CHAPTER 7

Funerals and
the Religious Imagination

_Burying and Honoring the Dead in the
Celestial Church of Christ in southern Benin_

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“If I have joined the Celestial Church of Christ, it is because, as a philosopher, I have seen that what they did was a bit like what our ancestors used to do.”

G.-B. A.

Introduction

In contemporary southern Benin as in other parts of Africa, funerals are major social events. However, even though some significant evolutions have been experienced in the last decades, research on the topic has until recently often seemed disconnected from research on social change in this region of Africa, as well as in many others. Funerals and social change were in fact two domains of research, the first more or less focused on the permanence of “traditional rites,” the other on the forms adopted by “modernity” in the African field. In what follows, I will try to focus both on social dynamics and on social continuities through the study of funerals in the Celestial Church of Christ, a Beninese prophetic Church which has today become the second largest church of the country in terms of membership, right after the Catholic Church.

This chapter is organized around two main issues. In the first part, after introducing the Celestial Church, I will show the implications of the fact that Celestial funerals always take place in the broader social context of a differentiated society. In the second part, after the presentation of the cycle of funeral rites introduced by the church approximately fifty years ago, I will show how Celestials are involved in a _bricolage_ of the status of the dead between “traditional” ways of thinking and schemes of thought inherited from missionary Catholicism. Also, drawing on my southern Benin materials, I will show how the focus on displaying one’s social and economic capital as the real driving
force behind the importance and extravagance of contemporary African funerals (see in particular van der Geest 2000) should be supplemented by other perspectives.

**The Celestial Church of Christ in southern Benin**

The Celestial Church of Christ was established in the city of Porto-Novo in southeastern Benin in 1947, approximately twenty years after the beginning of the *aladura* movement. In the 1920s, the *aladura* movement had seen the birth of a series of prophetic churches, especially in the regions of Lagos and Ibadan in neighboring southwestern Nigeria. Samuel Bilewu Joseph Oshoffa (1909–1985), the founder of the Celestial Church of Christ, was first a member of the Sacred and Eternal Order of Cherubim and Seraphim, one of the main *aladura* Churches, implanted in Porto-Novo in the 1930s. According to him, in 1947, Oshoffa—a carpenter at that time—had a vision after getting lost in the swamps of the low valley of the river Ouémé, near Porto-Novo. This vision ordered him to establish a church that would become “the last vessel” for salvation. He met his first success in the villages of the lagoon surrounding Porto-Novo, and the Celestial Church experienced a fast growth in the following decades.

Nevertheless, the importance of this somehow millenarian starting point should not be overestimated. Both the Celestial Church and the other *aladura* churches require the faithful to wear white robes during the services, and both involve themselves heavily with the religious concerns of the “traditional” religious system, especially with the problem of finding an effective protection against the dangers of occult aggression such as witchcraft. Christian influences, however, cannot be reduced to a simple “mask” over traditional religious logics (see Mary 2000; Bastide 1970), and going back to the literal meaning of the Bible has been an obsessive concern since the origin of the church. Samuel Oshoffa was raised in a Methodist environment and attended a Catholic school for a few years during his childhood. Moreover, the Celestial Church bears the imprint of Islamic influences from the Yoruba environment of Porto-Novo in which the young Oshoffa was educated, which included for numerous decades a significant number of Muslim lineages. I will return to the question of the interplay between these different influences while analyzing the Celestial rites for the dead.

Finally, the source of religious legitimacy is double in the Celestial Church of Christ: it derives both from the Bible and from dreams and visions. “Visionaries” actually represent an important category of church member (see Henry 1998; Mary 1999). In every church compound, these people offer day and night religious consultations to all those who need it; their visions, normally free,
perform a divinatory function similar to that of traditional diviners. The Celestial Church thus ensures in southern Benin a religious service open to everybody and aimed at providing a solution to concrete problems of everyday life: visions are often followed by a “prescription” of “spiritual works” that imply a series of more or less long prayers and appeal to more or less important ritual materials (candles, incense, palm branches, holy water, holy sheets, etc.). The strong materiality of the majority of the Celestial rites is indeed widely acknowledged in contemporary southern Benin, and this, together with the divinatory activities of the visionaries, largely nurtures the accusations of “fetishism” regularly formulated against the church, especially among the circles of Pentecostals and fervent Catholics.

Today, despite the fact that it now represents the second largest church in Benin (after the Catholic Church) in terms of membership with more than 1,200 parishes (of which the vast majority are located in the southern part of the country), the Celestial Church of Christ has neither obtained a legitimacy comparable to that of the historical missionary churches (Catholic and Methodist) nor to that of churches like the Assemblies of God, the main Pentecostal church in Benin (Noret 2004c). Finally, after the sudden death in 1985 of the “prophet pastor founder” S. B. J. Oshoffa soon after a car accident, the church, at that time already established in many African countries (especially in Nigeria and the Ivory Coast with a few thousand and several hundred parishes, respectively, but also in Europe and the United States), experienced increased division. After the death of the prophet, a brief division occurred between two of Oshoffa’s main collaborators, one from Benin (B. Agbaossi) and the other from Nigeria (A. Bada). The death of the latter in 2000 then led to new divisions and new conflicts and alliances between the ethnonational leaders of a church that its founder had declared “one and indivisible.”

**Funerals in a differentiated society**

The society of southern Benin is now incontestably differentiated. By this I don’t mean, of course, that there are no more continuities between the social and religious worlds that constitute this society. Funerals in particular are a place of important social investment in the whole society (see also Noret 2005). However, this investment can be ambiguous and controversial. Indeed, the sumptuous dimension of these “ruinous ceremonies,” as they were termed in particular during the Marxist-Leninist period of the country (1972–1990), is frequently criticized as socially irresponsible by those same people—the great majority of the population—who organize them when they are in a position to do so, a contradiction resulting from the importance of internalized social norms and pressures. Additionally, the wide sharing of this social investment
in funerals within the population does not mean that the norms that shape how burials should be organized are shared in the same way across the different social worlds of southern Benin society (see Noret 2010).

In fact, the differentiated character of the society goes back to the period of the development of kingdoms and “precolonial” urban centers with the diverse social hierarchies to be found in each. But, just to briefly mention here one very complex evolution, the differentiation of the society of southern Benin developed in particular from the nineteenth century with the gradual establishment of the Afro-Brazilians (see among others Guran 2000; Giordano 2001) and the expansion of Muslim and Catholic minorities, with these two phenomena only partially overlapping. This differentiation then obviously increased in the twentieth century during the colonial era and all the consequences and dynamics that it brought about in every sphere of social life.

Today, if lineages often remain at the heart of the management of death and organization of funerals, the exertion of authority by customary chiefs on these occasions is no longer recognized as easily as before. Social actors are today more and more committed to different social worlds and networks, especially in urban environments, and this happens in a context characterized by the growing priority of religious affiliations and identities. Therefore, when funerals are organized, several groups are often able to claim an active role (even slight ones) in the decision making process. These groups include the different components of the paternal and sometimes maternal lineages of the dead, the lineage of a female deceased person’s husband, and also eventually the members of the religious group of the deceased and in some cases even members of his or her profession, although this last is found to a much lower degree.

However, it is especially within the different components of the paternal and maternal families of the dead (children, brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, and lineage authorities) that conflicts are likely to originate, especially when these groups or parts of them (i.e., children, siblings, etc.) don’t agree on the same funeral “scenario.” In most cases, these struggles are resolved either by the surrender of certain parties or by the formation of a compromise, even a minimal one. Alternatively, people will typically say that “the family imposed itself” (where “the family” often refers to the deceased’s brothers and sisters or the lineage authorities), “the children imposed themselves,” or—in order to stress the fact that an agreement has been found—that “we came to an understanding.”

Conflict plays a changing role in funerals depending on the situation, as the different groups that try to find their place in the funeral “scenario” are likely to encourage the formation of both relations of concurrence and those of affinity. Nothing prevents, for example, a form of political liturgy of the elites from cohabiting with any religious register. This is how in November 2000, during the funerals of an important Celestial “Senior Evangelist,” different re-
religious, political, and even lineage-related demonstrations coexisted without major tensions in the context of a Celestial-dominated ritual. Different elements, however, were added between the display of the corpse in the house of the deceased in Cotonou, the economic capital of the country, and the burial ceremony and the moment of inhumation in the deceased’s region of origin two days later. As it is not uncommon in the case of prominent people’s burial rites, these funerals involved different groups claiming the departed as an honorary member.

The deceased had recently passed away in Paris, and on the night of his arrival in the mortuary house there were Celestial drums and trumpets in order to ensure the night vigil. The day after was dedicated to different forms of homage. Since the deceased was a retired “instituteur de classe exceptionnelle” in a family involved in the highest levels of state power, an official speech that reiterated his state service as a teacher—and thus also his contribution to the moral edification of the nation—was pronounced in the morning. Later, a delegation of the departed’s maternal lineage, a royal family originating from Togo but equally settled in Benin, performed traditional funeral songs, while the carrier of the récade (the emblem of royal power) that accompanied the delegation was left highly visible. Since there were no sacrifices to be offered in this sort of lineage homage, their coexistence with the Celestial Christian identity of the dead was clearly easier. Some of the deceased’s children, Celestials as well, even danced during the performance of the songs, while other members of the deceased’s parish, embarrassed because of the confusion that could be generated by this performance of lineage rituals, and desirous of avoiding accusations of “syncretism,” explained that what I was witnessing was in no way a part of the burial ceremonies organized by the Celestial Church. A certain tension was then perceptible, as lineage rites are easily condemned in a church like the Celestial Church of Christ. Finally, later in the afternoon, the former president N. Soglo officially came to pay honor to the corpse, since one of the departed’s brothers was at that time an important government minister in Benin.

During the wake that took place that night, the same kind of cohabitation of rituals occurred. The trumpets of the gendarmerie were the first to be heard, as another brother of the deceased was a colonel in the Beninese army. Afterward there was a Catholic wake because another brother of the dead was a priest (all the brothers, with the exception of the deceased himself, were Catholic). It is only after these first two wakes that a Celestial vigil took place. In fact, at the beginning of the church, Celestials generally would not organize wakes on the day before the burial. However, since the habit of organizing wakes is now so widespread in contemporary southern Benin (with the exception of Muslim people, who bury their dead on the same day of the death or on the day after), Celestials themselves also started organizing music performances on the day
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before the burial. These performances—both those that take place within the framework of Celestial funerals and those that take place in a different context—now enable the Celestials involved in burial ceremonies to be involved in the ritualization of the night before the burial. Additionally, such performances also enable the church choirs to show their musical savoir-faire to non-exclusively Celestial audiences, assisting in the promotion of the Church.

The next day, accompanied by Celestial prayers, a long motorized procession headed towards the deceased’s region of origin, where he would be buried. Nearly forty-five miles later, after a stop at a local school where the deceased had taught when he was young and another one at his father’s house, the corpse was brought to the land where the deceased man had intended to build a parish before suddenly dying, the land that he would be buried in. The few hundred people gathered for the event gradually took their places on the plastic chairs aligned under the huge canvas that covered a vast part of the land on which the parish would be built. The burial ceremony was hardly started when another moment of political liturgy occurred: Mathieu Kérékou, then-president of the Republic, had travelled in support of the brother of the departed who was then a government minister. The entrance of Kérékou, who took a seat in the first row in one of the armchairs reserved for the deceased’s immediate family and for the political authorities expected for the occasion, was obviously solemn, that is, according to Pierre Bourdieu (2001: 176), “legitimate and extra-ordinary”: a hedge of policemen and bodyguards, the audience partially standing either for curiosity or for respect, etc. The Celestial liturgy proceeded normally until the very moment of the burial, when a Catholic prayer pronounced by the priest brother of the deceased joined the prayers performed by the Celestials.

However, when the rituals involved are not solely Christian, their cohabitation can also turn out to be more difficult, even if the incompatibilities are often practically limited by the concern of keeping a form of entente between the different groups involved in the organization of the funerary “scenario.” Entente and a sense of compromise, particularly in the familial sphere, remain important social values, even if in practice these values do not exclude, in the “backstage,” tricks and cheating performed against other groups also involved in the organization of the funerals. Nevertheless, a real attitude of exclusion towards lineage rites, one anchored in open demonization and moral disqualification, exists today among the Christian elites (and among Muslim ones) of each denomination, including a large number of Catholic priests. Indeed, despite their not truly having power over the widespread double practice of church services and of traditional lineage rites, Catholic priests have come to play more and more on the growing social value of Christian funerals, using these moments to deliver speeches that openly discredit lineage rites. Such speeches can even take place during the funeral itself, as I have regularly had the opportunity to notice in recent years.
In the Celestial Church, the desire for a radical break with the lineage rites has been obvious since the origins of the church. Most recently, a document called “Testament” has even been created for this purpose by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Beninese branch of the church. This allows the members of the church to write down their wish to be buried according to the rites of the Celestial Church instead of their lineage traditional rites. This document can then serve as legal evidence during the meetings for the organization of funerals. However, I have not yet encountered a case where such a “Testament” had actually been drafted. In fact, the recourse to written documents to serve a testamentary purpose seems to be quite rare within the society of southern Benin. And this phenomenon of course multiplies the struggles regarding the more or less legal appropriation of inheritances, and frequently leads to—or feeds—serious family conflicts.

The radical refusal that Celestials oppose to “traditional” lineage ceremonies clashes sometimes with an equally radical refusal on the part of the lineage authorities to abandon these practices. In such cases the conflict can become open, with more or less explicit threats of magical aggression or with recourse to the local gendarmerie. However, conflict does not normally lead to this extreme, and the reaching of a compromise is more frequent. The main issue is that each involved group must reach a compromise without compromising itself, according to the expression of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991: 338–343).

In March 2004, in Abomey (the historical capital of the precolonial Dahomean kingdom), the discussions that surrounded the funerals of a founding figure of the Celestial Church in the town were relatively tumultuous. The dead was a member of an important Yoruba family of the town that didn’t want to be marginalized in the organization of the funerals. Indeed, the lineage authorities rather wanted to use the occasion to recall and celebrate the deceased’s lineage and to glorify the lineage identity of a person known throughout the town. But such a position (along with the concern for reaffirming the lineage right to the corpses of its dead “children” regardless of their religious affiliation) was not unanimous among those members of the family who could express their own opinion. A regular informant and a friend who described the scene right after it happened affirmed that he took the floor at a family meeting in order to remind everyone that the deceased had been sick for months before dying and that the influential lineage members had been at that time much less worried about him than they were acting today; they were claiming the right to bury him according to lineage rites and yet they had not done anything for him during his long illness. However, this intervention only served to confirm the independent spirit of my friend, and the lineage authorities maintained their claims.
On their part, both the children of the departed who were members of the Celestial Church and those who were members of other Christian Churches, as well as the church congregation headed by the deceased intended to bury the dead according to the Celestial rites. But this scenario also implied that the burial lineage rites would not be celebrated around the corpse and that the lineage authorities would not be given the fingernails and tuft of hair of the dead that have become in southern Benin, at least since the nineteenth century, a conventional metonymic substitute for the body. Such opposition could have degenerated into open conflict and the involvement of the police, but a form of compromise accepted by both parties ended up emerging. This compromise illustrated quite well the pragmatism of both the people fighting for tradition and of the Celestial negotiators.

Indeed, after the parties had privately agreed on this compromise, the parishioners of the deceased's church solemnly came to ask the lineage authorities to let them bury the dead. This saved the “face” of the latter, who were thus recognized as the final decision makers in the funeral scenario. However, in order to avoid any open conflict, they knew that they had to allow the parishioners (and the children) to organise a Celestial burial without even asking for the fingernails and the hair of the dead. This kind of removal from the corpse is exactly the kind of activity that Celestials want a radical break with. Claiming these substitutes for the dead would have been unacceptable to the group of the children and the parishioners.

But the lineage authorities could not surrender all rights to the organization of the funeral, and therefore the children handed in a large amount of money (400,000 CFA francs, according to my informant, or nearly 900 dollars) so that the lineage funeral for their father could be organized. Since they could not obtain the fingernails and the hair, the lineage ritual experts had resorted to a convocation of the dead man's spirit similar to the rituals used when there is no available substitute for the corpse (in precolonial times, this was particularly the case for the warriors who had died during the raids of the Dahomean army.) Also, the complete cycle of funeral and ancestralization rites was organized with money the children had given. Of course, the amount given to the lineage authorities was actually higher than necessary for the organization of the lineage rites, allowing the remaining amount of money to be shared as compensation for allowing the children and the parishioners to have the use of the corpse, which was finally buried on the parish land that the dead man had acquired during last decades of his life in Abomey.

In this case, both parties actually managed to keep a part of what seemed essential to them, but at the same time they had to surrender on other essentials. The children and the members of the dead's church obtained the right to organize the Celestial funerals without having to give the fingernails and hair
of the dead to the lineage authorities, and the latter obtained the reaffirmation of their right to have the use of the bodies of lineage members and to organize lineage funerals. But simultaneously, the Celestials surrendered on the fact that only Celestial funerals would be organized, and the lineage authorities dropped the idea of organizing lineage funerals for the corpse or its conventional substitute.

The pragmatism of the different groups, however, isn’t the only reason for the cohabitation that arises at such funerals. In fact, the compromises that come out of concern for lineage and social entente also lead to forms of agreement that can remain tense and that unquestionably contain a share of violence. In urban environments at least, lineage authorities often know that the contemporary law in Benin does not really support their claims on bodies, and that the recourse to police forces by the deceased’s children would probably not work to their own advantage. But on the other side, the magical capital of the traditional elites often remains decisive in dissuading direct opposition to lineage authorities: the fear of magical aggression that often bears upon those who try to break too radically with lineage ceremonies certainly plays a role as important as the concern for lineage “entente” in leaving open the possibility that the different groups involved will be able to negotiate. Therefore, the pragmatism of the latter is perhaps less linked to tolerance of other ways of conceiving funerals than to the prudence and concern of both sides for not being involved in a spiral of physical and magical violence.

The Celestial way of death

Burying the dead in a Celestial manner

In 1974, a brochure entitled Lumière sur le christianisme céleste, written by a well-educated person from the circle of the prophet Oshoffa, was released. It was particularly meant to answer the criticism directed in those days at the church, as well as to clarify the organization of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. But a small chapter was also devoted to funerals, entitled “Le Christianisme Céleste assure les obsèques de ses membres.” The brochure answered the criticism about the way the church was supposed to bury its dead. Because the Celestial Church refused the performance of the “traditional” lineage rites on behalf of its members, it was at the time accused of abandoning bodies without proper burial rites. The chapter on funerals justified the establishment of Celestial funeral rites, as well as the break with lineage funeral rites, which were considered evil practices. Specific funeral rites have been practiced since the first decades of the church’s existence, and I will now briefly describe their present form.

As I already stated, a music performance often takes place on the night before the inhumation, even though it is not really part of the Celestial liturgy
established by the prophet Oshoffa. On the morning of the burial, the corpse is showed for one or two hours in the mortuary home (which is very often the house where the dead used to live when he was alive), and after a series of prayers and songs around the corpse, the deceased, dressed with his or her Celestial robe and the rank insignia of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, is brought directly to the cemetery or to the lineage grave for the burial service proper. Celestials do not bring corpses inside church compounds because the latter are considered impure, and unless otherwise indicated the floor of the parish should not be soiled by their presence. However, some exceptions are likely to occur, as in the above-mentioned events in which the two important “Evangelists” of the church were buried, one within the walls of a parish under construction and the other inside the parish he had established.

Upon taking the corpse towards the grave, a procession starts behind the faithful carrying the cross, the blessed water, and the incense, and a holy song begins. It retrieves a conventional metaphor from the Fon (the main ethnic group in southern Benin) and Yoruba worlds: “We come to the market, we come to the market in this world.” The fact that a deceased person, especially an old one, “goes back home” when he dies is indeed a conventional way of regarding death and the relations between the world of the living and the world of the dead, even though it of course does not constitute a religious belief as

such. Next to the grave, the coffin is positioned on wooden logs placed through the grave or right beside it, and many different ritual actors and attendants gather around it.

Individual or collective prayers, canticles, collective recitations of psalms, and readings of the Bible commence one after the other until the “announcements” that enumerate the places and dates of the wakes and the services for the dead that will follow the inhumation. Afterwards comes the preaching, very often dealing with conventional themes that refer to ideas shared in the different Christian worlds and even (for some of these themes) in the traditionalist world of southern Benin: the ignorance of people regarding the moment of death, the fact that man is dust and that the soul is property of God, the concern that the dead will find a “good place” in the afterlife and will continue to be benevolent towards the people left behind, etc.

After the preaching, the conductor of the ceremony performs the purification and the sanctification of the grave with incense and blessed water. These rites can be regarded as a rather direct continuity with “traditional” practices of purification, even though the fact that Catholic cemeteries are also considered to be blessed ground must also be underlined. At that moment, a eulogy of the deceased may take place (especially in educated circles) before the conductor incenses the coffin. At that moment the choir, positioned just beside the grave, begins a canticle sung in a language which was unintelligible at the beginnings of the church and considered to be the “language of the angels.” Catalyzed by this specific canticle (which, unintelligible, perfectly illustrates a paradox very frequent in ritual languages) and the simultaneous incensing of the corpse—a gesture which is used in loco verbi, quoting Levi-Strauss (1971: 600)—the soul of the dead is said to rise towards heaven, carried (according to many Celestials) by angels.

After the incensing of the corpse, which is a fundamental moment that will be recalled again during the services for the dead on the eighth and the forty-first day after the burial, the conductor improvises a short prayer before picking up a handful of soil or sand and spreading it on the coffin while remembering with a conventional formula that man is dust. As the coffin is lowered, those who wish can throw another handful of sand on it, or take turns using the sprinkler to pour blessed water. The ceremony is then finished.

In the vast majority of cases, and unless the dead died young and in tragic circumstances, a reception is organized after the burial ceremony. This event represents one of the most significant expenses, if not the most significant, as the reception is also the moment of the funeral attended by the largest audience: some people indeed arrive just after the ceremony of inhumation, either to save time or because they have to attend two burials on the same day, these events being concentrated more and more on Thursdays and Saturdays (on the organization of time in funerals, see Noret 2006: 113-119; 2004b). Also, the re-
ception is increasingly organized separately by the different children (though some of these can still join together to “receive their foreigners” in common) and by the other categories of relatives. Each child indeed fears to be obliged to pay for the others in some way by contributing to receive the “guests” of the other people, and this at the expense of resources that could be used for his or her own “guests.”

This quite general evolution shows of course only one aspect of the contemporary restructuring of familial solidarities, but from this point of view at least the conception of “African solidarity” as unproblematic and noncalculated is in contemporary southern Benin most obviously “a myth to be revisited” (Vidal 1994). However, a part of the reception always remains almost by necessity organized with the help of contributions from the different children of the dead, since there are people in attendance who are neither the “foreigners” nor the “guests” of someone in particular. It is to this common reception that, for example, the members of the choir and of the parish of the dead will be invited in the case of a Celestial funeral, even if the highest religious personalities that attend the event might also be received and given food afterward by some children of the deceased.

However, despite the fact that the postburial receptions often mobilize substantial resources when compared with the income of those who organize them, arguing that the lavishness of funeral expenses means that these organiz-

ers take death as an “excuse” to perform a ceremony for the living’s symbolic benefit (see van der Geest 2000) probably underplays the tensions in which people are caught while engaging in such expenses, and the true burden that funerals represent. Having different social roles (as child, but also as spouse, as parent, etc.), a man burying his father, for instance, often knows the difficulties the expenses he is incurring will cause in his household for months (or even years) after the event, and people may be in such occasions really divided between parts of themselves (on the plural nature of the self, see Lahire 1998 and 2002). Funerals are rarely desired or welcomed, and while they are certainly a “passionate sociodrama” where making use of one’s social and economic capital can take an existential turn (Vidal 1986), I have often seen my informants involve themselves in such events with apprehension, anxiety, or even anguish (see also Bähre 2007; Englund 2001).

Also, to ensure important funerals for one’s parents is a key moment in the construction of the feeling of the accomplished filial duty, and funerals may in this respect prove to be a key moment of the grieving process (see Noret 2010). I remember, for instance, a regular Celestial informant, unquestionably a religious virtuoso in the sense of Max Weber, who used to live permanently within the walls of a parish and devoted himself to praying and to helping people accomplish the “spiritual works” prescribed to them by the visionaries of that parish. Hence, he used to own very few things, and had almost no money. When his mother, Celestial as well, died a few years ago, he could not contribute to any expense incurred by the funerals, and suffered at least for a few months from a genuine and persistent regret. Not being able to contribute to the funerals, as he should have done as a son of the deceased, definitely did not facilitate his grief.

The postburial rites

On the night of the third day after the day of the burial, the first of the three wakes organized by the church takes place. The second and the third wakes will be organized on the fifth and the seventh day, before the eighth-day service. Actually, the whole week following the inhumation is marked by liturgical ceremonies, and the Celestial way of death proves to be ritually dense, a fact that constitutes an evident continuity with the “traditional” handling of death and its numerous successive rites that lead to ancestralization (see, among others, Herskovits 1938: 352–402; Jamous 1994; Noret 2006: 286–413). The precise codification of the wakes, however, is absent from the first written documents issued by the Church, and the systematization of the current way of doing is then probably quite late in the elaboration of the ecclesiastical liturgy.

The wakes, organized most of the time in front of the house of the deceased, start with the sanctification (with incense and blessed water) of both the ritual
space and the person in charge of the service, an event common to Celestial ceremonies in general. Previously, a cross, two candles, and a Bible containing a paper that mentions the name of the dead have all been placed on the little altar provided for the occasion, which is usually a chair in front of which the person who leads the service celebrates with his back turned towards the audience. The wake starts with a series of prayers, readings of psalms, and songs. The canticles which are likely to be sung are of course numerous, but some of them are very common. The first canticle, in the Gun language, states for instance that “we work in order to clean our spirits.” Another very popular one is meant to communicate to the dead that he is not forsaken: “Oh dead, I come with you (bis), there where you eat, there where you drink water, there where you drink a beverage, there where you sleep; oh dead, I come with you!”

Afterward comes the reading of the Bible and more songs. If the deceased was wealthy, held a high rank in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, or held significant social capital, there is usually more than one choir, and more songs. Indeed, if the scripts of the wake and the inhumation ceremonies are strongly codified, this does not imply that the gap is trivial between, for instance, (a) the well-attended funerals of an old male or female member of the Church who was wealthy and advanced in the ecclesiastical hierarchy and whose adult children succeeded in life and (b) the scarce obsequies of a young faithful who comes from a poor family and who was scarcely involved in the Church. Economic, social, and proper religious capital all interlace here and together define the importance of the funeral in the eyes of the church congregation.

But let us return to the wakes. After the reading—drawn from the Old or the New Testament and read most of the time in a local language and sometimes in French—comes the moment of the announcements, followed by the preaching. It is only afterward that the choir is again asked to “animate” the wake. Its rhythmic hold on the audience can obviously vary depending on the case, but at least a part of the female audience often starts to dance when the “battle” rhythm of the church, symbolising its continually renewed fight against malevolent spirits, is launched by the drummers.

Prayers close the wake, and afterwards the audience is often offered a bowl of “coffee” (condensed milk which is diluted and then flavored with instant coffee) with a piece of bread or a cereal mush before slowly leaving the place. The day after the third wake (the one with the highest attendance, because those who can not attend the first two wakes make the effort to participate in this one), the eighth-day service closes the ceremonies of the week following the inhumation.

As stated above, a religious service for the dead, called the eighth-day service when it takes place one week after the burial, is organized after the three wakes. As a noticeable part of those in attendance will not be Celestial on this day, the ban on wearing shoes inside the parish walls is softened, but the parish
will have to be “purified” after the service. Before the service, a *catafalque* (an empty wooden structure that represents the coffin) is placed between the nave and the chancel. In the Celestial temples altars are normally oriented towards the east, and according to this ideal geography the “head” of the *catafalque* is oriented towards the south with its “feet” toward the north. This *catafalque* is also initially covered with a black cloth with a white cross in the middle and then with a white cloth with one or three blue crosses. A candle is placed at the head and another at the feet.

As a sign of its solemnity, the service starts with the entrance procession of the different categories of members: the choir, the upper ranks of the Church hierarchy, the male and female faithful, and finally the members of other religions that attend the ceremony. Next, prayers, songs, readings of the Bible, and psalms come one after the other. The preaching follows and is often as lengthy as in the majority of the Celestial services, which can last three or four hours. After the preaching comes the moment of the offering accompanied by the choir, and after this finally comes the crucial moment of the ceremony: the incensing of the *catafalque*.

At that moment, the wooden structure welcomes the soul of the deceased for whom the service is celebrated: the dead receives there the blessings contained in the incense and in the songs and the prayers that are being performed. At the beginning of the incensing, the two candles placed at the head of the *catafalque* and at its feet are lit. The white cloth is removed to disclose the black cloth with the white cross. The faithful in charge of the incensing then incenses the *catafalque* while the choir solemnly sings the canticle revealed in the “language of angels” that had already been sung around the grave during the burial. But this time, the translation of the canticle into Gun (the main language used in Porto-Novo’s region, where the church was established), revealed to the prophet after the apparition of the canticle itself, is sung promptly after the original one, and then the entire canticle is restarted again: “Let’s come to the Lord (bis)! Up there in Heaven, besides the Archangel Michael! Oh, brothers, let’s come to the Lord!”

The “elite” faithful who know the biblical justifications of the church activities concerning the incensing of the *catafalque* make reference here to the beginning of the third chapter of the book of Zachariah. There, after his death, Joshua appeared in front of God wearing filthy clothes, at which point these clothes were turned into clean ones by the “Angel of the Eternal” as a sign of the remission of his faults, Satan having failed to highlight Joshua’s iniquity. The fact that the white cloth is again placed on the black one after the incensing could here be a metaphor of the remission of sins expected from the ritual action. The mastery of this biblical justification is however unequally distributed among the faithful, and the meanings the services for the dead often take on are more complex, as we will see later.
The moment of the incensing, however, is extremely solemn. It is forbidden to move (adults take children’s hands if necessary), especially in the central part of the temple, because that is the path that the soul and the angels carrying it follow at that moment. Being hit by the soul or by one of the escorting angels would necessarily lead to sickness, accident, or death, depending on the informant asked. Given that the faithful in charge of the incensing might find himself on the path of the soul or of the angels, he must be (at least according to some informers) both full of spiritual power and praying in order to avoid this plight. These contact precautions, the attention paid to keeping the world of the dead and world of the living separate, clearly recall the precautions traditionally taken in order to avoid the contact with the spirits of the dead. And during the ceremony, the catafalque also becomes a way of making the dead present, evoking in some respects the ancestors’ altars but also certain artifacts which materialize in a provisional way the presence of the spirits of the dead during the rites of ancestralization that can be found in the different ethnic traditions of the region (on those rites, see, among others, Jamous 1994; Noret 2006: 286–402). A form of dialectic thus appears here that makes the catafalque a complex synthetic object. Actually, the form of the artifact clearly shows, like the majority of the objects employed by the Celestials, the Christian filiation and identity claimed and experienced by the participants in the ceremony. But by bringing back the spirits of the dead in the catafalque, the Celestials also
introduce some habits of thought that can hardly be considered to be inherited from missionary Christianity and that rather recall the convocations of the dead found in “traditional” lineage funerary and ancestralization rituals.

Finally, after the white cloth has been put again on the catafalque, the members of the family of the deceased are invited to kneel in the central part of the temple as seven ranking faithful start to pray for them. A last song and some prayers finally close the service. Most of the time, the mourners organize another small reception for the attendees within the church compound itself or, for those who care to organize a new “separate” reception, in the place arranged for receiving “foreigners.” Such a service for the deceased is still organized on the forty-first day after the burial.

The bricolage of the status of the dead

Conversion to Celestial Christianity, often motivated by the quest for a solution to concrete problems, is never really followed by explicit education as to the systematized doctrine of the Celestial Church. Discussions on the interpretation of the rites may take place among the faithful or be raised during preaching, but in the majority of the parishes “biblical classes” are either embryonic or nonexistent. It is therefore not surprising that the religious imaginations of Celestials differ according to their previous religious socializations, and that the kinds of relations with the dead they conceive of depend on those influences.3

Moreover, my discussions with Celestials about the status of the dead always happened within the framework of questions about their religious life. My research may thus fail to give a full account of “the lack of consistency and systematic rigor in people’s beliefs” (Astuti 2007: 234) since, just as among the Vezo evoked by Rita Astuti, one can also hear in southern Benin—among Celestials as among the population in general—judgments according to which “when one is dead, one is dead.” Such assertions often seemed to be quite rare, and very probably, according to my ethnographic experience, they are less frequent in southern Benin than among the Vezo in Astuti’s account. But those opinions clearly exist, even if the question of their precise extent and contexts of enunciation and validity are beyond the scope of this chapter. In brief, what follows is an account that relies specifically on the religious discourses of Celestials and not on all of their discursive and tacit practices.

In general, many faithful think that when the catafalque is incensed, the soul of the dead receives the prayer for the remission of sins, which is one of the results expected from the canticle and the ritual action in general. In such interpretations, the ritual aims at obtaining the peace of the deceased’s soul (and consequently, the peace of his or her family). However, one must also
underline the fact that Celestials, like the vast majority of Christians in southern Benin (Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholic and Celestial militants excepted), don't talk much about heaven and hell (see Noret 2004a). The souls for which things go wrong are those who can't rise towards God, those that remain “down” and roam among the living, or simply those that have not found “a good place on the other side.” In this particular, the religious questioning of the Celestials most obviously bears the mark of the traditional religious system: it is at the same time a concern for redemption or salvation and a concern for the departure of the soul.

By this, I don't mean of course that the image of such a departure was absent from missionary Christianity, or that departure isn't present as a simple conventional metaphor for death in the Christian worlds of southern Benin. I would rather underline the gap existing between the orthodox issue of missionary Catholicism, which is a religious concern for redemption and salvation of the soul, and the concern of the lineage funerary rites, which is a concern for the aggregation of the deceased to the group of his forebears. And the conceptions of the afterlife held by the majority of the Celestials are marked by these two religious issues at the same time. You can typically hear that the peace of the soul is linked to its departure towards God, to the fact that it does not remain “down.” This kind of popular interpretation does not spontaneously recall the question of damnation: even if this interpretation exists, it hardly appeared spontaneously in conversations with my informants. Rather, it is much more frequent to hear oscillations and entanglements between concerns for the aggregation of the soul to the group of its forebears (which evoke a scheme of ancestralization) on one side and for the soul’s peace and salvation (which evoke a scheme of redemption) on the other.

However, focusing on the interpretations of the incensing of the catafalque does not provide a full picture of the ambiguity of the status of the dead in the Celestial Church. Actually, this ambiguity most clearly appears when you discuss with the Celestial faithful the reasons motivating the regular organization of religious services for the dead (such services, whether responding to the demand of a member of the faithful or of a family, have exactly the same liturgy of the eighth-day services). Many Celestials then recognize that the dead can sometimes act to benefit the living. As one Vénérable Senior Evangéliste, a high-ranking man in the Church hierarchy, put it in a discussion that we had near the town of Abomey in August 2007 while evoking how souls guard some people: “You know, it is said that the dead are not dead. Perhaps something [bad] would happen to you, and that soul fights for you”—and finally the bad thing does not happen to you any more. It is common for informants to evoke in the same interview both the problems that the souls may have and the need to thank souls for what they do in order to explain why religious services are organized for them. As a Celestial choir member of approximately twenty years
old, a member of the Church since his early childhood, told me in Cotonou in August 2007: "When one asks a mass [a religious service] for a dead relative, it is because perhaps this dead relative has many difficulties there [in the afterlife], and [we do that] so that this dead relative may have peace. Perhaps he deserved to go to heaven and because of some sins he cannot be accepted in heaven, and thus it is necessary to organize masses in order for him to be accepted." But five minutes later, he added, in a slightly different perspective: "I think that dead relatives help. I really believe that … I take my own case for instance. It was said to me that my [dead] older sister helped me a lot, and that it is not finished, and that I really must ask a mass [a religious service] for her. And that she will always help me."

Such narratives often show quite different ways of thinking about the dead, evoking one after the other the precariousness of their situation and their usual power to help the living. Moreover, when considering this second scenario, it seems that the religious relations Celestials weave with their dead oscillate between two different configurations. Some faithful indeed recall the benevolent or malevolent actions of the dead in the world, as if they were some kind of independent entities, while others more systematically place the dead in the position of intercessors who may pray to God in favor of the living. This ambiguity over the autonomy of the dead appears clearly in the prayers pronounced during the funeral rites. It is common to hear on these occasions in reference to the dead: “May he not forget his wife, may he not forget his children,” and so on—statements very often followed, however, by “May he pray for them”: the figure of the interceding dead is reintroduced after the invocation of his or her protective action. When the prayer is said in the Fon language (the main vernacular language of southern Benin), it is addressed to the dead in an even more direct way, the conventional expression being “ma won asi towe kpo vi towe le kpo” which means “do not forget your wife and your children.” This is a popular way of praying to the dead that can be found far beyond the Celestial Church. In this case, the prayer is more directly addressed to the deceased, before it may be specified that he or she is asked to pray for spouses and children. Thus we see how a position of intercessor or even of autonomous entity is regularly attributed to the dead, these formulas being pronounced at almost every funeral (with the variants that, for instance, the deceased’s gender and age impose.)

Additionally, the same people can in some contexts evoke their relations with the dead as if the latter were independent entities and in other situations evoke them as if they were intercessors. This potential instability or relative ambiguity of schemes of thought has long been highlighted by anthropologists. The hesitations or oscillations that can be found in the original syncretic or synthetic religious productions among the Celestials should of course not be considered without reference to the “logique de là-peu-près et du flou”
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(Bourdieu, 1980: 146) of the practical reason. But those hesitations and approximations must also be considered in relation with the heterogeneity of many people’s (and thus many Celestials) religious socialization, which often confront social actors with different religious universes, notably those of “traditional” divinities (the vodun) and those of Islam and Christianity in their various forms.

Actually, the kind of bricolage—in the sense here that the “preconstraints” of the symbolic materials involved in the process fully act (see Lévi-Strauss 1990: 30–36; Mary 2000)—of the status of the dead in which Celestials are engaged is certainly not unique to them. Many Christians (Catholics and Methodists) in southern Benin are indeed involved in a similar symbolic work regarding how they consider the status of their dead: sometimes as recourse figures that recall the ancestral type, sometimes as deceased who implore their prayers in order to improve their condition “on the other side.” Furthermore, the Celestial Church is the only church (probably with other small churches derived from it) in southern Benin where the dead periodically return to an artifact like the catafalque. In that way, the Celestial services for the dead perhaps illustrate better than other liturgies the work of synthesis accomplished on the figures of the dead in contemporary southern Benin, where the Christian religious materials unquestionably constitute an evermore important source of inspiration in the reshaping of categories and the transformation of habits of thought.

Conclusion

The funerals in which Celestials are involved today in southern Benin take place in the context of a differentiated society, albeit one in which important continuities can still be found, among these the way in which burials are generally organized “beyond one’s means.” Lavish funerals, however, are often considered a heavy burden to support, as much among Celestials as in southern Benin in general (Noret 2010). The psychic and social tensions they often cause (inside both individuals and households committed to these expenses) are only partially grasped by the expression “funerals for the living,” used by S. van der Geest (2000) some years ago to stress the contrast between the conspicuous dimension of funerals (and the huge amounts of funeral expenses) in southern Ghana and the simultaneous regular neglect of old people (see also de Witte 2001: 76–80).

Along with the important social investment in funerals, breaking points, however, also appear in southern Benin society, such as in the attitudes that the different religious worlds adopt towards the “traditional” lineage funeral rites. Celestials indeed often try to break in a rather radical way with the “traditional” ritual forms still accepted by the majority of the population while
incorporating into their ritual system in a more or less conscious and declared way certain principles of these traditions, particularly the local longstanding ritual density of the handling of death and the calling of the deceased’s spirit into an artifact (namely, the catafalque) in order to ritually (try to) ensure its transition to a stable position in the afterlife. Moreover, since they were not really socialized into a Celestial doctrine when they entered the Church, their relationship with the dead bear in various ways and at the same time the marks of habits of thought that evoke traditional schemes of thought (and the pattern of ancestralization) and the imprint of ways of thinking inherited from the historical missionary churches (the Catholic Church in particular) with their emphasis on redemption and salvation. Such entanglements of “traditional” and Christian habits of thought are of course very common phenomena across Africa and may probably be considered as a general trait of African religious modernities. The Celestial stroke of genius is to have imagined, with the eighth-day services, a visually powerful ritual synthesis through the invention of a Christian temporary receptacle for the souls of the dead.

Notes
This chapter was first translated from an original French manuscript by Chiara Giordano, then revised by the author, and finally edited by Michael Jindra.
1. This presentation of the Celestial Church of Christ is of course very short. For more general studies on the church, see Adogame 1999; de Surgy 2001; and Henry 2008. And for more detailed studies of the recent history of the church and of its developments in Europe, see Mary 2005 and Henry and Noret 2008, respectively.
2. For a perspective that emphasizes the importance of “entente” as a moral category in the making of arrangements between social groups in West Africa, see Pierre-Joseph Laurent’s analysis of the place of Pentecostal Assemblies of God in contemporary Burkina Faso (Laurent 2003).
3. In an earlier paper (Noret 2003), based on less important fieldwork, I have presented a slightly different view of the status of the dead in the Celestial Church of Christ, where I tended to overestimate the systematization of the diverse religious synthesis of the Celestials. Today, I no longer agree with all the views expressed in that paper. For a more detailed description of the Celestial funerary rites, and a critique of my 2003 paper, see the chapter “Naître et mourir en Chrétien céleste” in Henry 2008.

Bibliography


