

Nine Nights in Jamaica: The Island, The Magic and How Death Becomes Her



I arrive at the Montego Bay airport in Jamaica, anxious for the celebration of death.

As I wait for my ride, each airport employee breezes past me smelling fresher than the last. The soapy fragrance of the staff drifts harmoniously through the air with the occasional splashes of sweet cologne from the odd male worker. I have never smelled a collectively cleaner group of people. Porters mill about in starched brown uniforms and engage in lively banter while attending to the day-to-day. They are a familiar, friendly crew.

I exit the building and the Jamaican breeze immediately embraces me. It is cool, soft and soothing amidst the hot climate and whispers softly...welcome.

Jamaica is an enticing beauty, a land of lush curves, fertile vegetation and pure magic. She is full of mystery and like a true lady she never reveals all her secrets. I hear that there are dark caves and hidden creases on this island that are so intoxicating, once you enter them, you are forever transformed. As magical as she is, Jamaica is also an island steeped in religion and long-standing superstitions, one of them being the Nine Nights Tradition.

Originating from African Culture, Nine Nights is a ritual where family and friends gather together in the house of the recently departed for the nine nights directly preceding the deceased's burial. Comparable to the Jewish seven-day Sat Shiva, this is not a time for mourning and tears; it is a celebration, one magnificent send-off before that final journey into the after life. The celebration is nine days long because according to legend, it takes this much time for the soul to rest and find peace. For each of the nine nights, well wishers visit the family with food and partake in prayer and song.

Aside from celebrating, Jamaicans also use this time to ensure that their loved one is gone for good, never to return. The mattress of the departed is turned up and placed against a wall to prevent the spirit from revisiting a familiar resting place. It is also common for the wife or lover of the deceased to don red underwear or a measuring tape around the hips and over the crotch like a thong to discourage the ghost from returning for some "post mortem" sex. As drastic as this seems, the goal is to help the soul find its final resting space so that it is not wandering around in limbo for eternity. Growing up, I used to

hear tales of wandering “duppies,” spirits who had not yet found peace, the last thing you would want for a loved one.

The Nine Nights Tradition is a formality that has evolved for many Jamaicans over the years into a one-time event that occurs the night before the burial. In this case, however, my family decides to participate in the full nine nights. Eighteen nights, to be exact, since we are honoring my grandmother, who is now with my grandfather, who passed away two weeks prior.

Late into the night, visitors appear to bear witness to the passing of the soul. They are armed with food, blessings and an endless supply of hymns. As our guests and family gather together in prayer, my Uncle and I, the least religious of the bunch, dutifully go through the motions. As our eyes meet across the room of closed eyes, he makes funny faces at me. I am entertained by his silent act of defiance. Although Jamaicans typically come to these gatherings with food in hand, there is a massive feast prepared in advance for our guests. A tent is propped up on the front yard housing a banquet of delicious dishes like stewed chicken, fish fillet, turkey soup, plantain, bammy, coconut water, tamarind juice, and various flavors of soda. Not to mention the beef patties, cocoa bread and coconut drops – a gingery and sugary confection.

Lively music dances throughout the house and after each night of festivities, we lock ourselves securely inside until morning. This is one thing about Jamaica that has always puzzled me. I have never met a more generous group, but at the same time the house is locked up in layers to protect us from these very people. My aunt warns me that the homes of the deceased are commonly targeted for robbery, since thieves anticipate that during a funeral, no one will be home. It's a harsh reminder that Jamaica's blatant poverty can render people as dangerous as they are kind.

I try to sleep, but with the humidity and the hungry mosquitoes, the hot stale nights leave me restless. Although a joyous celebration so far, it is sometimes hard to escape the sadness. Deep wails of sorrow fill the quiet night and without a word we emerge from our beds and join together to silently lay hands of comfort on each other until dawn.

Finally, it's morning. We pile into several cars and leave for church.

Along the way the sun shines a spotlight on the beauty that is Jamaica. Stretches of trees, grass and untouched land. Buildings are bright blue and yellow. There are roadside vendors selling fruit out of their van and people walking and riding bikes. I can smell jerk pork grilled with pimento wood and fried fish with onions wafting through the air. Where it had been raining just prior to my arrival, not a single cloud occupies the sky. It is the perfect day for a funeral.

In Jamaica, it appears that funerals are THE social event. At the church, there are at least a few hundred people in attendance. The choir sings about how wonderful heaven must be. Their faith is unflinching. I wonder to myself, what if there is no heaven? What if all we have is here and now. If that is indeed the case, then Jamaica is the perfect place to be since it could certainly be mistaken for heaven on earth. The funeral is a joyful reminiscing of tales and stories about my grandmother, the perfect combination of two parts laughter and one part tears.

At the cemetery there are tall cemented tombs, rectangular box-like slabs that sit above ground. There is an empty concrete box right next to my grandfather's grave. It's been painted a bright sky blue on the inside with designs of yellow and white flowers. It is waiting for my grandmother. The pallbearers lower her coffin into the concrete box, which is then sealed with cement. The finishing touch is a floral

wreath to match my grandfather's: "Mom" and "Dad." There are no other names to identify them.

The party's over. On my way back to the airport I marvel at the freshness of Jamaica. She's had some work done. Priory... St. Ann... Runaway Bay. The street signs are so professional. A far cry from what they used to be thirteen years ago. There are sky blue houses and broad stretches of fields with goats and cows feasting on the vast land. There are also rocks, cliffs and shanty towns followed by huge complexes of modern monster condos and resorts.

Do I believe in the Nine Nights Tradition? I decide to consult an expert on the tradition, my Aunt Bev:

"Oh, it's just an excuse for people to come over and eat," she claims.

A very simple statement, but still I wonder... do Jamaicans truly believe they're securing the fate of one's soul? I guess I'll never know. But, as I stare at the surroundings and reflect on my first Nine Nights celebration, one thing is for certain, Jamaica has never been more beautiful.