



Notes about:

Haitian Beliefs about Death

It is important to remember that just like language dialects and foods, many of the beliefs about death and dying are influenced by various factors such as the area of Haiti in which the individual has lived, individual family traditions, economic and financial resources and the level of acculturation to the United States. Additional influences are religious considerations and the extent to which voodoo practices are integrated into everyday life. Many people may practice Christianity or Catholicism, but aspects of the voodoo culture are present in their practices.

Organ Donation:

- This practice is not widely accepted in Haiti. There is an emphasis on keeping the body intact after death to be prepared for afterlife and resurrection.

Autopsy:

- There is very little availability of professionals who can do autopsies in Haiti. Therefore, the idea of autopsy is not common, and is often thought of as related to a political or suspicious reason.
- As with organ donation mentioned previously, there is a preference to keep the body intact.

Cremation:

- This view is changing some, but typically, burial is preferred over cremation.
- One contributing factor is the belief that the body can still feel; so a cremation would cause the pain of the heat. Similarly, the thought of putting a body into a cold morgue is discomforting to some families, because the morgue is cold.

Zombification:

- Some Haitians believe that zombies are persons whose spirits have been captured and brought back from the dead. Zombification is seen as a punishment because of some injustice the person had inflicted on another person during their first life. Zombification is performed by a voodoo priest who causes the person's death, and then raises them from the dead, transitioning them to an individual who is like a slave, controlled by another, without the freedom to make their own decisions.
- This has caught the attention of some researchers in the past:
<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2017/10/are-zombies-real>

Cemeteries:

- A cemetery is for the purpose of burying the dead. It would be unfamiliar to walk through a cemetery for any other reason. In the USA, houses or buildings that are built close to a cemetery can be puzzling as to why that location was chosen for such a building.

- The master of the cemetery is the first person to be buried in the cemetery. In voodoo tradition, the Haitian priest must ask permission of the master of the cemetery in order to raise dead, etc.

Funerals/Mourning Practices:

- If it is known that the person is going to die, prefer to keep the person at home to pass on. Family wants to gather at the bedside when death is imminent. Sometimes a family will want to bathe and perfume the body of the person who has recently passed, although in the USA, this access is not always possible.
- The veve is typically the night before the funeral, similar to the viewing used in the USA. The funeral service can be called the prise de deuil. During the time between death and the funeral, the family prays to help the soul pass to the next phase; this is typically seven days if there are resources to preserve the body before burial. In many parts of Haiti, the body buried much quicker due to no resources embalm or hold the body.
- Mourning is often very loud. Crying is showing care.
- For funeral Haitians usually wear black or they open to other colors like blue, gray; but in any circumstance it should not be red. Red in a funeral in Haiti is like giving a slap to the family of the deceased person or openly declare you are the murderer. Following people's perspective in Haiti, red is the color of blood and should be avoided in every activity related to giving a tribute to a person deceased. (But for weddings, parties, casual situation...people wear red normally like any other colors.)

Death:

- Death is often viewed as unnatural; death has happened because someone else caused the death (either by their actions, thoughts, or curses.)
- Death of an older person is more acceptable than that of a young person. An older person lived his/her life, but a young person did not accomplish life goals or mission.
- Hospice care is not common in Haiti, so this can be confusing to immigrants from Haiti and is easily misunderstood as actions to speed up the death of the person.

Infant Death:

- Views on infant death may be varied between families from Haiti, depending on if the family is from Port-au-Prince, a city with increased access to health care and prenatal care, or if the family is from another part of Haiti which does not have hospital or clinic care available. It is critical to consider that every situation is individualized and best practice is to develop trust and communication with the mother and family to best support them during this difficult time.
- If the mother has **not** had the opportunity for prenatal care, she may not have had an ultrasound, she may not know the gender of the baby, she most likely didn't have gifts or a baby shower, and she may not have a name for the baby. She has had limited opportunity to think about that baby as a person and may instead think of pregnancy as more of a condition. Therefore, if the baby dies before, during or shortly after delivery, the mourning may not be as evident, as that baby has not had the opportunity to be named, baptized, accepted into the family. It is interesting to note that in Haiti, if the mother and the baby die, it is not unusual for them to be placed in the same casket or box and buried together.
- On the other hand, a mother who has had more opportunities to connect with her unborn baby may mourn differently, wanting to see or hold the deceased baby. Sometimes this mother may have had the opportunity to live in cities with more prenatal care and therefore have a different connection with

the unborn baby. The number of years that they spent in school may be impact their view of life and death, as well as their exposure to other cultures.

- Sometimes the death of an infant is thought to be caused by a curse or angry thoughts from another person. The family may question if the baby is truly dead, or if the “death” is just a curse. In Haiti, that family would desire to take the body of the baby to a voodoo priest to raise the baby, as the cause was thought to be a curse and therefore, can be reversed. Another reason the family may want the body is to perform rituals for the correct passage to life after death.

Additional Impacts of Death:

- Unfortunately, death is far too much of a reality for Haitians who live in Springfield. For many of them, their family members are still in Haiti and are currently attempting to survive some of the most violent times Haiti has ever seen.
- Se´izisman is the most frequently occurring syndrome specific to Haitian culture; literally meaning “seized-up-ness,” it is a state of paralysis is brought on by strong feelings of anger or sadness. The most frequent causes include receiving bad news, witnessing a traumatic event, or seeing dead bodies. Symptoms can include headaches, increased blood pressure, loss of vision, disorientation, constant weeping, refusal to eat or sleep, unresponsiveness, shortness of breath. Because Haitians believe that Se´izisman can cause miscarriages, deformations, and contaminated breast milk, it is common for family to make every effort to protect pregnant and postpartum women from bad or shocking news.

How to use these notes:

These notes are not meant as a comprehensive guide to death rituals among immigrants from Haiti. We compiled these notes by looking through written sources and amending and altering them through review of our public health co-workers here at Clark County Combined Health District. We expect that these notes may need to be updated. Thank you for checking back for updates of this document.

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