Articles

A PILGRIMAGE HOME

Tombs, Burial and Belonging in Jamaica

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Abstract

This article is concerned with the construction of ancestry in Jamaica. Based upon a comparison of burial tombs in inalienable, 'ancestral' family land as well as in churchyards and cemeteries, I explore how the painted, polished or embellished cement structures mediate the relationship between people and land, a primary locus of identity in the Caribbean. Examining the ways in which the tombs are decorated and augmented, I argue that the creation, design and redesign of the tomb and its facade are important for the declaration of personhood as well as the positioning of the individual within the family. However, ancestral status is ultimately realized through the neglect and disintegration of these surfaces, the exposed grey concrete materially reuniting the deceased with the land.

Key Words ◆ ancestry ◆ burial tombs ◆ the Caribbean ◆ homes ◆ land

In his classic ethnography *Placing the Dead*, Maurice Bloch (1971) examines the large tombs built in the ancestral villages (*tanindrazana)* of Madagascar's Merina. The tombs are substantial concrete and rock structures, which are typically larger and more elaborate than the daily homes in which the Merina dwell; 4 to 5 ft of the painted tombs are visible above ground while the burial chamber rests below the surface. Bloch contends that these great rock formations scattered throughout the villages, and the funeral rituals associated with their creation and habitation, fundamentally structure Merina society by creating a self-selected 'tomb family' (or descent group[1]) devoted to the construction and maintenance of burial tombs. The tombs, and the affiliation with the tomb family, determine where an individual will be laid to rest after death.

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Bloch's seminal work represents a wider concern with the establishment and continuation of ancestry through burial, particularly the disintegration and destruction of the body associated with secondary burial – or 'double death' – (Bloch and Parry, 1982; Danforth, 1982; Hertz, 1907; Metcalf and Huntington, 1991; van Gennep, 1961). Vividly describing how the Merina exist as moist, mobile beings steadily moving toward a dry, fixed death, Bloch reveals how this process culminates in the placement of the corpse in an individual grave whereby the body decomposes. Once the dry skin is separated from the body, the bones are recovered, transported and placed within the ancestral tomb where they become part of the dusty, dry stone lining the tomb's interior walls. The corporeal tie to the tomb built and maintained in the ancestral village is so strong that even those Merina who 'live in France . . . arrange for their corpses to be flown back to Madagascar so that, in the end, they will be back as part of permanent stone structures in the soil of their ancestral land' (Bloch, 1996: 79–80).

Here, I seek to understand the relationship between land and ancestry in Jamaica through the building and alteration of the concrete tomb.[2] Taking into account the materiality of tombs, particularly the contrast between their costly elaboration as well as their apparent abandonment, I employ an approach to material culture that acknowledges the dynamic association between objects and things, be it through the constitution and reconstitution of the self through the separating, shifting, sorting, refurbishing or disposal of objects (Buchli, 1999; Chevalier, 1999; Garvey, 2001; Marcoux, 2001) or the daily and ceremonial construction or destruction of memory (Forty and Küchler, 1999; Hallam and Hockey, 2001; Parkin, 1999). By questioning what the consequences of particular forms of burial may be for understanding contemporary notions of ancestry and continuity, I seek to understand how and when the living 'place' and reconstitute the dead.

TOMBS, TOMBINGS AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF ANCESTRY

Two months into my fieldwork, my Jamaican 'Mum' phoned to say that she planned to hold 'Dad's' *tombing*, or the celebration of building 'a little house for the dead' on the top of a sealed grave (see also Beckwith, 1929). As I had been unable to attend his funeral[3] five years before, I was eager to say goodbye to 'Dad' properly by involving myself in the preparation for his *tombing*. In addition to helping collect some of the supplies for the event, on the day of the *tombing* I found myself in the kitchen with other women cumbersomely peeling Jamaican-grown cucumbers and carrots. Meanwhile the 'big women' were outside with large vats of boiling water preparing 'rice and peas', curry goat, 'food' (boiled green

FIGURE 1 Building the tomb.
Photo by Heather Horst, 2000

bananas) and manish water, a spicy soup composed of vegetables and goat innards. Although pleased to be participating, when I heard that a few of the women were planning to 'have a look at' what the men were building, I leapt at the opportunity to go to, where I imagined was, the centre of the action.

Walking up the steep hill to the churchyard, we were greeted by a number of stumbling men smelling of 'spirits' and the steady beats of dance-hall music blasting from a car stereo. The car, owned by the head builder, also contained a trunk full of Red Stripe, Heineken and rum. Just past the car a group of men were gathered around a shovel wedged in a pile of wet cement beside a half-sculpted tomb. After watching part of the tomb's construction (see Figure 1), I started wandering around the graveyard where I was immediately drawn to the number of security grilles, balustrades and colourful tiles on the tombs in the churchyard. These features were familiar to me through the study of new homes I was undertaking in one of the island's larger towns. I also noticed that, like homes, there appeared to be trends in the 'style' of the tombs related to proximity as well as the time of construction (or date of death) which I had not witnessed on the tombs built close to older family homes. What, then, was the relationship between tombs and homes? More specifically,

what might be the consequences of building homes for the dead using materials intended for homes for the living, particularly in churches and cemeteries located away from the family property? And finally, what do these tombs signify in terms of the construction of ancestry?

In the past, burial and the erection of tombs took place on 'family land'. Rooted in the Jamaican peasantry's creolized notions of property and ancestry (Besson and Momsen, 1987; Mintz, 1985), family land is 'this institution, whereby miniscule plots of land are regarded as inalienable property of all descendants of an ancestor or ancestress who obtained the land, is a strategy of maximizing freehold land rights among the peasantry' (Besson, 1987: 14). However, it is not the capital gained through family land that is significant, but rather the very notion that one owns a piece of land. Ownership is symbolic, signifying a sense of belonging as well as status and prestige (Besson, 1995; Clarke, 1966[1957]; Olwig, 1999). Moreover, and as Barry Chevannes (2001: 130) notes, the 'bit of space behind the decorative shrubs and hedges' became 'the summary of memory . . . because it hosts the ancestors who are buried and tombed within its confines in what is commonly referred to as the family plot'. The death, burial and construction of a headstone or tomb in the 'dead yard' of the deceased[4] thus remain important elements of the transition from individually-owned property to family land. Equally, the burial of an individual on family land transfers an individual into the category of 'ancestor or ancestress' because they are literally entrenched within the family soil.[5]

While burial on family land remains an ideal, shifts in Town and Country laws regarding the location of burials (particularly in large towns and cities), the sale of family land, land scarcity and migration have increasingly necessitated burial in a church, public or private cemetery (Besson, 2000), a practice which Besson (1984: 19) suggests shifts the emphasis from family identity to the consolidation of community identity. Given the centrality of burial on family land as the fundamental marker of familial and ancestral identity in Jamaica and the Caribbean, what are the implications of shifting burial away from the family soil, which literally and symbolically roots the individual within the family, and burying the deceased in non-family land where plots must be placed alongside those of individuals not considered 'relations'? Can cemetery burial transform an individual into an ancestor or ancestress in the same way as burial within family land 'places the dead', to borrow Bloch's famous words?

The Placement and Form of Tombs: A Brief Survey

In Jamaica, two basic forms of burial are employed.[6] Cement, metal or granite headstones affixed on the grassy ground above the casket remain

the cheapest and simplest type of grave, generally used in large public or private cemeteries in evenly spaced rows. Typically, these headstones include the person's name, dates of birth and death as well as scripture from the bible. The second type of burial – the focus of this article – is the expanded form of the sealed cement grave, the tomb.[7] As the following examples demonstrate, Jamaican tombs can be envisioned as elaborated headstones, sometimes described as roofs (Wardle, 2000), in various shapes and designs.

TOMBS ON FAMILY LAND

As noted previously, family land tombs are located on privately or corporately held property, which, theoretically, cannot be sold or partitioned. While I was often told that tombs should be built either on the side of or behind the main house, tombs were also visible in front of the house. Most tombs were located in clusters of two to four individuals approximately 50 ft away from the main house.

Although tombs and burial markers can range from small slabs of concrete covering the grave with words inscribed into the wet cement to elaborately painted sculptures and paintings, Figure 2 illustrates a number of elements prevalent in the tombs found on family land in rural districts. The two adjacent tombs are located in a concave space in front

FIGURE 2 Tombs placed on family land.
Photo by Nikita Mundle, 2001

FIGURE 3 Tombs in churchyard cemetery.
Photo by Heather Horst, 2000

of the laundry line. The tomb on the left of the picture was constructed in the shape of a two-level roof with headstone at the top. The tomb on the right contains a two-step roof with a headstone shifted at an angle enabling the viewer to read from the side rather than from the foot of the tomb. Each tomb is painted in dark grey on the vertical surfaces and the horizontal surfaces are painted white, the small drips of dried white paint still evident. The first tomb also includes a dark grey cross.

NON-FAMILY LAND: CHURCHYARDS AND CEMETERIES

As with family land, churchyards and cemeteries include a 'main house'. In churchyards, the main house is the 'house of worship', the grounds and church maintained by the congregation (church family) on a regular basis. However, the individual burial plots remain the concern of family members. Private cemeteries also contain a small chapel used for church services and quiet reflection as well as a home for the caretaker, which is often adjacent to the cemetery grounds. In the public cemeteries I encountered, it was rare to find a building for worship on site, the only home near the grounds would be the one inhabited by the caretaker. Again, unless a little extra money is given to the caretaker by the relations of the deceased, family members maintain full responsibility for the upkeep of the gravesite.

In general, the tombs in the rural churchyards were the most modest

FIGURE 4 Tombs using house-building materials.
Photo by Nikita Mundle, 2001

of all the graves surveyed. Figure 3 includes a series of rectangular tombs of virtually the same structure and decoration. Most of the tombs include one to two steps atop a lid, all of which were originally covered in white paint and incorporate a headstone in the shape of a bible or a scroll placed flat on the tomb. A number of tombs are also surrounded by bars or a fence, typically painted white, of the sort also used to encase many Jamaican homes. One exception, evident in the background of Figure 3 is a tomb with three steps and a white vertical headstone flanked by two white ornamented crosses. The tomb is painted in contrasting white and grey and includes the letters R I P (Rest In Peace) as well as a lengthy tribute inscribed in black paint on the headstone.

In contrast to the rather humble graves present in churchyards, tombs in public and private cemeteries often used sturdier or more luxurious materials. The tomb in Figure 4 combines many of the decorative elements present in tombs throughout cemetery burial lands, such as floor tiles covering the surfaces of the three-step 'roof' with a flat headstone similar to ones seen in previous figures. It also incorporates a series of four designs of white metal bars (known locally as 'burglar bars') on each side of the tomb. The lower vertical bars curve towards the outside of the tomb and are topped by a horizontal row of swirls. Atop this horizontal line sits another series of straight vertical bars, interrupted on each side by a black painted cross. On top of the vertical bars are metal

sunbeams, which support the corrugated tin roof covering the entire tomb. Two sets of plastic flowers were placed inside the bars on each side, although one bouquet has slipped onto the side of the tomb. Figure 4, therefore, combines several different features and demonstrates why Jamaicans think of tombs as 'little houses for the dead'.

The cemetery tombs appear to reach new heights of competitive displays of status through the use of house materials such as expensive bars, decorative tiles and roofs. Yet, the form and organization of the tombs within the cemetery also communicates family unity and continuity. For example, through the painted or etched words, the family situates their departed family member in terms of the remaining family, such as by using the words '*in loving memory of George sadly missed by his wife, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren*'. Signifying his or her presence, they also physically link the tombs to other deceased family members, such as with a semi-detached tomb which includes a shared wall of cement connecting a married husband and wife. In some instances these tombs are demarcated by a single set of burglar bars, poles or a balustrade. Shared designs and patterns, such as the crosses in Figure 5, further emphasize the collective aspect of the individual tombs.

Diverging from the integration of families through the design and decoration of house-like tombs in cemeteries, family land tombs contain greater variation in terms of size, shape, design and placement as well as a more personal characterization of the individual's life. An example of this personalization is shown in Figure 6, the image of Jesus on the cross between two church buildings, which commemorates the life of a placement, tombs on family land incorporate more unusually shaped monuments to the ancestor or ancestress. If we follow Miller's (1998: 6) argument that 'any attempt to construct general theories of the material quality of artefacts, commodities, aesthetic forms and so forth, must be complemented by another strategy that looks to the specificity of material domains and the way form itself is employed to become the fabric of cultural worlds,' then one must consider why Jamaicans have turned to the materials and forms of the house to elaborate the space above the tomb.

As with other places around the world, the ownership of a house is an important symbol of achievement and respectability (cf. Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995; Tan, 2001). In Jamaica, home ownership is often tied to marriage, the ultimate symbol of and entrée to formal respectability, with many marriages delayed until later in life when a house can be constructed (Austin, 1984; Clarke, 1966; Douglass, 1992). However, the achievement of respectability and personhood does not appear to end with death. To illustrate, Junior, who like many rural Jamaican men worked when temporary road work or yard work presented itself, was still living with his mother at the time of his passing. As the funeral represented an unexpected and formidable expense, Junior's family

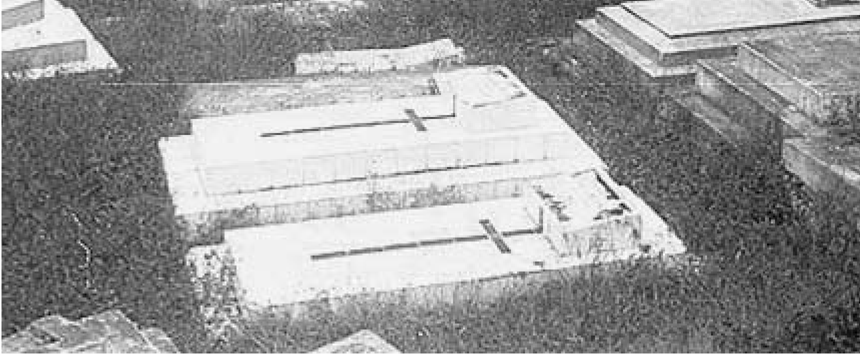

FIGURE 5 Painted crosses linking family members.
Photo by Heather Horst, 2000

spent weeks 'putting together' the money for the funeral preparations and tomb construction. Although Junior's family did not think they could manage the expense of a *tombing* for at least another year, they planned to build a painted concrete tomb for his final and *only* house. In other words, if acquiring a house was evidence of status and therefore a prerequisite for full personhood, then Junior's family determined that if he could not become '*a smadi*' (a somebody) in life, or at least attain

FIGURE 6 Tomb designed for a preacher.
Photo by Nikita Mundle, 2001

the outward symbols of this status, they would assure that he could do so in death (Beckwith, 1929: 84). Building up a tomb is then akin to building up a person, granting them status in the scheme of the family and wider Jamaican society. A person who possesses a house – even if it is a door-less and window-less tomb – is '*a smadi*'.

SURFACES AND APPEARANCES: TOWARDS THE MATERIALITY OF JAMAICAN TOMBS

For the Merina, the synthesis of tomb and body transforms the individual into the category of ancestor, the process of becoming an undifferentiated ancestor being integrally tied to the materiality of the body and the structures in the land that cradle them in death. Moreover, among the Merina, tombs are deliberately kept separate from the events of daily life and, because they are collectively constructed and maintained by the tomb family before and after an individual's death, the tombs often far surpass the quality of everyday homes. However, in Jamaica it is not the destruction of the clothed body placed within the purity of the white satin-lined steel or metal casket body that helps transform the individual into an ancestor or ancestress.[8] What matters in the Jamaican context, and for the descendants of the deceased establishing and declaring their family's status in the community, is that some sort of material marker representing the person exists. Historically accounting for the symbolic importance of an individual emblem of identity for the deceased, Besson affirms

> Unlike the entombed slave master and the graves of the emancipated slaves and their descendants, the burial places of the slaves were unmarked. Thus they remained '*invisible*' men and women, lacking formal identity in death as they did in life on the slave plantation. In contrast, the ex-slaves and their descendants were able to forge *visible* identities within the village community through the creation or consolidation of enduring family lines, family lands, and family burial grounds. (2002: 110–11, my emphasis)

Whereas in the past, these markers may have merely been a cut stone placed over the location of an individual burial, today the markers have clearly become more elaborate employing the form and materials of the house, which expresses status. The house form's elaboration in the context of funerary practice and tomb building in cemeteries suggests that the home, even when built for one individual's possession in the afterlife, can be shared within the family through the tomb's communal construction (or commissioning). When placed in relation to other family members' tombs, the tomb-house can be utilized to create an ancestry through style – be it through the patterned use of tiles or painted designs resembling a family crest. Particularly in cemeteries, it is the embellishment of the tomb above the ground that creates family links rather than

FIGURE 7 A tomb reuniting with the landscape.
Photo by Nikita Mundle, 2001

the process of rooting a tomb in collectively owned land. Thus, the form and idiom of the house are merged in the tomb.

Yet, despite the great cost and concern with the construction of the little homes for the dead, a brief walk through the cemetery or burial yard makes it difficult to ignore how drab, weathered or overgrown many of these concrete structures often become (see Figure 7). Given the great effort and expense involved in creating tombs, what may their lack of maintenance signify? In a country where resources are tenuous if not scarce for the average citizen whose descendants often live in London, New York, Miami and Toronto (Thomas-Hope, 1995), can the relative neglect of concrete tombs be justified in terms of economic rationality, whereby the short-term investment in the living is given priority over the social (and religious) investment in the places of the dead that the Merina value? Or might the peeling paint and weather-beaten cement signify something more fundamental in the relationship between ancestry and tombs?

As discussed previously, families increasingly utilize materials such as tiles, tropical paint, corrugated tin roofs and security bars in an attempt to preserve the tomb's longevity, particularly those tombs constructed on non-family land. In time however, the paint fades and chips away, disguising the carefully constructed words and designs and

revealing the red dust of the metal bars or the grainy, rounded concrete. Grass, weeds and bushes emerge through the slight cracks in the concrete and between the spaces of the security bars and the tomb. Even the tiled surfaces become dirty and dusty, losing their glossy sheen. However, because it is primarily the surface of the tomb that disintegrates its destruction and concealment are also ephemeral, such as when a relative dies and the family invests in the re-painting of tombs of related family members. Likewise, tombs are occasionally repainted or decorated upon the deceased's birthday or anniversary of death.[9] Keeping up appearances, so to speak, temporarily reinvigorates the tomb, (re)placing the departed in relation to other family members buried as well as within the family lineage.

As the days pass, however, these appearances will also grow faint, overtaken by unruly bushes, the hot sun and seasonal rains.[10] The worn surfaces merge the greying, fading tomb with the rocky soil interspersed with green leaves, bushes and flowers, thereby naturalizing its presence in the land, be it in cemeteries, churchyards or family land. It is only when the family *allows* the constructed tomb to fade into the landscape – when the tomb is both present and absent, seen but not seen, visible yet invisible – that the dead can be transformed into ancestors or ancestresses.

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Notes

1. Bloch (1971) notes that the Merina have a cognatic descent system which is both ego-centred and traced through the male or female line as well as ancestor/tomb focused.
2. Jamaica is the largest island in the Anglophone Caribbean with a population of approximately 2.6 million people, primarily of African descent. While the vast majority of Jamaicans are Christian, religious life is constructed out of a creolization of Euro-American and African practices and worldviews. For an exquisite analysis of Jamaican Pentecostalism and religion more generally, see Austin-Broos (1997), as well as Chevannes' (1994) groundbreaking study of Rastafarianism, a religion that emerged specifically from the Jamaican condition but now possesses global appeal and membership.

3. When a person dies in Jamaica, conventionally the family of the deceased gathers to plan and prepare the burial. In the final days before the services, a wake is often held which includes a 'set up' where food is prepared for visiting family and friends (cf. Beckwith, 1929; Besson 2002; Hurston, 1990[1938]; Wardle, 2000). During this time, gravediggers clear a rectangular hole, 9 ft by 4 ft by 4 ft in which the dirt is then lined with concrete blocks. Once set, the blocks are then sealed with white paint. When the casket is placed inside the grave, a cement slab is placed on the top and sealed tight. On the day of the funeral, a lengthy 'Thanksgiving Service' and sermon is held in the family or deceased's church. During the service, the casket is permanently sealed. Shortly after the service, an additional sermon is performed during which family and friends sing the casket into the ground. A feast shortly follows at the family house of the deceased. Although the funeral has been completed, the graves are considered 'unfinished' as only the tomb's basic structure is built prior to the funeral service. The tomb may remain in this state for a great deal of time – a year, five or even ten years – before a family holds a *tombing*. Like the days before and after a funeral, a *tombing* involves the sharing of food. However, the celebration is often without service, speeches or ceremony to commemorate the dead. However, Besson (2002) notes that the entire process of constructing a tomb has condensed (a trend that I also found). Now, the tomb-building and burial are carried out together rather than over an extended period of time. As a result, more money must be gathered for the occasion and contemporary funerals have thus become more costly.
4. Dead yards generally refer to the house-yard of the deceased. However, some individuals I talked with did not distinguish between dead yards and cemeteries, particularly in urban areas.
5. Although the issue of family land has been greatly debated (cf. Besson and Momsen, 1987), it is generally accepted that family land is passed down through the generations by an unrestricted cognatic descent system whereby property may be transferred to resident or non-resident descendants of the male or female land-owners. As a result, the ancestors buried on the land can be male or female (as can those who inherit the property), which is reflected in my use of the terms ancestor and ancestress throughout this article.
6. This analysis is based upon a survey of eight burial grounds located in Jamaica's central parishes, including a private cemetery, public cemeteries, church burial grounds as well as burial grounds located on family land.
7. In this article I have not distinguished between concrete tombs and vaults. Whereas in the past individuals were buried in the earth (their graves marked by stones), today cement tombs and modern vaults proliferate (cf. Besson, 1984). In contrast to concrete tombs, which are placed in the ground, vaults incorporate a protective outer container for the casket, which keeps soil and other elements away from the casket.
8. While conducting research, I witnessed a conversation between two acquaintances about the significance of the body in a Jamaican's burial. The man, a self-proclaimed Christian who rejected the church for a more spiritual approach to religious practice, was arguing that, as far as he was concerned, 'when I die they can throw my body to the pigs for all I care' since he knew he was going to heaven. His acquaintance, a middle-class Christian woman active in one of the town's influential churches, was absolutely horrified at the man's statement. Between expositions of scriptures

which attempted to refute his blasphemous remarks, the woman continually repeated that you must respect the body. Intrigued by this emotional exchange (among others), I began to grasp that it was not the remains of the body that was significant in ancestor or ancestress making, but rather the material representations of these individual bodies, the concrete tombs scattered throughout Jamaica's hillsides.

9. See Besson (1997) for a discussion of rituals devoted to hero ancestors and ancestresses among the Maroons of Accompong.

10. Nick Argenti (1999: 21) employs the term 'appearances' to describe the number of spontaneous events which materialized momentarily after the death of the Oku king in Cameroon and the objects that arrived only to be left to corrode. Here, I use 'appearances' more broadly to reinforce the outward orientation of the changes to the tombs' surfaces as well as to reemphasize the notion of visibility suggested by Besson.

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