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# Climbing the Trail to Heaven: traditional funerals and burial practices in Dane-zaa territory - an ethnographic account from North-eastern British Columbia

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## ABSTRACT

While performing fieldwork in Fort St. John (July 2019–August 2020), I attended two traditional funerals organised by Doig River First Nation, a Dane-zaa First Nation of North-eastern British Columbia. As per the Dane-zaa tradition, drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire were key components of both funerals. Nevertheless, there was an essential difference between the two ceremonies. The 2019 funeral celebrated for Janice Askoty was a blended ceremony where traditional practices were performed alongside a Christian liturgy. Such a ceremony underlined existing tensions between community members regarding faith and systems of beliefs. These tensions were absent in the 2020 funeral celebrated for Annie Oker, where there was no Christian liturgy. Drawing on my observations and using the concept of *syncretism*, in this paper, I highlight how indigenous cultural practices, symbols, and beliefs have been integrated with Christian practices to the point that new blended practices have been established. At the same time, I point out how some traditional practices (i.e. drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire) have not been modified by external influences, surviving until now. In conclusion, I describe how colonialism's legacy still manifests itself during funerary celebrations and how community members perceive, face, and counter it.

## KEYWORDS

Indigenous peoples;  
Dane-zaa; syncretism;  
traditional funeral; Tea  
Dance; drumming;  
traditional beliefs system

## 1. Introduction – between traditional beliefs and Christianity: the concept of syncretism

The sun was shining when I arrived at Charlie Oker Park (named after Annie's Oker brother), Petersen's crossing, in the early afternoon of Monday, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019. It was not a common location for a funeral, which is usually celebrated at the Reserve; however, in exceptional cases and where family preferences can be satisfied, other sites are considered. Janice Askoty asked before she died to have her funeral celebrated at Petersen's crossing, a place that has a special meaning for many members of Doig, Blueberry, Halfway, and Prophet River First Nations. In fact, many members of the former Fort St. John Indian Band were relocated there after being displaced from the Montney Reserve after World War II.<sup>1</sup> A few

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years later, when the Indian Reserve #206 (Doig Reserve) was established, many moved to the Reserve; however, some members of the Askoty, Makadahay, Oker and Pouce Couple families decided to continue living at Petersen's crossing.<sup>2</sup>

The place has a special meaning for Doig members also because Charlie Oker, one of the last Dreamers, died there in 1951, and he is buried in the small cemetery located at Petersen's crossing. Janice Askoty lived many years at Petersen's; she felt a special connection with that place. Thus, her desire to have her funeral celebrated there and be buried in the small adjoining cemetery. Similar reasons justified the celebration of Annie Oker's funeral (Charlie Oker's sister) at Petersen's crossing, where she lived and raised her kids. Although celebrated in the same location, the two funerals had some significant differences. As will be explained in this paper, Janice's funeral was a blended ceremony, with traditional practices performed alongside a Christian liturgy; Annie's funeral was a traditional one, without any Christian influence. This important difference between the two funerals serves to highlight how certain cultural practices have been integrated with Christian practices, while other cultural practices like singing, dancing around the fire, and drumming have not been modified by external influences and are still perceived as defining elements of the Dane-zaa identity.

In this sense, Petersen's crossing is still remembered as the place where the elders used to go as children to listen to Charlie Oker and Charlie Yahey, the last Dreamers, singing and telling traditional stories (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, p. 11). Dreamers were fundamental in ancient times, as they functioned as hunt chiefs able to visualise communal hunts in their dreams, providing crucial information to community members so that the hunt could be successful (Hiscock, 2020, p. 328). Dreamers were also able to envision the future; they predicted the coming of the white men and prophesied that oil and gas (they referred to it as the grease of the giant animals) were to be extracted to meet the white men's needs (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, pp. 142–143).

According to Charlie's stories, when people die, their ghosts walk back at night on the Trail they went through life on Earth until they reach a place where there is enough light to ascend to Heaven. As described by Mills, those who died when drunk or following a violent event are unable to find the path to Heaven and are condemned to be ghosts in a confused state (A. Mills, 1988, p. 25). Relatives who are still alive can help the person walking the Trail by singing and dancing to the songs of the Dreamers. When people dance together around a fire whose smoke rises to the sky, the Trail is shortened, and the climb is simplified. By dancing and singing Dreamers' songs, the tracks of the deceased and their relatives overlap, with their minds synchronised following the Trail to Heaven, 'yaak'ihst'é? atanii' (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, pp. 188–189).

In the Dane-zaa traditional worldview, the Trail has a crucial role, as it is linked to the past and the future. To live a good life, Dane-zaa must learn how to navigate the Trail by making decisions taking into account the trails materialising from the past and combining them into the future. This was possible only with the help of the Dreamers and by using dreams (R. Ridington, 1990, p. 91). In Dane-zaa culture, Dreamers were shamans who had symbolically died and then returned to life after walking through the Trail to Heaven (A. Mills, 1988, pp. 45–46). Due to their experience, they could use their dreams to see the future of the whole community; they were considered messengers who came back from Heaven to guide community members on Earth and to warn them about the Trail they

were supposed to walk to reach Heaven (Moore & Wheelock, 1990, pp. 59-60; R. Ridington, 1990, pp. 94-95; R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, p. 157).

The Trail to Heaven was the main subject in one of the three paintings exhibited at Charlie Oker Park throughout the two funerals. Made by Garry Oker, former Doig River First Nation Chief, those paintings represented traditional stories of the Dane-zaa people related to Creation, Life on Earth, and the Afterlife. In the painting representing the Trail to Heaven, the different challenges the soul must face to walk the path to Heaven were depicted. In the other two paintings, a mammoth was reproduced to represent life on Earth during the Ice Age, when giant animals lived on the traditional territory of the Dane-zaa. A Beaver woman was portrayed in the other representation, and the Dane-zaa creation story was illustrated.<sup>3</sup>

According to their Traditional Beliefs, Dane-zaa people have celebrated death and the afterlife for centuries. However, after the first contact (1859) with Father Henri Faraud, an Oblate of the Order of Mary Immaculate (OMI), Christian elements started to be integrated into the traditional way of worship (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, p. 136). Robin and Jillian Ridington documented that symbols such as the cross or the concept of Heaven did not belong to the Dane-zaa culture but have been imported from Christianity (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, pp. 136-137). Similarly, a Christianised vocabulary started to be adopted to describe places (i.e. Heaven) or entities (Gods and angels), thus finding space in traditional storytelling (Beaudry, 1992, pp. 78-79). In such a context, when the Oblate missionaries started to convert the Dane-zaa, they used the Catholic Ladder to explain the basics of Catholicism to people who could not read the Bible (R. Ridington, 1990, p. 80).

The Catholic Ladder was a chart created in 1839 by Father Blanchet, a few weeks after he took charge of the Mission of Cowlitz, at that time headquarters of the Catholic missionaries in the Oregon territories and one of the sites of the Hudson Bay Company, near the present town of Toledo, Washington (Hanley, 1965, p. 31). The Ladder derived from a previous invention, the Sahale stick, a piece of wood two inches by two inches by four feet long, created in the same year as a preaching aid (Hanley, 1965, p. 36). The purpose of the stick was to communicate *an idea of religion* and key dates to those Indians who arrived at Cowlitz to listen to the missionaries. The first Sahale stick depicted forty marks to symbolise the forty centuries before Christ, thirty-three points for the age when Jesus Christ died, and eighteen marks and thirty-nine points for the eighteen centuries and thirty-nine years since that event. The Indians reunited at Cowlitz called the square tool 'the Sahale stick', deriving the name from the Chinook jargon, which means 'the stick from Heaven' (Hanley, 1965, pp. 33-34). The Ladder, in the form of a chart, offered more space to amplify the message of salvation already depicted in the Sahale stick. The Ladder featured the great epochs of the world, according to Christianity. In the first version, the Tower of Babel, the ten commandments, the seven sacraments and the precepts of the Church were depicted (Hanley, 1965, pp. 46-47).

It is reasonable to believe that the Catholic Ladder influenced how the Dane-zaa integrated the idea of Heaven and the action of climbing the Trail to Heaven within their Traditional Beliefs (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, p. 150). In many Dane-zaa Dreamers' drawings, crosses and stylised Trails to Heaven were depicted together with the representation of a bird acting as a guard of Heaven's gate. By merging old and new cultural practices and beliefs, a new and multi-layered system of beliefs has been created. I observed this at both funerals, where different features and symbols of other religions were mixed with

Dane-zaa traditions. They coexisted with tensions that manifested during Janice's funeral, with the peak being reached while the preacher delivered the sermon.

Having birds as guards is typical of the shamanic tradition and shared by several hunting groups. However, once Dane-zaa learnt about Jesus and Heaven, they started to perceive birds as Christian symbols (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, pp. 148–151). In Dane-zaa culture, a bird flying over a group of people gathered for a funeral has a high cultural significance, as confirmed during Janice's funeral when an eagle flew over the ceremonial site right before the burial. Such an episode was interpreted by many community members as a positive sign, as it is believed that the eagle symbolises the spirit of the deceased paying a visit to those attending the funeral (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

Geertz argued that religion could be defined as a 'system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence [...] (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). The negotiation, interaction, and fusion of elements from different religious systems have been defined as *syncretism*; a process in which practices and beliefs from one religious current and life view are adopted by certain groups of people in another religious current and then assimilated or repudiated (Vroom, 2004., p. 104; Maroney, 2006, p. 6).

It has been argued that through syncretism, beliefs from one religion are incorporated by another. In the specific case of the Doig River First Nation, such incorporation has been done in different stages. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between an early syncretism and a late one. The former was the response of the Dane-zaa to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church (prevalent until the beginning of the twentieth century) and the messages brought by its missionaries at a time when there were not many European settlers living in Dane-zaa territory. Charlie Yahey explains this in one of the stories he told Robin Ridington on how Dane-zaa Dreamers got to know about Heaven (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, pp. 149–150). As for late syncretism, it can be seen as the result of the affirmation of Protestantism throughout North America in the twentieth century. This type of syncretism was influenced by settlers who were well established in traditional Dane-zaa lands by then.

It is undoubtedly true that terms and references of the early syncretism were constructed by Dreamers, who integrated Christian symbols within the Traditional system of beliefs (McGinley, 2004, pp. 5-6). This can be perceived as a form of syncretism that stemmed from inside the community, with members that kept practising their Traditional beliefs, with the addition of some new features introduced from the outside. Contrariwise, late syncretism can be described as the result of the influence of external cultural and religious practices performed by new settlers. This type of syncretism was not limited to the inclusion of new symbols or images within the Traditional system of beliefs but aimed at penetrating and modifying it by changing the way in which members perceived and practised their own beliefs.

Nevertheless, not everyone shares the vision that the coexistence of Traditional beliefs and elements from other religions is possible. The current Chief of Doig River First Nation, Trevor Makadahay, follows the Traditional system of beliefs and he does not think that different beliefs can coexist. During a conversation I had many months after the first funeral I attended, he told me that including Christian elements within the Traditional system of beliefs is not possible. Where foreign features are integrated into traditional

culture, they will wipe out older elements, so operating a substitution in the system of beliefs. He pointed out that Christianity does not accept that the Traditional system of beliefs has the same value as itself. In his opinion, Traditional beliefs are perceived as old and with no value, inherently wrong (Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2020).

Chief Makadahay believes in animism, a system many Indigenous peoples share (R. Ridington, 1990, p. 68). Animists perceive that everything is somehow animated and alive. This is true for living beings, such as animals and plants (Peterson, pp. 160-161, 2011) and according to some also for non-living beings, such as rocks, rivers, mountains, and oceans (Stringer, 1999, pp. 550-551). The environment as a whole is made of sentient living beings, and humans connect with them through dreams and visionary experiences. In this sense, humans are supposed to share an underlying mentality with other sentient beings in the same way as they share an understanding with one another (R. Ridington, 1990, p. 68).

While sharing his thoughts with me, Chief Makadahay highlighted that his grandmother (Sally Makadahay) taught him how and why Traditional beliefs are essential for living following the ancestors' teachings while being part of and succeeding in the modern world. For example, as regards hunting, he said that when hunting an animal, it is essential to be grateful for its meat and for the life the animal has given to feed you and your family. When cutting the animal into different parts, it is important to honour its meat while covering the organs that are not being used. Once done with the cutting, it is crucial to bring unused bones and organs back into the bush. It is a form of respect towards nature, the animal, and the Creator. Then he added: 'Christianity does not teach you these things' (Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> February 2020). What Christianity has tried to teach and impose on community members was to worship Jesus Christ, the only Saviour. Such an attitude still exists, and it emerged during Janice's funeral, where elements of evangelism were ingrained within a funeral ceremony.

## 2. The phases of a traditional funeral

Here we gather to remember Janice, who grew up here, at Petersen's crossing. That is why she decided to have a more traditional style funeral and burial. Thank you very much to all of you for coming; it is a special event; it is a celebration of Auntie Janice and all the things she contributed to the Beaver Indian people. So, we are going to honour her with a couple of songs, Dreamer songs (Garry Oker, DRFN Councillor and former Chief - Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

A traditional funeral is a social event. People from surrounding communities get together; they rejoin relatives and old friends while remembering and paying tribute to the deceased. Traditional funerals are particularly important for elders, who might not have many occasions to travel around the traditional territory to visit relatives in other Reserves. As a Doig member told me, it is also an occasion to understand whether the family is loved and well-respected within the community beyond kinship boundaries (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019). Although a traditional funeral is not a public event, it is open to non-members and staff working at the Band office. The more people you get at a funeral, the more respected your family is. More than 100 people were present at both funerals I attended, with the peak being reached during the *Tea Dance*.

A traditional funeral is usually initiated with a drumming session, intended to pay an initial tribute to the deceased while welcoming those who travelled to attend the funeral. Drumming is the first of a number of activities that take place during a traditional funeral, such as:

- *The Tea dance*: drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire.
- *The moccasins' wearing procedure*.
- *The liturgy* (in Christian funerals), followed by drumming, singing, dancing and a feast.
- *The burial procedure*.

### **2.1. The Tea Dance: drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire**

Tea Dances are an essential part of Dane-zaa traditional memorial practices and fundamental to Dane-zaa cosmology. When dances are practised at traditional funerals, they give members the possibility to honour the memory of the deceased while praying for them through drumming, singing, and dancing. As documented by Amber Ridington, following the death of the last Dreamer, Charlie Yahey in 1976, and the passing of song keeper Jack Acko in 1979, the Dane-zaa of North-eastern British Columbia stopped hosting Tea Dances. After a five years hiatus following the death of a young member (Mackenzie Ben, in 1981), the community felt an obligation to help the young boy open the Trail to Heaven, and the Tea Dance was reintroduced (A. Ridington, 2012), p. 43).

The death of Mackenzie Ben was perceived as a wake-up call for the Doig River First Nation. Besides helping the young boy to begin his journey to Heaven, the revitalisation process of songs and dances became an important way to affirm the Dane-zaa cosmology, in spite of external pressures to adopt a more Western lifestyle, with Christian elements already embedded in the Traditional system of beliefs (A. Ridington, 2012, pp. 43–44).

The Tea Dance is an important moment of reflection and prayer; relatives and community members come together to commemorate the deceased and deal with the loss while praying and supporting each other.<sup>4</sup> Many members describe the Tea Dance as an occasion where everyone can benefit from the positive energy created by reunifying relatives and friends (Beaudry, 1992, p. 82). The atmosphere during the Tea Dance is relaxed, and everyone is welcome to join the dance with no strict commands as to the way the dance should be performed.

Imposing something on someone (be it a behaviour or a belief) is not part of the Dane-zaa culture. In this sense, Dane-zaa people rarely say that a person cannot perform an activity. Instead, they tend to show how to do something; without pretending that there is only one 'right' way to perform an activity. People learn through experiences, as only by living specific experiences can human beings understand their relevance while learning what is accepted on a community level. I am saying this because a specific episode caught my attention during the drumming session. During Janice's funeral, a four-year-old child played and jumped around the fire while people were dancing. While observing, I noticed that no one reproached him; instead, he was just encouraged to join the dance. Notwithstanding members were performing an important activity, the little boy was free to act as he felt. He would have learnt by himself, at some point, what to do.



Drumming is fundamental to the Tea Dance as it helps the deceased to walk the Trail to Heaven. It can be said that drumming, dancing, and singing represent how ancestors had been praying for centuries. As for many other Native people of Northern America, drumming has a specific value within the community, and those able to drum and sing are valued members (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, pp. 143, 158, 192; A. Ridington, 2012, p. 35). Dane-zaa people have two types of songs: *Mayiné?* (my songs) and *Nahhatáá?yiné?* (Dreamers' or prayer songs). The former is personal medicine songs received during one's vision quests<sup>5</sup>, not shared with others or sung in public. The latter are songs Dreamers receive in Heaven intended to help Dane-zaa people face life and death; they are used as prayers during dance ceremonies (A. Ridington, 2012, pp. 35–36). During a Tea Dance, Dreamers' songs are repeatedly sung by male singers, usually accompanying themselves with drums.

Drumming must be initiated before singing to allow the singers to adjust to the rhythm of the drummers. A song keeper leads the session, taking the vocal lead and choosing the songs (A. Ridington, 2012), p. 39). It is necessary to handle the drum correctly to produce the right vibration when drumming. In the Dane-zaa traditions, two types of drums exist: the single-headed snare drums and the double-headed barrel drums. The former type is the most used nowadays, with the latter only used by Dreamers or their heirs. Both types are typically made of raw moose hide, tightly stretched over round birch frames and beaten with a stick (no longer than cm 20) to produce the desired sound (A. Ridington, 2012, pp. 39–40). On the back of the drums, to the inside of the frame, there is a babiche string (also known as a snare) on which the fingers can exert different tensions, allowing the drummer to create different sounds (A. Ridington, 2012, p. 39). It is crucial to warm the drum before drumming, as the structure of the moose hides the drum is made of changes when heated. Consequently, the sound generated by a warm drum is gentler and catchier than the one created by a cold drum (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July – 9<sup>th</sup> August 2019).

## 2.2. *The moccasins' wearing procedure*

While observing the drummers, I noticed that some of them took off their shoes and put on their *moccasins*. Similarly, other people who were sitting next to me started wearing moccasins. I got curious and asked Lori, a Doig River First Nation member, the reasons behind such an action. She explained that traditional moccasins are worn to help the deceased dance towards the Trail to Heaven, make the path smoother and accompany the soul during the journey. A new pair of moccasins is gifted to the deceased before the burial, with one of the relatives putting the moccasins on the dead person's feet (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019). As was pointed out during the 2020 traditional funeral:

When somebody passes away, it is our tradition to put moccasins on their feet. It is a very symbolic thing, and the reason is that we want to help the spirit of the person who passed away reach Heaven as soon as possible. So, by singing and dancing, with the new pair of moccasins, it will be easier to walk the Trail to Heaven. When a person passes away when the spirit comes out of the body, it is confused; they do not know what to do. So, that is why we sing and dance, and by putting on moccasins, we help the spirit find its way to Heaven. So, it is a very respectful and meaningful practice, and it is important to us (Garry Oker, DRFN Councillor and former Chief - Fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020).



In addition to wearing moccasins, it is essential to dance; the more you dance, the more you help the person make their journey safely and smoothly, and the quicker the person will reach Heaven. Dancing is a tradition shared by many Indigenous peoples from North America. Similar cultural practices were spread throughout the continent, known as the '*Prophet dance, drum dance or tea dance*'. Some were initiated as messianic shamanic movements after contact with the white man and their Christian beliefs. Dreamers and Prophets warned their people about the changes that were coming following the first contact and urged members to counterbalance these by dancing following a sunwise direction to restore the balance according to the circle of life (Asch, 1988, pp. 67–68; A. Ridington, 2012, pp. 35–36). In this sense, dancing has a double meaning: it is a cultural practice aimed at resisting colonialism; at the same time, it is the first example of *cultural syncretism*, given that as time went by, elements of Christian cosmology were integrated into it. Indigenous shamanic principles related to the renewal of life cycles were merged with Christian messages, such as living a humble and honest life, being compassionate and forgiving to enjoy redemption and reaching Heaven (Abel, 2006, p. 222; A. Ridington, 2012, p. 36).

### 2.3. The liturgy

The main difference between the two traditional funerals was the liturgy. Janice's funeral was a traditional funeral with Christian elements, in which a preacher was invited to celebrate the liturgy. Contrariwise, at Annie's funeral, there was no liturgy. Annie was Garry's mother, and her father was one of the last Dreamers; it is not surprising that her family still follows the Traditional belief system.

Including Christian elements within a traditional funeral might foster divisions among community members while generating tensions throughout the funeral. Indeed, prior to the beginning of Janice's funerary ceremony, I observed that some members were involved in discussions about the appropriateness of having a liturgy. Tensions grew during the liturgy in response to the priest's sermon and attitude; however, they disappeared as soon as the preacher left, with members reconvening for the burial procedure (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

Before the Tea Dance, Garry talked with Janice's daughters. He was unsure about having the preacher celebrate a liturgy, thus transforming the traditional funeral into a Christian one. As he said, '*that priest will come just to impose his vision on First Nation people*'. (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019). He did not like the fact that preachers kept being invited to celebrate Christian liturgies during Indigenous funerals. In his view, priests and preachers have never shown respect for the Traditional system of beliefs; contrariwise, they use such occasions to affirm the superiority of their faith. He did not like how Christianity had penetrated the First Nation beliefs system, with some members being ashamed of their Traditional religious beliefs. Janice's daughter replied by saying that she was trying to respect her mother's wishes (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

Janice had become an ardent believer in the last years of his life; she wanted a Christian funeral as she knew that she would never reach Heaven without it. The conversation ended with Janice's daughter claiming that she talked to the preacher about what he was supposed to say during the ceremony and that she did not want to discuss the topic any further. Instead of replying to her, Garry stood up, took the Doig flag and hoisted it next to

the Tepee where the drummers were supposed to drum in the evening (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019). The way some members perceive Christianity underlines a strong intolerance towards a religion imposed from the outside, a legacy of colonialism that still affects people, their lives, and how they perceive the afterlife. Listening to this conversation gave me a better understanding of the profound divisions among community members regarding religious beliefs and the role of priests and preachers within a specific ceremony, such as a funeral.

The liturgy started after half an hour of drumming, singing, and dancing around the fire. Although the preacher attended the Tea Dance, he did not join community members singing and dancing around the fire. When he started the liturgy, his tone was tense, and I wondered if it was due to the fact that he had attended the Tea Dance beforehand (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2019). The preacher was clearly uncomfortable in such a situation, which perhaps exacerbated the content of the sermon he delivered, which was harsh, inappropriate, and disrespectful to Indigenous beliefs. Tensions and divisions between the preacher and community members were not that different compared to those documented by Hugh Brody in *Maps and Dreams* (Brody, 1988, pp. 78–79). It struck me to think that almost fifty years later, they are still present.

Officially celebrating a funeral, I felt the preacher was there actually to evangelise members and give them ‘the truth’. I remember being very disappointed, and my frustration grew as the liturgy proceeded while the preacher started to say strong sentences that struck me. I jotted down some of them, as I believe this is what colonisation in the name of God looks like these days.

If you have back pain, stomachache, something mental going on ... come to me. I will give you Jesus Christ, and he will fix it! If you are injured, if there is something broken in your body ... come to me today, and I will fix you! Because Jesus Christ will come and fix everything. However, you have to be conscious; you have to renounce everything else and accept the path of Jesus Christ. You have to live in his name; you have to accept him as the Saviour (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

This unreal situation became even stranger during the Holy Communion when the preacher started calling people to him. In the beginning, only a few people went to him; it was clear that many members were being called to make a decision they were uncomfortable making. To encourage people to choose Jesus, he urged the congregation by saying to those already near him: ‘*You are doing the right thing!*’ He created a division within the community between those who ‘wanted’ Jesus and those who ‘refused’ him. After 15 minutes, around 25–30 people formed a circle around him. He began touching everyone, starting from Jack (Janice’s husband), while saying compelling sentences, such as ‘*Jesus is coming to you now, he will fix you now. No pain anymore; he is here now, he is fixing you now, he is in your body now*’. (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). He did the same with every person, to everyone who was receiving Communion. I was sincerely shocked and could not believe what I was seeing, and hearing.

After the liturgy, I had a conversation with a Doig staff member, who pointed out how community members have always been tolerant regarding religious beliefs; every member is free to believe or practise whatever they want. However, the opposite cannot be said, as the priest demonstrated by delivering such an intolerant sermon, in addition to how he behaved throughout the funeral.

Unlike Janice's funeral, no liturgy was celebrated during Annie's funeral. As I explained before, this was because the deceased's family follows Traditional beliefs. Nonetheless, a different Christian component manifested itself in another, perhaps unexpected way. After the drumming session, old friends and relatives were invited to say a word while sharing memories about the deceased. A member from Doig took the floor, starting to share her feelings about her faith in Jesus. Initially very quiet, it became a strong witness as time went by. The peak was reached when she shared the memories of one of her dreams, in which Jesus invited her to go to the hospital and wake up her sick friend. As she said, Jesus gave her this power, and she went to the hospital and used these powerful words to wake her up. Screaming out loud, she pronounced these words:

Jesus, you raised from death. She will wake up now, and I will have a chance to talk to her about you! I want her to accept you, so she can go to Heaven, where she can see her mother (Fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020).

After this prayer, her friend woke up and asked for some food, as she had not eaten for five days. Then, she slept for a day and a half again, then she woke up and asked to go home, where she passed away a few days later. At this point, with a strong emphasis, the lady who shared the story screamed something in Beaver language, as if she was experiencing a sort of ecstasy, and then she said in English:

You are a mighty power, show them how you can help them, so when they die, they can go to Heaven (Fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020).

She ended her speech by blaming herself and asking for forgiveness for the time she lost in her life; before meeting Jesus and becoming a servant of God on this Earth. This strong statement made me think about the priest's sermon delivered during Janice's funeral the year before. Notwithstanding that Annie's funeral was not religious, with no priest invited or a religious celebration performed, Jesus found his space in it. The fact that it was a community member who mentioned Jesus' name highlights how external religious beliefs have entered and penetrated life among community members while affecting their understanding of beliefs and faith.

#### **2.4. The burial procedure**

Another difference between Christian and traditional practices is how the coffin is taken care of throughout the ceremony and burial. For Janice's funeral, the coffin was hosted in a Tepee, which is an uncommon practice, as it is usually placed next to the drummers (as happened during Annie's funeral). However, in exceptional cases, hosting the coffin in a Tepee serves to affirm the value of traditional practices, especially when members perceive the presence of some external threat (i.e. the presence of the priest). There was an altar next to the coffin with a few pictures of Janice and the new pair of moccasins she would receive before the burial. On the sides of the altar were two candlesticks, with five candles each. In the background, there was a painting depicting some episodes of the Creation story.

When placing the coffin in the Tepee, members ensured that the deceased's head was directed west towards the sunset. In this way, the life cycle was reproduced: the person's departure was represented by positioning the head in the same direction as the sunset. As

confirmed by a member, this parallelism with the sun indicates a strong relationship with nature and the earth elements, besides underlining the Dane-zaa people's connection with their land and the surrounding environment (Fieldnotes, 29<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). As argued by A. Ridington, the worldview of the Dane-zaa people is based on a cyclical perspective, mirroring the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth, without forgetting the interdependency between humans, animals and other natural forces (A. Ridington, 2012, p. 35).

Before being transported to the burial site, the coffin has to be sealed. I interpreted the process of sealing the coffin as a compromise between Christian and Traditional beliefs (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). Traditional burials are typically performed by community members with no external input; only community members touch the coffin and place it on the ground. However, as was the case at Janice's funeral, the funeral agent, who was present throughout the funerary ceremonies, was responsible for sealing the coffin before allowing members to touch it (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). The coffin must be sealed for legal requirements, after which the agent leaves it to the Band for burial wherever they prefer in the forest, within their traditional territory.

I suppose this is accepted by the funeral agent in exchange for the body being placed in a sealed coffin. In fact, putting the deceased's body in a coffin is not part of the traditional way. In a conversation I had during the funeral, I was informed that in the past, bodies were wrapped in a sheet and then buried. Putting the body in a coffin and sealing it before proceeding with the burial is a recent practice, or, as a member told me, it is another legacy of colonialism (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). Once again, the burial process reflected how several elements of different belief systems come together to form something new, with different practices that overlap.

The burial process lasted for around 45 minutes. When I arrived, the grave was almost ready. Although some members and close relatives were going through emotional distress, there was a jovial atmosphere, to my surprise. Many members involved in the digging were laughing and joking, and even Janice's daughter started to laugh and joke with them. I never had the feeling that desperation was prevalent. As a Doig member told us while the coffin was interred:

Death is a step, is the way to go to the spiritual world and get reconnected with the ancestors. There is nothing wrong with it; it is part of the cycle of life. People are on this Earth for a while; living on this Earth is just a part of the journey (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

Several things, such as the Tea Dance, the feast, the burial procedure and the overall atmosphere, were similar to what Hugh Brody described in the chapter 'A Funeral' of his *Maps and Dreams*. More than 40 years later, many things are still similar, and traditional practices are observed. This demonstrates how different belief systems came together while traditional ceremonies and rituals have been passed on to future generations, notwithstanding the many socio-economic changes the community has experienced.

One of the things that caught my attention during the burial was people's clothing, with members putting on shirts of different colours (light blue and purple) based on the person's task during the burial procedure. I noticed that those carrying the coffin wore light blue shirts. Others wore purple shirts (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). Although a dress code was not officially requested, wearing these shirts was another way to pay the last tribute to the deceased. The same morning, I had a conversation with a few members

about the dress code and how people used to dress during a traditional funeral in the past. Sam Acko, Doig River First Nation elder, told me that in the past, people were supposed to wear traditional dresses for a funeral; however, this practice had been lost. He argued that perhaps it is quite expensive to buy traditional clothing to be used just for a funeral (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

Once everything was ready, three ropes were tied to the coffin before proceeding with the burial. Drummers started to drum and sing for a few minutes while roses were distributed. Towards the end of the drumming, the coffin was swung three times. The act of swinging the coffin is present in many Indigenous traditions worldwide, and it is linked with rituals of birth, death, and rebirth. As an act, it represents a symbolic crossing of two different worlds, with the pendulum functioning as a gate to establish a connection between the two worlds (Möller & Pehkonen, 2018, pp. 125–127). After the swinging, the coffin was interred and covered with soil, with roses thrown on it throughout the process. In the end, a cross was put on the ground, protected by a wooden roof, with abundant flowers adorning the site (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

### 3. Conclusions

The coexistence of different elements of various belief systems clearly emerges from the description of the two funerals, with syncretic elements that have defined and shaped how community members perceive and relate to beliefs and religious practices. Attending these two traditional funerals was an excellent opportunity to observe and learn how several layers of different cultures, belief systems, and legal requirements (i.e. the sealing of the coffin) had been integrated and intertwined, producing new and complex practices. While observing the burial procedure, it was evident that several Dane-zaa traditional practices have merged with foreign practices. For instance, the body was placed into the coffin (western approach); however, the person was buried in a forest (Dane-zaa practice). Before proceeding with the burial, the coffin was swung three times (Dane-zaa practice), and then a cross was put on it after finishing the burial (Christian practice) (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019). At the same time, attending these funerals was useful in understanding that community members still perceive colonialism as an ongoing process, as confirmed during Janice's burial. On that occasion, a Doig River First Nation member came to me, commenting on the integration of Christian elements in the Dane-zaa culture. He said:

You see, this is colonisation. This is what Italians and Spanish have done to us. This comes from you ... (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

I felt heartbroken; however, I recognised that this accusation was directed towards the associations between Italy, the Catholic Church, Christianity, and colonialism more generally. Struck by his comment, I expressed my sincere apologies for what happened during the liturgy, adding that it was not normal. I know that episode is just one of the many situations in which community members have felt that colonisation is still active. As I discussed with one of my interlocutors later that evening, many people were unsatisfied with the liturgy, which was perceived as a neo-colonial practice, a way to divide the community while creating tensions among members (Fieldnotes, 30<sup>th</sup> July 2019).

Counteracting the many forms neo-colonialism can assume nowadays is not an easy task. When it comes to faith and beliefs, syncretism might help if it is perceived as the fusion of different viewpoints (Shaw & Stewart, 1994, p. 186). Syncretism may well be perceived as a form of resistance; since hegemonic practices are never integrated or absorbed in the process of passive acculturation, a kind of transformation is always present (Snodgrass, 2008, p. 19). As argued by Magowan and Gordon, Indigenous people who embrace other religions continually reshape their religious practices to express their beliefs through new forms of worship. Thus, syncretism may be seen as an indication of Indigenous agency, autonomy, and creativity, where the distinction between religious authenticity and inauthenticity is not relevant (Magowan & Gordon, 2001, pp. 328–329). Contrariwise, it is worth exploring the integration between Indigenous cultural practices and faith, as it is in this space that the debate around Indigenous religious beliefs takes place. Saying that religion is syncretic means that it has a history and has received influences throughout history (Magowan & Gordon, 2001, p. 329).

In the case of the Doig River First Nation, syncretism has allowed community members to integrate religious elements of the Indigenous system of beliefs with exogenous factors, be they Christian or from other religions (Goulet, 1982, pp. 1–2). It is remarkable that many members keep following their Traditional system of beliefs, with some inclusion of external elements. In this sense, it looks like Doig River First Nation has found a compromise between what I have referred to as the late and the early syncretisms. Whereas the former almost wiped off traditional religious practices and beliefs, the latter included Christian elements within the Traditional system of beliefs while making sense of them in a different system.

In conclusion, it is possible to say that, in and of itself, syncretism should not be considered a negative phenomenon (Pandian, 2006, p. 230). As argued by Magowan and Gordon, it can help to make sense of an integrated cosmology shaped by specific cultural, social and historical conditions (Magowan & Gordon, 2001, p. 254). After all, as Gerry Attachie, Doig River First Nation elder and former Chief, affirms, '*Charlie Yahey and Jesus, they say the same thing*'. (R. Ridington & J. Ridington, 2013, p. 155).

## Notes

1. Until 1977, Doig and Blueberry River First Nations were part of the same Band, namely the Fort St. John Indian Band. More information in Madill (1986) - *Treaty Research Report Treaty Eight 1899*, p. 60.
2. <https://doigriverfn.com/our-lands/our-special-places/alaa-sato-petersons-crossing/> (last accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2022).
3. On the Creation story, prehistoric life and giant animals and other traditional stories, consult chapters 1 to 4 of the book *Where Happiness Dwells – A history of the Dane-zaa First Nations*, by Robin and Jillian Ridington, in cooperation with several Dane-zaa elders (among others May Apsassin and Billy Attachie). The book is a priceless collection of traditional stories and information about the Dane-zaa people and their culture, where it is possible to find several transcriptions of the Creation story, told by the last dreamer Charlie Yahey to Robin Ridington.
4. <https://www.wcr.ab.ca/This-Week/Stories/entryid/4729> (last accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2021).
5. According to the Dane-zaa culture, the vision quest (Shin kaa, in Dane-zaa language) is a journey that youngsters must take to receive a song or power from an animal friend. By spending time alone in the bush, youngsters entered an altered or visionary state of

consciousness that eventually gave them a broad understanding of the animal people. For a comprehensive reading on the Vision Quest, consult chapter 3 of the book *Where Happiness Dwells – A history of the Dane-zaa First Nations*, by Robin and Jillian Ridington.

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## Notes on contributor

**Giuseppe Amatulli** research focuses on the cumulative effect of Industrial Development and its impact on the culture, lifestyle, and socio-economic organisation of two First Nation communities (Doig River and Blueberry River First Nation) located in Northeastern British Columbia, Canada. In the context of his research, he has also followed the litigation BRFN v. BC, the first case in Canadian legal history where a Band had brought the Province to Court for the cumulative effects of Industrial development intertwined with Treaty 8 infringements. Thus, by using an ethnographic approach, he aims to understand how community members have been able to cope with development, adapting to the modern lifestyle while continuing to perform traditional activities. Before joining the Durham ARCTIC programme, Giuseppe worked as a junior researcher at the ARCTIC Centre in Rovaniemi, Finland. Giuseppe holds a European Master's Degree in Human Rights and Democratization (E.MA), and a Master's and a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science and International Relations, both from the University of Trieste (Italy).

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