



# CUSAG

The Cultural Systems Analysis Group

Community Action Anthropology

## The Anthropology of African American Expressive Cultural Traditions<sup>1</sup>

### A Retirement Rite of Passage Celebration

**Date and Time:** Friday May 2, 2014, 5:30-10pm

**Location:** The Colony Ballroom, Stamp Student Union, College Park, Maryland

Welcome, to all of you who have come to join me on this celebration of my retirement as a full time faculty member from the Department of Anthropology, University of Maryland, College Park. The actual celebration begins with dinner at 5:30pm on Friday, May 2, 2014 in the Colony Ballroom of the University's Stamp Student Union. However, these celebrations (dinner followed by dancing) will be preceded by an all day (9am to 5pm) public forum discussing an issue, with which I have long been concerned: *Identifying and Addressing the Needs of Reentering Citizens and Their Families*. The purpose of this forum, which is open and free to the public, is to learn from the attending policy makers, organizational and agency representatives, other scholars, and private citizens, including reentering citizens, about the various issues associated with this topic.

A cash bar reception follows the forum from 5:30 to 6:30pm, followed by dinner and the retirement program from 6:30 to 8:30pm. The dinner and retirement program are hosted by the Department of Anthropology for my family and friends from out of town, current and former academic advisees, and former CuSAG staff members. Locally based friends and colleagues, and those attending the public forum, may join us for the evening dinner program with payment of the \$50 dinner charge. The dinner program will be followed by dancing (R&B music from the 1960s & `70s) until 10:00pm.

The dinner program and dance are organized around the theme of *African American Expressive Cultural Traditions* (music, song, dance, art, story telling and other narratives, language and "talk," food preparation, and so on). When taken together, the public forum and the celebrations represent two cultural themes of broader interest in Anthropology: (1) transitional life cycle rites of passage; and (2) expressive culture and celebration. Transitional life cycle rites of passage are celebrations in which: (1) individuals, couples, or age cohorts are taken through a transition from one life stage to the next (birthing, initiation, school graduations, marriage, death, etc.); and (2) their community or support systems are present to facilitate both the transition of that individual/couple/group, and the transition of the social unit itself, as it

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prepares for either *gaining* a new member (e.g., birth or marriage into a new kinship/family unit) or *losing* an established or familiar member (e.g., in the case of death, or to a lesser extent, marriage in those cultural systems in which one member is expected to go live in the residence of their partner's kin group).

I have long been of the opinion that because of the high divorce rate in America, we should have rites of passage celebrations for divorce, as we do for marriage, having a big party with close friends and family in attendance, and some type of ceremony to clearly mark the end of marriage and the transitioning into the new status of divorced. I am now creating a similar type of transitional celebration to mark the end of full time employment and the new state of retirement.

This is not to say that retirement parties are not already commonplace in the US. They are usually, however, organized around the work place, wherein people in the retiring person's place of employment organize an affair with hors d' oeuvres, do a little roasting, wish the retiree well, maybe give a gift of appreciation, and it is done.

For my transitional work-to-retirement celebration, I have borrowed from the funeral motif, which in most of the world's cultural systems, more people from the transitioning individual's networks are expected to attend his or her funeral than is the case in any other transitional celebration. Similarly, to this retirement celebration, in addition to family, friends, and neighbors, I have invited people from my elementary, high school and college years; from my time in the US Peace Corps from almost 50 years ago; from my graduate school years at the University of Pittsburgh; former students and colleagues from my first academic job at the University of North Carolina; and from my current work environment at the University of Maryland.

Another thing that I observed at funerals while conducting research on food and festive occasions in North Carolina many years ago is that they are characterized by a pre-ceremony phase that is quiet and sobering (e.g., the wake). The next activity, of the greatest significance, is the funeral service, a rite of passage ceremony in which the collective energy and spirit of the support network members present help to move the transitioning person/couple/cohort on to the next life phase. This is followed by a more festive activity (feast or party), a celebration of a successful passage of the transitioned individual by present members of his or her various support systems (kin & other networks).

The activities of the May 2<sup>nd</sup> celebrations are themed in a similar fashion with the public forum being viewed similarly to the first phase of the funerary rite of passage: sobering discussions of what I will introduce as an "epidemic" affecting African American persons, families, and communities characterized by vicious cycles of mass incarceration, reentry, and recidivism. My morning introduction will be followed by panel discussions on a range of *needs* of incarcerated and reentering citizens, their families, and their communities. Family and community are viewed as very important to successful reentry, but they also have the capacity to serve as potential contributors to failed reentry and recidivism. In the afternoon, three panels are tentatively planned that focus on new and innovative policies and programs to address the needs of reentering citizens, their families, and communities.

The public forum will close with a “Healing Circle,” a concept that comes out of ethnographic research that I carried out in Cameroon, West Africa in the winter of 1981. I was fortunate to observe a healing ceremony of the Kaka people who live in the tropical forest of the eastern Kadey Province. This healing ceremony was carried out by group of good sorcerers, as differentiated from bad sorcerers who people seek out to bring some type of affliction targeting an enemy or rival. I was able to place this ceremony in broader analytical cultural context informed scholarly literature that had read years earlier during my graduate training in medical anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh. While I no longer remember the authors of this literature, it had introduced me to traditional healing practices in some African communities as a rite of passage, in which healers and the supporting community held a ritual to mark the end of the illness state, and the transition to a state of recovered health.

In the Kaka setting, the healing process was carried out for not only the young man who had been afflicted by bad sorcery, but also the young man who was accused of having gone to a bad sorcerer to bring the affliction. In other words, these two young men who were kinsmen, and had mined gold together<sup>2</sup> were both viewed by the community as “ill,” i.e., incapable of normal social and psychological functioning, unable to care for themselves, or to meet their responsibilities to their children, to their kinship group, nor to the wider community. Thus a healing process was needed to bringing both back into their communities as functioning and cured individuals<sup>3</sup>.

These two young Kaka men were required to spend several days in the compound of the primary healer, undergoing several healing processes. Then on the final day of the healing process, various ritualistic practices were carried out so as to transition the two young men from a state of illness to recovered health. And for this final day of healing activities, other good sorcerers (healers) in the region were invited to participate. One of the final activities involved the healers forming a circle around the afflicted persons, and while holding hands several incantations were cited by the primary healer, each followed by responses from the others.

As I sat there fascinated by what I was observing, I began to reflect on how such transitional ceremonies were absent from healing processes in my own (US) culture, in particular the community taking part in transitioning ill persons to a state of recovered health. The idea of these African healing rituals being used to address the issue of social dysfunction may be interpreted as a “mental illness” in the western bio-medical lexicon; and we definitely do not approach the curing of mental illness using such community and culturally supported rituals. The lack of such culturally prescribed community supported transitional rituals that clearly mark the state of illness and recovered health could be the basis for such general perceptions that mentally ill persons can be treated (mostly through drugs), but never actually cured or healed. (Being crazy is a permanent state once diagnosed).

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<sup>2</sup> I was told that the afflicted young man was very successful in mining gold, while the other young man, who was much less successful, was filled with great envy of his clan mate, and was continually wished him ill will in public gathering. Seeking the help of a bad sorcery, it was said helped him in achieving his dastardly desires.

<sup>3</sup> From what I understand, similar indigenous healing techniques are now being used some African societies to reintegrate former child soldiers back into their communities, and to heal them from the tendencies towards the atrocities that they had practiced earlier.

Nevertheless, many years later while attending a funeral ceremony in Baltimore of a friend of mine who had died from HIV/AIDS, I was struck by how a ceremony at the end struck me as something very similar to the healing ritual that I had observed in Cameroon twenty years earlier. At the end of the Baltimore funeral, a number of the preachers present formed a circle, held hands, and asked everyone in the congregation to hold hands while one of them led us in a moving prayer, which I interpreted as helping to facilitate transitioning to the afterlife, and his loved ones transitioning to a life without him. While mental health issues have never been my area of research study, some years later as I was carrying out research with returning citizens, we found that mental health and substance abuse illnesses were our most prevalent findings, I began to wonder if such transitional rituals could provide some benefit to this population. Moreover, the Kaka concept of illness, mentioned earlier, as “the incapability of normal social and psychological functioning, inability to care for oneself, or to meet one’s responsibilities to one’s children, or to one’s kinship group (or family in the US context), nor to the wider community,” fits the state of the returning citizen as he or she cannot find housing, work, support their children, or in some cases lose their parental rights.

It is in within the context of these types of healing ceremonies discussed above that we will perform our Healing Circle at the end of the public forum. We accept that this ceremony may not help those attempting transition to successful reentry. But hopefully through a collective pledge from those present to a lifelong commitment to action oriented towards policies and programs addressing our national incarceration epidemic, we will bring healing to reentering citizens, their families and communities, and our nation from the afflictions of the incarceration epidemic, as well as other afflictions of social injustice.

The cash bar reception following the public forum has multiple purposes including the following: (1) to allow for some networking and further discussion among forum attendees, (2) to offer a period of de-acceleration from the sober nature of the forum, and (3) to provide a segue into the retirement ceremony and celebrations captured in the dinner program, and the dancing following this ceremony.

As the ceremonial phase of my transitional rite from employment to retirement, the dinner program will consist of: (1) the feast, (2) a roasting by family members, friends, colleagues, former students, and other from various stages of my life, (3) a personal thank you to those same categories of guests for the roles that they have played in my life and career, (4) a launching of the *UMD-HBCU Graduate Mentoring Fund*, and (5) several African American expressive cultural traditions as performed by guests who are also artists.

The dishes served for the feast were selected to reflect the evening’s theme of African American expressive cultural traditions. Thee attention given to food preparation, presentation, and protocol are forms of expressive culture in many parts of the world. (For many people, France is the first culture that comes to mind here). In African American cultural traditions, food preparation should also be considered, as slave cooks had to be creative, both in preparing meals for the master’s household, as well as taking less desirable food stuffs and creating tasty dishes for their own families and those of the master class, and eventually in the feasts served in their churches. These traditions continued into the post slave periods, particularly during celebratory feasts and festive occasions.

I have tried to capture that creativity by planning a menu with dishes that reflect this tradition in

what is frequently referred to as “soul food”, or southern cuisine--but with less salt, sugar, or fat. In planning this menu, I drew on probably the second (after funerals) most well attended (in terms of number of network members) transitional rite of passage --marriage. With help from friends, I created a menu that envisioned a wedding dinner in which one partner is from Charleston, South Carolina, and the second from New Orleans, Louisiana. While I did not grow up in either place, I selected foods to reflect the fact that these two cities were major seaports into which slaves and foodstuffs from around the world were imported into the South during the US colonial and slave periods.

However, it was also because I did not grow up in either of these food traditions that I relied on an artistic practice found in several traditional cultures, in which the creation of some art is not always an individual endeavor, but is sometimes collaborative, with members of the community adding to the product before it is considered finished. I adopted this process by first selecting foods that I was aware of from the New Orleans and Charleston (Coastal Lowlands) regions. Then I invited friends who currently or once resided in either of these areas to offer dish suggestions. Once receiving their contributions<sup>4</sup>, I, along with a Department of Anthropology staff member, Ms. Sarah Morrow, met with Ms. Beverly Carroll of the University Dining Services, and made selections for the final menu.

I don't profess to have the knowledge of whether *food presentation* is part of African American Expressive Cultural Traditions. I have observed however, what one might call tacit practices of *food protocol*, occurring in church feasts, or at other food events in which church leaders were in attendance, and were seated in select locations, and served first. Food presentation will not be reflected at this retirement dinner, as food will be presented in a buffet format. However, some type of protocol will be reflected as it is in many cultures, in terms of seating arrangements. Those closest to the transitioning person (me) in terms of kinship and friendship significance at certain periods of my life will be seated closest to me<sup>5</sup>. I will not, however, emulate the M'Borro (Fulani) of Cameroon (and some other African nomadic groups), and serve my

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<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to my old graduate school friends, Dr. Alton Lawson, and his wife Mary L Pretz, and Dr. Edward and Louise McKinney, and my friend and first PhD student, Dr. Erma Manoncourt, former Tulane University faculty member and retired UNICEF official for their contributions.

<sup>5</sup> After returning to the South (North Carolina), after receiving my PhD in Anthropology, I became to look at tacit practices of protocol in other African American rituals, such as how funeral directors would try to line up the siblings, children, and descendant of the deceased by generation to march into the church and take their pre-determined seating. While there was nothing unique about this, what I found fascinating was observing how this system would breakdown with the generations of children parented by sometimes multiple male family members with “outside” women (females to whom these men were not married), but had never been seen before by some of the “inside” children or grandchildren; or who the latter had met but did not know they were kinsmen. In some instances however, outside and inside children actually knew each other and had always referred to each other as kinsmen. Funeral directors differed also, as some of them had learned to do some pre-funeral genealogical research to pre-determine who would be lined up and seated as family, by asking questions of the siblings of the deceased whether the deceased had outside children who would be lining up with the family. If they answered yes, then the director would go on to ask questions of the names of these people, and their genealogical location (parentage) within the family tree. These directors would then be able to prevent the protocol breakdown that sometimes occurred at these funerals.

guests different portions of food based on their relationship to me<sup>6</sup>.

The second and third items listed on the dinner program, the “roasting” of the transitioning person, and my personal statements of gratitude to guests are self explanatory and do not need further discussion. Throughout this program, performances reflecting African American Expressive Cultural traditions will be performed. At some point during the program, the *UMD-HBCU Graduate Mentoring Fund in Anthropological and Community Health Sciences* (hereafter referred to as the Fund) will be introduced and donations requested<sup>7</sup>. Once the dinner program is completed, the remainder of the evening will primarily consist of one final expression of African American Expressive culture, dancing to soul music from the 1960s and 70s, with Kalfani Ture, an American University doctoral candidate in Anthropology as DJ.

The two primary activities of this retirement celebration, the public forum and the dinner program will serve somewhat as a template for a planned annual fundraising strategy for the Fund. That is, soon after the retirement program is over, and has proven to be cost effective, we will begin planning next year’s donor event that will include a public forum on a significant social or health issue during the day, followed by dinner in the evening.

Beyond the anthropological themes of rites of passage and expressive culture, the full day of activities also represent the two sides of who I am, the intellectual and the spiritual. I did not recognize these two personas, however, until after I had put the full day’s program together, and began reflecting about a similar 3 ½ day conference on AIDS and African Americans that I organized at the University in 1994. As I worked with a conference planning committee that included several persons who had the HIV virus, including the late Baltimore HIV/AIDS activist friend whose funeral I mentioned earlier. At one point during a planning session, he turned to me and stated, “*Tony, your illness is worse than mine.*” When I asked for clarity, he responded “*because you are the most spiritually fragmented person that I have ever known. You can’t seem to decide whether you want to be in the University or out here playing with us. If you want to heal Brother, you have to bring those two sides of you together.*” After considerable reflection on his statement over several months, I concluded that he was correct. And my healing was the realization that my life as an academic anthropologist feeds my ongoing intellectual curiosity about the beauty of human cultural life wherever it occurs. But I also came to realize that my need to always be involved in social and community problem solving activities with people working in the trenches on these issues, feeds my soul. It is little wonder then that my retirement celebration would evolve to include both the somewhat academic themes of rites of passage and expressive culture, and the social activism theme of learning from people who are

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<sup>6</sup> During my fieldwork in Cameroon in 1981, I attended two M’Borro weddings in which whole cows were butchered, barbecued, and dispensed to guests based on the degree of kinship to the transitioning couple. In other words, the groom’s brother by the same mother (in a patrilineal system) would receive a larger portion of the meat than a brother of a different mother (a polygynous, or multiple wife, marriage system).

<sup>7</sup> The flyer for the Fund states that it is being *established at the retirement of Dr. Tony Whitehead, honoring his legacy and continuing passionate commitment to providing mentorship to graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) interested in pursuing a graduate degree in anthropology with a focus on community health action research. Awardees will be mentored first by Dr. Whitehead, and eventually by other anthropology faculty members involved in such research. Once this fund reaches endowment level, all contributions made into this account shall be transferred into an endowed fund.*

engaged in addressing the problems of the African American incarceration epidemic, including citizens returning to their communities. Through the establishment of the UMD-HBCU Mentoring Fund, and the annual fundraising dinner in support of that Fund, I hope to support future generations who share this passion for action research.

Tony Whitehead, PhD, Ms.Hyg.  
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May 2, 2014.