin is buried and covered in earth after being rocked, and roses are scattered on top as they go.

METHOD

Researchers used qualitative methods in this research. Qualitative methods allow researchers to understand phenomena and contexts in depth, explore perspectives, and gain comprehensive insights. This is research that has a purpose. In special natural situations, various natural methods are used. This research uses library research methods to collect data. In collecting data, researchers used narrative research data analysis techniques. At the heart of this method is the ability to understand a person's identity and worldview through the stories they hear and tell in everyday life.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Funerals are not simple ceremonies; they hold great significance in the culture and spirituality of the Dane-zaa people. Funerals not only honour the deceased but also create a space for the community to gather, tell stories and strengthen social ties. The tensions between community members over issues of Christian faith and liturgy during the funeral ceremony indicate challenges and differences of opinion within the community. Rituals that incorporate Christian elements generate disputes and debates, highlighting the complex dynamics of the merging of traditional and Christian beliefs. Despite external influences and synchronicities, some traditional practices, such as drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire, remain unchanged and persist to this day. This shows the strength and sustainability of local culture and traditions in the face of the pressures of colonialism.

The use of the concept of syncretism in the research highlights the way in which the traditional cultural practices and beliefs of the Dane-zaa have integrated with Christian practices, forming a new blended practice (Amatulli, 2023). Such observations reflect the complexity of the relationship between tradition and religion among indigenous peoples. The death ceremony for Janice Askoty in 2019 included traditional Dane-zaa elements but also mixed them with Christian liturgy. This highlighted tensions in the community related to faith and belief systems. The death ceremony for Annie Oker in 2020 did not involve Christian liturgy, demonstrating the variation in approaches to religious belief and practice within the community.

Highlighting their significance and the beliefs surrounding the transition of departed spirits to the other world emphasizes the importance of ceremonies in honoring and guiding departed spirits, preventing spirit anger, and ensuring the safety and well-being of souls who have gone to the spirit world. In addition, death ceremonies serve as a time for community members to gather, share stories, and strengthen social bonds. This highlights the Dane-zaa people's deep connection to nature and their spiritual beliefs, portraying the death ceremony as a reflection of their cultural values.

Performing these ceremonies and rituals amounts to helping the spirits of the deceased find their way to heaven. Actions such as dancing are referred to as ways to facilitate the journey of the departed soul and contribute to a safe and smooth transition to the afterlife.

CONCLUSION

Death rituals in the Dein Za'a area consist of a series of traditions and rituals carried out by the Dein Za'a people. Also known as the Beaver Tribe, this tradition aims to honor and empower the souls of people who have died in another world. Rituals This is accompanied by funeral ceremonies, singing, dancing, and various offerings. The Dane Zar community believes that the spirits of the dead must be taken to the spirit world and worshipped there. For the Dane Zea people, this death ritual is important to ensure the safety and welfare of the spirits of the deceased and prevent their anger. In addition, funerals are an opportunity for communities to gather, share stories, and strengthen social ties. Death rituals in the Daenzer region reflect the tribe's deep connection to nature and its spiritual beliefs.

Performing these ceremonies and rituals is the same as helping the spirits of the dead find their way to heaven. In addition, offerings such as dancing can help make the spirits' journey safer and smoother and reach heaven more quickly.

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