

Sacred and Profane Space: Ritual Interaction and Process in the Newfoundland House Wake*

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Abstract/Résumé

L'étude porte sur les relations spatiales qui s'établissent dans le contexte de la veillée funèbre traditionnelle à Terre-Neuve. Cette analyse comparative des veillées dans les communautés catholique et protestante examine surtout la façon d'occuper l'espace pendant la veillée, pendant le rite de passage, ainsi qu'au cours de l'"éloignement" symbolique du défunt.

This paper examines the spatial relationships which develop within the context of the traditional Newfoundland wake, including both the physical deployment of space during the wake and the practice of ritual separation during the symbolic "distancing" of the dead. These features are examined through a comparative analysis of wakes in both Catholic and Protestant communities.

The division of the world into two domains which include everything that is sacred in the one and everything that is profane in the other, is the characteristic feature of religious thought... By sacred things, however, we must not just understand those personal beings called gods or spirits: a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in short any miscellaneous thing can be sacred. Émile Durkheim.¹

It is the aim of this paper to examine the concepts of sacred and profane as they relate to the use of interior spaces within the context of the traditional Newfoundland house wake.² The notion of the existence of sacred and profane worlds as the universal concept underlying all forms of religious thought is not a new one. The eminent French sociologist, Émile Durkheim, treated this notion in some detail in the latter part of the nineteenth century and his work remains relevant to contemporary social scientific research. Although a thorough discussion of the terms sacred and profane is beyond the scope of this analysis, a brief review of Durkheim's definitions will be useful. The profane is that world wherein interaction between

individuals, and between individuals and other animate and inanimate objects, is governed by purely human considerations. These considerations are those of the everyday life of a geographically or ethnologically defined community whose members share similar ideas concerning such interaction. In the sacred world, the rules of human interpersonal conduct are negated. The inhabitants of this world are non-human, supernatural beings. The sacred world is not immediately perceivable by humans, but its nature and structure can be made known to them by sacred human intermediaries, such as priests or prophets. This knowledge often takes the form of myth or other religious message imparted by inhabitants of the sacred "Other-world." The sacred then may not be directly experienced or perceived but is conceptualized in terms of concrete metaphor and expressive symbolism, that is, in humanly meaningful terms.

Durkheim saw the difference between the sacred and the profane as absolute, the two having in essence nothing whatsoever in common. This does not imply that the two worlds may not enter into contact the one with the other: interaction is unavoidable and in fact necessary. In addition, objects in the profane world may become sacred through some process of metamorphosis. Pebbles, trees, houses are all profane objects that may become sacred. This change is conceptual, not perceptual, in nature: such transformed objects retain their profane appearance but are considered to possess certain intrinsic qualities which render them sacred. An object or individual may not be both sacred and profane at the same time. It will be demonstrated, however, that these categories, although by

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definition mutually exclusive, function in complementary fashion to accomplish a single aim.

In his examination of Durkheim's social theory of religion, Murray Wax relates these abstract notions to human activity: "Religious beliefs are then systems which express the nature of sacred things, and religious rites are rules prescribing the way men must conduct themselves in relationship to sacred objects."³

The concept of the sacred is therefore a prerequisite for the development of religious beliefs which in turn are expressed in the form of religious rites. Through the performance of such rites man recognizes the contact between the sacred and profane worlds, as well as the possibility of establishing and the necessity of maintaining relationships between the two. Such rites have an equivalent in the profane world, where social rules and mores determine the quality of relationships between individuals in the sociocultural unit and prescribe the conduct deemed appropriate of individuals within that unit. Such social rules determine the relationships of the individual to his fellows and to his physical environment.

Theoreticians such as Durkheim have outlined the distinctive features of the sacred and the profane and the nature of man's relationship to each. In practice, however, such clear-cut distinctions are difficult to maintain for the concepts of both the sacred and the profane are essentially cultural in origin. Culture and society establish the criteria for profane interaction, these criteria being largely based upon the necessity for cohesion if the society is to survive. Similarly, it is culture which prescribes the rules for interaction between the profane and the sacred, the concept of the sacred and one's relationship to it being culture-specific: the sacred *per se* does not interact with man except through man's (culture's) conception and interpretation of it. Thus, the sacred frequently appears as a force which serves to legitimize the society's moral and social rules of personal conduct and interaction. The result is that both the sacred and the profane concepts of a given culture operate to maintain societal integrity and cohesion in the profane world in which they originate and are conceptualized. Religious rites, although overtly expressing an individual's relationship to the sacred, covertly express one's relationship to this fellows. The collective sanctioning of, and participation in, such rites reinforces the legitimacy of the values themselves and of the society as an integral unit.

This treatment of the traditional wake in Newfoundland will rest upon the essentially dual nature of the custom. The wake illustrates well the conceptual dichotomies thus far introduced: the physical and the abstract, the profane and the sacred, the social and the religious. The remainder of this study will examine and illustrate the manner in which these apparent opposites are integrated — and show how they function — within the wake context.

II

To this point, the traditional Newfoundland wake has been referred to as though it were a uniform custom practiced with little or no variation throughout the island. Such is not the case, since each community possesses its own particular ways of dealing with the deceased. What is striking, however, is that in all areas where the house wake continues to be practiced, the underlying pattern of the wake appears to be essentially the same, although the specific surface features may vary considerably depending on the community and the religious denomination. It is not my intention to describe the enormous variety of these surface features but rather to focus upon those elements of pattern (or structure) which appear to be common to the wake in general. Specific features will be considered only in so far as they are widely practiced and in so far as they reflect and illustrate the underlying concepts which are our prime concern.

Of the descriptions of wakes in Newfoundland tradition which were examined, all contain reference to beliefs and practices which correspond to and may be grouped into the following general categories:

1. A concern for the physical appearance of the deceased.
2. The designation of a specific room in which the corpse is placed; in most cases, the room is the parlour.
3. A concern for the arrangement of the wake room and for the position of the corpse within this arrangement.
4. A differentiation of the activities performed within the wake room and those performed elsewhere.
5. An almost formulaic pattern of interaction between the deceased's immediate family and the visitors attending the wake.
6. The designation of a specific length of duration to the wake.
7. The performance of rites aimed at facilitating and ensuring the separation of the deceased from the world of the living.

These categories represent the characteristics which appear to be common to all wakes in Newfoundland tradition, regardless of community or the religious affiliation of its members.

1. Physical Appearance of the Corpse

Immediately following the death of an individual, arrangements are made to prepare the body for the wake and subsequent funeral. Normally, two individuals — male or female depending on the sex of the deceased —

undertake the task of rendering the body as lifelike as possible and in a condition suggestive of peaceful sleep. The body is washed, shaved, and dressed in the deceased's finest clothes. Makeup and perfume may be applied to the body of a female. A penny or other coin is often placed over each eye to keep them closed until rigor mortis has set in. Similarly, the mouth is tied shut by means of a strip of cloth passed under the chin and around the back of the neck. The body is placed in the casket with its hands clasped on its breast or straight at its sides.

Of interest is the maintenance with respect to the dead of the sexual proprieties which prevail in life. This suggests an attitude which views an inanimate object — the corpse — as subject to the same societal and moral norms as any living member of the society. This attitude seems to indicate that the corpse is still considered a member of that society, and subject to the same rules of interpersonal relationships and conduct as are the living.

The concern for appearance which is expressed in the care taken over the grooming of the corpse tends to reinforce this suggestion that the deceased has not yet passed from the profane world of society. The corpse is treated, in fact, much as an invalid might be who is unable to perform the task of personal grooming. A more tangible explanation for this concern is that the corpse is, in a very real sense, to be put on display to the entire community. As such, the appearance of the deceased is as important to obtaining for the family the approbation of the community as it is to the personal fulfilment of one's duty to a family member.

2. Designation of the Wake Room

Invariably, the room designated for the display of the corpse is the parlour (living-room, inner room). In Newfoundland outports, this is a seldom-used room in which the family displays what it considers to be its best furniture, ornaments, and heirlooms. The social centre of the home is the kitchen, where the routine processes of everyday interaction occur. In his discussion of the community of "Cat Harbour," Faris makes the following observation:

But there is also a conceptual association between everyday normal outport life and the kitchen, where visiting, eating, and most daily interaction takes place. The living room or parlour — the "inner part" — is associated with formality, reserve, and fear, reflected in an outside entrance which is never used by the inhabitants... Only "strangers" go to this door to be admitted and only strangers are entertained in the inner part (it being a serious breach of conduct to enter the inner part without being specifically invited).⁴

Faris's description corresponds for the most part with other descriptions of the functions of kitchen and parlour,

though his ascription of fear seems to be peculiar to his own area of research. Certainly, the parlour is used sparingly, often only at Christmas and on other special occasions, such as the wake. Some informants claim in fact that the parlour was utilized only during a wake.

The parlour then is very much a sacred space, as opposed to the kitchen which is a decidedly profane space. However, an important distinction exists between the sacredness of the parlour as described by Faris and its sacredness as a wake room. Whereas under normal conditions the parlour is reserved almost exclusively for strangers to the exclusion of community members, the opposite is the case during the wake. It is at this time that the room is opened to the community and wakers to the exclusion of strangers. And it is in this room that the corpse is placed.

This apparent reversal of the function of the parlour is not inconsistent with the theoretical model outlined in the introductory section of this essay; on the contrary, it corresponds to and confirms the theory. By removing the deceased to the sacred space which is the parlour, the first physical move is made to remove the deceased from the profane world of the living and to recognize that he is no longer of that world. He has, in fact, entered the abstract space of the sacred, and in so doing has become a stranger who must now be related to in sacred terms. That community members, normally excluded from the parlour, are now permitted access to it in no way contradicts the rules that dictate that the kitchen is the place where normal interpersonal relationships occur. The participants in the wake are not entertained in the wake room; rather, they join with the family in sacred relationship to the deceased and to each other.

3. The Wake Room Setting

That the parlour is transformed for use as sacred space is further illustrated by the special arrangements made to alter its appearance in preparation for the wake. The curtains and blinds are drawn and remain so for at least the duration of the wake. A subdued light — shaded lamp or candles — is placed in the room, with some light illuminating the head of the casket. In Catholic homes, crucifixes are mounted throughout the room. The coffin itself is placed against one wall, away from the windows, and raised upon a platform designed for that purpose. In many instances, informants describe the positioning of the coffin as being of particular significance: often, the foot of the coffin faces east. The window is left slightly open.

Although the furniture in the wake room may not be rearranged, in many cases it is covered either in white or dark-coloured sheets. Extra chairs are moved into the room and positioned near the coffin to be used by those who will "sit up" with the corpse at night.

Just as the general appearance of the parlour is altered to a greater or lesser extent, so too the attitudes of people towards this room are significantly modified. The parlour, which already holds particular significance for the family, now constitutes a purely sacred space and, more specifically and importantly, symbolizes the sacred space which is now the domain of the deceased.

4. Differentiation of Activities and 5. Interaction between Bereaved and Visitors

The wake room then is the sacred space of the deceased and all activities which have a bearing on the deceased's new state are performed in this room. Visitors to the wake follow a highly structured and formally rigid procedure. Upon entering the home, the visitor immediately enters the wake room and expresses his condolences to the bereaved. He then proceeds to the half-open coffin to view the corpse. In many cases, prayers are offered and, in the Catholic tradition, the sign of the cross is made. There is then some discussion as to how peaceful the corpse looks and remarks are passed on the life of the deceased. If he died young, these remarks are expressions of extreme pity, regret, and sadness; in the case of older people, talk generally turns to the fullness of his life experiences and, if appropriate, to how well he lived and how peacefully he died. After further condolences are offered, the visitors move to the kitchen.

In the kitchen, the situation is much different. Food and drink is served and a more relaxed atmosphere prevails. People sit or stand around at their ease and socialize much as they might under normal circumstances. There may be some discussion of the deceased, but talk generally turns towards personal interaction between and concerning those present. The gathering may in fact become quite a lively affair as the evening wears on.

The activities in each area are sharply differentiated, and are as different as the sacred and profane spaces in which they are performed. The wake room is the ultimate sacred space in which the rules governing the expression of man's relationship to the sacred hold complete and supreme sway. It is the place where ritual behaviour is a requisite and all other behaviour inappropriate. The parlour has been transformed from a real space, access to which is governed by its sacred nature. To behave other than according to the prescribed rules would be to behave in a profane manner, and such behaviour is restricted to the kitchen. Any violation of the code determining the type of relationship one may enter into in each space is not only a personal affront to the deceased and to the family, but also a threat to the community's shared concept of the sacred and man's relation to it.

For the duration of the wake, the deceased's immediate family abandon their normal activities and devote their energies to the wake itself. As a rule, when one is

entertaining guests in one's home, the family provides the food and sometimes the drink. During the wake, however, the visitors bring and prepare the food, although the bereaved serve it. This reversal of normal practice is a significant example of how the rules governing interpersonal relationships in the profane world are displaced by those of the sacred. It implies an association of the family with the deceased and hence with the sacred world itself. It is not the death of the close relative which alone is responsible for the family's expressing its grief; social considerations regarding community norms dictate that the family *must* behave in an appropriately respectful way and demonstrate their state of mourning. Just as the visitors observe certain rules of conduct while in the wake room, so too failure on the part of the family to behave as society expects would be to reject and therefore threaten societal cohesion. In a real sense, the family, as well as the deceased, are on display and open to careful scrutiny, as are the visitors. When all behave according to the accepted norms, the society's values are reaffirmed and reinforced.

One final wake room activity is of particular interest, and, owing to its almost universal practice at all wakes, merits discussion here. This is the practice of "sitting up" with the corpse. Many of the participants at the wake, with the exception of the very close relatives of the deceased, remain at the wake throughout the night. Most stay in the kitchen, where activities may range from subdued conversation to lively partying. At all times, however, someone remains in the wake room with the corpse, which is never left alone at any time during the wake.

6. Duration of the Wake

In most cases, the wake lasts for two nights and three days, the funeral occurring on the third day following death. A number of reasons have been proposed for this, but two in particular, one from Catholic and one from Protestant traditions, are most common. In Catholic tradition, the three-day duration of the wake is associated with the Biblical account of Christ's rising from the dead and ascending into heaven on the third day. The Protestant explanation is less mystical in nature and is based on practical considerations. Stories are told of people being thought dead, only to regain consciousness during their own wakes. The three-day period is considered a safety measure to ensure that the deceased is indeed deceased. However, neither of these explanations is widely cited and the origin of this practice seems to be unknown to most informants. Our discussion and analysis to this point suggest a possible interpretation of the three-day ritual.

If one regards the wake as an institution designed to reaffirm societal values, the necessity for the three-day waking period seems clear. It allows the community as a whole the opportunity to express its solidarity with regard to things sacred, and permits the gradual separation of the deceased from the world of the living. In addition, the

bereaved, who are themselves separated by their grief from normal activity, are gradually reintegrated into the community. By restricting the period of grief and formalizing it into a three-day ritual, the community becomes whole again in a relatively short period of time.

On a more abstract level, recognition of the need for making one's final peace with the deceased may be a decisive factor as well. O'Suilleabhain discusses this possibility in his treatment of the Irish wake:

Why should the living have feared the dead in earlier times? Their first attitude towards one who had died was one of pity, as friends and property had to be left behind for some reason which was not clear to them. This feeling of pity was mixed with a still stronger feeling of fear that the dead person might return to take revenge on those who had succeeded to his property. Thus the survivors did everything in their power to placate the dead. This could best be done while the dead body was still with them. Hence the wake. It was originally intended to give the living a chance of showing goodwill towards the dead and of sympathizing with him in his decease. By doing this, they hoped to gain his goodwill and thus negate any evil dispositions he might have towards them.⁵

For whatever the reason, the members of the community feel the need to pay their last respects to the dead. As for the three-day period, which appears to be a constant in Newfoundland tradition, it is considered to be the maximum length of time which a body may safely be kept before decomposition necessitates interment.

7. Rites of Separation

As mentioned above, the removal of the corpse to the sacred space of the wake room suggests a symbolic physical separation of the deceased from the profane world of the living. During the wake, a certain number of rites are performed to facilitate and promote this separation. A number of examples which seem to represent widespread practices further illustrate this separation.

The window of the wake room is left open from the moment of death until the physical removal of the corpse from the house. No theoretical hypothesis is necessary to interpret this practice — the informants themselves admit that this is to permit the deceased's soul free egress from the house.

When the time comes to remove the corpse from the home, it is commonly believed that the casket must be removed foot foremost and only through the door. Any divergence from this practice may result in the deceased's spirit remaining in the house. In many cases, the coffin is built inside the home of the deceased and often is too large to pass through the doorway. One informant cites an instance when, rather than pass the coffin through a

window, the wakers enlarged the doorway to accommodate the coffin. These two examples illustrate the manipulation of a physical space to fulfil the requirements dictated by the concepts governing appropriate conduct of the profane towards the sacred. Procedures deemed convenient in the treatment of the profane world are taboo in relationship to the sacred.

A third example of a rite of separation illustrates the attempt by the wakers to establish their future relationship to the deceased. It is common in Newfoundland wake tradition that those who come to view the corpse touch or kiss the body. This is said to be performed so that the living will never again "see the deceased" or be haunted by dreams about him. This is performed in the wake room before the funeral. The significance of such a rite is clear: the corpse itself has been physically moved from the profane to the sacred space. Now his spirit — the sacred being into which the deceased has been transformed by death — must be finally and fully relegated to the sacred domain. Future communion with the dead is to be at the volition of the living. Contact with the dead is controlled through the performance of this rite.

III

The Newfoundland wake may be seen as a process whereby the social order, which has been disturbed by the death of one of its members, is restored. It serves to remove the imbalance between the profane and sacred domains which death has created. Each of these domains has its place, and the community maintains a clearly established relationship with each. When a death occurs, the sacred enters into uncomfortable contact with the profane and is embodied in the deceased, who is suddenly neither profane nor sacred; the wake, through an organized synthesis of sacred and profane relationships, literally puts things in their proper place.

During the wake, the sacred and the profane are symbolically capsulized under one roof, where the process of differentiation may be more conveniently performed. This differentiation is realized by the gradual separation of the deceased from the world in which he no longer has a place and his integration into the equally structured world of the sacred, where he belongs. Death, therefore, no longer implies contradiction and disorder but rather recategorization. The mystery of death is thus rationalized. It is for these reasons that the wake process must be viewed as a single entity, rather than as a juxtaposition of two opposed and contradictory types of activity. Resolution is the result of a structured deployment of interior spaces.

For a number of reasons, it has been necessary to discuss the wake in general terms and to emphasize its patterned structure, rather than its surface features. More complete and valid conclusions would result from an intensive

examination of the tradition as it relates to the network structure of a single community. Nevertheless, the very consistency of the patterns upon which this paper concentrates is significant enough to warrant this type of theoretical analysis. The separation of the deceased from the profane world and the reintegration of the bereaved into the normal environment of the community would appear to constitute the elementary aims of this form of ritual behavior and interaction. The successful accomplishment of these aims serves to consolidate the position of both social and religious values, thereby enhancing the survival chances of the community as a stable, cohesive unit.

NOTES

1. W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings with Bibliographies* (London: Rutledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 113-14.
2. In many areas of Newfoundland, the term "wake" is applied only to Roman Catholic funerary tradition; however, it is convenient here to use it for the practice in general.
3. Murray Wax, "Religion and Magic," in *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, ed. James A. Clifton (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), 229.
4. James C. Faris, *Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) 154.
5. Seán O'Suilleabhain, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1961), 171.