

Anthropology of Death: 290

Mourning Around the World During the Aids Epidemic

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## Running Head: MOURNING AROUND THE WORLD DURING THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

Mourning for some, is an individual process. It can seem like the pain from losing someone you love is beyond anyone's comprehension. Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, also known as Aids, is a deadly epidemic that rocked nations. According to the World Health Organization: "Since the beginning of the epidemic, 75 million people have been infected with the HIV virus and about 32 million people have died of HIV." (World Health Organization, 2018). There is no denying the immense impact that the Aids virus has on the living. One person cannot handle the mourning of millions by themselves and it requires communities to come together to grieve.

With no current cure, this virus continues to steal the lives of hundreds of thousands a year. However, the disease is at halt due to recent medical advancements. In 2017 alone, 50% of the population that is HIV positive is being treated for it. (Ending Aids, 2017) This means that 19.5 million people globally in 2017 were being treated for Aids. This is an all time record and huge reward and sigh of relief for those who are HIV positive and their supporting communities. (Ending Aids, 2017) Sadly, the disease is still deadly to those who have not been treated properly or cannot afford treatment. Over 770,000 people passed away from Aids in 2018 (W.H.O, 2018)

However, by bringing communities together in times like this, it can be incredibly healing. Everyone can think of a time where talking about their feelings actually brought them some peace of mind. In situations of severe medical conditions, loved ones of the ill feel especially helpless. (Walker, 2019) In an article by the New York Times released in 1992, it accounts how therapists encouraged community mourning during this devastating period. (Rosenthal, 1992) Mardi Fritz, a psychotherapist who ran grief counselling for Aids victims said "We have to find ways to handle the experience of perpetually grieving, of never being out of

grief. For those of us who live in the world of H.I.V., by the time you close the circle of grief for one person, 4 others, or 10 others have died.” (Rosenthal, 1992) This article explains that people living in urban cities were more likely to see their friends, chosen-family and fellow citizens pass. (Rosenthal, 1992) This seems to make people feel like death is all around them and might find it difficult to cope with such extreme loss. Grief counsellors during this period, worked to try and find new inventive ways to cope with the intense amount of loss. They found that group therapy seemed to be the most effective way. (Rosenthal, 1992) She also explains that instead of becoming overwhelmed with grief, the LGBTQ+ community in New York focused their energy on political change as a way to mourn. (Rosenthal, 1992) In times of helplessness working towards a goal is comforting for mourning. It seems that for this community, getting the government to acknowledge the crisis gave the survivors a purpose to keep fighting.

In South Africa, the first reported case of Aids was in 1982. (Hodes, R. 2018) Due to the quick spread of Aids in South Africa, the adults who have passed are regarded as a “missing generation”. (Block, 2018) This “missing generation”, has left behind their children and because of their parents passing, they are now orphans. In South Africa, grandparents, specifically grandmothers are regarded as ideal caretakers in the absence of the parents. (Block, 2018) This stems from thinking grandmothers will treat their grandchildren as if they are theirs. Due to this, it puts them in a difficult position. These grandmothers are left to provide for their grandchildren, grieve the loss of their children all while their health may be at risk. Ellen Block explains that grandmothers during the Aids crisis, experienced high anxiety towards their own death. (Block, 2018) They seem to fear death because of feeling like they are burdening the rest of their family

with the children in their care. (Block, 2018) This is a sad state of mind towards your own death especially because a key priority for them is to have a “good death”.

Basotho people in South Africa are most often Christian. For the Basotho people of Lesotho, funerals are used as a transition from living family members to ancestors. (Block, 2018) Funerals are quite an expensive investment for Basotho. Funeral ceremonies and feasts are standard features in the Basotho funerals. They are a way to bring the community together to mourn in a healthy way. In their beliefs, it's common to reach a point of acceptance in order to achieve a “good death”. (Block, 2018) Block describes that a key part of dying for patients with chronic illnesses like Aids is to reach acceptance. (Block, 2018) They can prove this by leaving specific instructions for the living to abide by. (Block, 2018) However, in the case of grandmothers as sole caregivers during this crisis, they seem to have skipped this part. The grandmother's sole focus is on their grandchildren and it was easier for them to put their physical and social needs for preparing their deaths behind the care for their grandchildren. (Block, 2018) By disregarding this process it most likely did not allow these grandmothers to achieve their well deserved “good death”.

Adodi is a community that was born out of Philadelphia during the Aids epidemic in 1986. (Sablo, N.D.) The collective was created for men of African descent who are homosexual. The group is not exclusive to only HIV positive men though. (Sablo, N.D.) Beasley in his article “Tribute to the Ancestors” details that the Aids epidemic in North American media mainly focused on white gay men. He claims “while the Aids epidemic increasingly becomes a disease of people of color, the literature, images, and general representation of the disease stay predominantly white” (Beasley, 2008) The origin of the word Adodi is the plural of Ado, which

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means man who “loves” another man in Yoruba. (Beasley, 2008) Adodi is praised for being a collective based on spirituality not religion. (Sablo, N.D.) A member of the Adodi states “The Black Church can be an oppressive and condemnatory force for SGL (same gender loving) individuals” (Sablo, N.D.) Due to this, inclusivity and the feeling of a safe space is a priority.

The Adodi held their first ritual retreat in 1983 with only 12 members attending.

(Beasley, 2008) As the years have gone on, the summer retreats have anywhere from 80-100 men in attendance. (Beasley, 2008) The purpose of the retreat was to mourn their partners, within a safe space with men who had similar experiences with Aids. The ritual they perform is called the “Tribute to the Ancestors”. (Beasley, 2008) During the ritual members of the organization dress in all white which is significant to Yoruba tradition where it means holiness and purity. (Beasley, 2008) They then enter a barn while chanting “Oyade’ winds of change” and the leader of the ceremony invites the spirits. (Beasley, 2008) This ritual is emotional and used as a tool to heal and rid the guilt of surviving Aids while commemorating all black individuals who have passed on. (Beasley, 2008)

The Adodi collective published two journals called The Sojourner. (Beasley, 2008) The purpose was to bring awareness and strike change during the aids epidemic. The first twenty pages are black with white writing of all the names of the people who have passed from Aids. (Beasley, 2008) The meaning behind this was to act like a memorialization piece. A part of their ritual ceremony is known as “Calling Out the Name of the Ancestors”. These twenty pages are meant to act like a written part of this ritual. The introduction of the journal states: “Sojourner is about beginnings. For many of us, it is the beginning of our search for ways to face the day after the wakes, the funerals, the memorials of yet another friend-lover-family member ... These pages

are to remind both the Black community and the Gay white community that black f\*g\*\*ts are infected/affected by HIV/AIDS!” (Beasley, 2008) This is a strong statement but it’s filled with emotion. Their community was not being recognized as suffering from the virus and ultimately they were left to fend for themselves to mourn. The Adodi have the right intentions of creating a community to mourn the millions they lost and create a safe space to do so. They are not exclusionary to anyone of a certain different economic status and have worked hard to keep their organization based on donations.

Aids is a horrible disease that took millions of people's lives over the last four decades. As the time gets further from the peak of the epidemic, there has been a lot of reflection based on it. This virus affects generations and leaves an intense amount of sorrow in its wake. Since Aids has not been cured, people continue to fall fatal because of it. Mourning in a healthy way is the only way to fully make it through the tragedy of this epidemic. Communities around the world have gathered their citizens and tried their best to mourn properly out of respect for the dead. In the case of mass death, community support is the key to making individuals feel less alone. By retreating into yourself when going through such intense grief for copious amounts of loss, isolation is not the answer.

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