Crying Shame
Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament

James M. Wilce

WILEY-BLACKWELL
Crying Shame

Metaculture, Modernity, and the Exaggerated Death of Lament

James M. Wilce
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments vii  
Preface ix  

1 Introduction 1  

PART I LOCATING LAMENT AS OBJECT 19  
Introduction 21  
2 For Crying Out Loud: What Is Lament Anyway? 22  
3 Lament and Emotion 43  
4 Antiquity, Metaculture, and the Control of Lament 57  

PART II LOSING LAMENT: MODERNITY AS LOSS 71  
Introduction 73  
5 Cultural Amnesia and the Objectification of Lament in Bangladesh 76  
6 Modern Transformations 97  
7 How Shame Spreads in Modernity 118  
8 Crying Backward: Primitivist Representations of Lament 139  

PART III REVIVING LAMENT: LAMENT AS KEY TROPE OF MODERNITY 153  
Introduction 155  
9 Mourning Becomes the Electron’s Age: Lamenting Modernity(ies) 156  
10 Lament’s (Post)Modern Vertigo: Floating in a Deterritorialized Media Sea 170
### Table of Contents

11 Lament in a Postmodern World of “Revivals” ........................................ 193
12 Conclusion .......................................................................................... 215

Notes ........................................................................................................ 222
References .............................................................................................. 228
Index ........................................................................................................ 253
An earlier version of chapter 5 appeared in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Wilce 2001). Parts of other chapters appeared in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* (Wilce 2005). Ideas included in the manuscript were further refined in an article that appeared in *Current Anthropology* (December 2006), and I thank Ben Orlove, Debbora Battaglia, Steven Feld, William Reddy, Michael Silverstein, Alexander Suralés, Claudia Strauss, Margaret Trawick, and four anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful comments on that manuscript. Thanks also to the many anonymous reviewers for Blackwell, and to Janet Moth, Rosalie Robertson, and Deirdre Ilkson for their help in editing the current manuscript, and for their constant encouragement.

Northern Arizona University has supported my work on lament over the years, starting with an intramural grant to return to Bangladesh in 1996 to study metadiscourses about lament as I completed my first book. That grant also enabled me to gain the expert library research assistance of two excellent graduate assistants—Abbie Uno and Sara Jasper. Abbie and Sara, this has been a long time coming, but thank you so much! And thanks to then Dean (now Vice Provost) Susanna Maxwell for her support. More recently my former graduate student Karin Knudsen has put countless hours into commenting on this manuscript. Thank you, Karin! Thanks to Francis Smiley, Kathy Cruz-Uribe, and George Gumerman for supporting my first research expeditions to Finland, which enabled me to participate in lament for the first time.

This book reflects many years of interchange with innumerable scholars and friends. I was privileged to present earlier versions of the ideas in this book to a variety of audiences who helped me clarify my thinking. I received much help from participants at the panel I organized at the Madison South Asia meetings in 1999 on “Genres in Tension and Transformation: The Politics
Acknowledgments

and Circulation of Lamentation and Related Forms.” I am particularly indebted to the panel’s discussants, C. M. Naim and Carl Ernst. Later, during the first sabbatical NAU granted me (2001–02), to start this book, I presented summaries of the argument to receptive audiences at Harvard’s Medical Anthropology Seminar, the Anthropology Colloquium at the University of Chicago, and the Anthropology Department at Pomona College. For my 2003 sojourn at the EHESS (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), and for many fine interactions with Parisian scholars interested in culture and expressive forms, I thank Daniel Negers and Michel de Fornel.

To others who have read and commented on chapters I am extremely indebted. These include Richard Bauman, Lila Abu-Lughod, Steve Feld, Karla Hackstaff, Neill Hadder, Judy Irvine, Deborah Kapchan, David Samuels, Louis Sass, Michael Silverstein, Bruce Sullivan, Greg Urban, and Neil Websdale. At three points in the history of this project, Carl Ernst provided crucial input – in its prehistory when I was his student, at the Madison meetings in 1999, and later when we were together at EHESS in 2003. I ask the forgiveness of other readers whom I might have forgotten.

I am deeply indebted to Aili Nenola, Tuomas Rounakari, and especially Pirkko and Ensio Fihlman for welcoming my wife and myself into their lives and into their work with lament in Finland.

Finally, to Sarah Wilce, my deepest gratitude. You have seen the vision with me and been a constant encouragement. You have helped me in the transition from observer to participant. Thank you for sharing in it all.
Preface

I initially encountered spontaneous improvised lament in my first period of ethnographic fieldwork – in Bangladesh (1991–92). Although partially inspired by those experiences, this book is not an ethnography of a particular place at a particular time; it is a critical analysis of representations of many societies across history, combining ethnographic and historical evidence and analysis. But it is also an ethnographic account of a recent sort, an account of postmodernity – a cultural formation that, by definition, involves the deterritorialized circulation of shared cultural elements (websites, ad campaigns, ideas, values). It is a book of culture theory disguised as a good story – the story of lament.

I have had a long-term engagement with lament. Unlike others who have only described this cultural performance phenomenon, I have also participated. Whereas many such descriptions imply that local lament traditions are dead or dying, this book tells the story of several putative revivals, as well. It addresses issues important in studies of “world civilizations,” and stands out among texts in that area in focusing on subjective aspects of culture, in tracing one single theme – lament – through great spans of time, and in relying primarily on ethnographic material.

Crying Shame presents a new model of modernity. Rather than simply a set of promises (Wittrock 2000), or losses, I present cultural modernity as a constant oscillation between exuberant “advances” based on sweeping away “tradition,” and a mass form of mourning over “progress” as loss, a loss of confidence that defines postmodernity. What we call postmodernity can thus be considered a phase in a cyclical modernity. This book demonstrates the fundamental relationship of modernity to lament. It shows the links between tradition and modernity, and ties high theory to folk expressive forms.

Shame – the topic of a great deal of academic attention lately – and the shame of collectivities in particular, defines some experiences of modernity from
the vantage-point of peoples peripheral to centers of modernity from New York City to Kuala Lumpur. I present “shame” regarding lament in relation to widely circulating cultural ideas about language, communicative practices, and the people who produce those practices – ideas called language ideologies. In order to grasp how these ideas are now circulating globally, we must jettison old ways of speaking about “cultures” (as though they were bounded and stable), and inquire instead about the dynamic relationship between culture (processes, ideas, products) and metaculture (cultural forces that reflect on, and thus influence, cultural processes and products and their circulation). We will rely on this dynamic model in understanding globalization in terms of both connections and locality. This approach to cultural phenomena enables a new way of looking at traditions around the world – in a single glance, so to speak.

Why an Intellectual Edifice?

Some might pick up this book expecting a book that takes wailing, crying songs, and laments as straightforward, necessary – even therapeutic – “expressions of human emotion.” Lament is not that simple. Still, I ask such readers to stay with me. If it is true that I build an intellectual argument about culture from accounts (my own and others’) of lamentation, I do so conscious of the increased attention our own society pays to grief, conscious of its nearness and of my decision to talk about my own and others’ abstracting of lament away from the immediacies of felt experience. So Crying Shame is also a cultural account of those who, like myself, have represented lament. Thus it takes its place as one of many self-reflexive projects that also attempt to engage their material at a human and not only a scholarly level.1

Wailing hardly seems an appropriate foundation for an abstract intellectual edifice. I hope this book is more than that, more than just a sign of the author’s defense against overwhelming grief. To deny another’s pain, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, is to put our future at risk (Das 1998:192). I do not deny the pain laments can express. But as a highly conventionalized and socialized genre, lament expresses more than individual pain. And so this book is not a psychology of grief but a study of performances, of cultural accounts of them (objectifications), of group shame, and of group pride of the sort reflected in cultural revivals.
Why Lament? My Engagement

What exactly is lament? What do definitions say about the definers? What attracts me to Others’ laments? Why do they move, or disturb, me? What is it about lament and the state of that art around the world that merits writing a book that deserves a reading? How do some dry-eyed narratives of modernity resemble what is said and sung in laments? My answers may provide a way for you to encounter lament as dramatic expression. I hope they also persuade you of its importance, and of the significance of the forces that are remaking it.

The need to study lament first became urgent for me during my doctoral fieldwork in Bangladesh. My fieldsite was a village in Chandpur district. Twice a month I traveled from there to Dhaka. My collaborator, colleague, and field assistant Faisal knew of my interest in madness. Not long after I started my fieldwork, it seemed everyone for miles around knew of my interests. I returned from a trip to Dhaka in March 1992 to find Faisal announcing the visit to my field home of a “mad” woman, whom I call Latifa. Her symptoms? She lamented – too much, at the wrong time. Latifa’s kin took lamenting as a sign of madness. Would it have been so a century earlier?

My ongoing struggle to understand lament in part reflects my profound personal ambivalence about being situated between Latifa (who hoped that I could help reunite her with her husband) and her cousins (who threatened me with unnamed consequences should I even emerge from my hut on the night they finally stopped her performances). My personal conflict reflects broader tensions between “neocolonialist” discourses about South Asian women as victims, and relativisms old (cultural) and new (postcolonial).

Along with speech understood to reflect spirit-possession, long performances like Latifa’s are vanishingly rare, and some Bangladeshis pressured me to pretend possession did not occur there. The topics of spirit-possession and lament elicited sharply contrasting responses from different groups in Bangladesh. At the end of my doctoral fieldwork, in spring 1992, I presented some findings to an audience of Bangladeshi medical professionals working near my field site. One of them became angry with me for talking about spirit-possession, as if it were shameful that the nation of Bangladesh could be so backward as to “believe” in such things.

Rural people never became angry when they discussed spirits with me, but those spirits themselves seemed to hide (in shame?) when I would try
Preface

to rush to the scene where a woman was said to be possessed and speaking in an unusual manner. In relation to lament, the roles are reversed: Latifa’s wailing made her rural kin extremely angry, while worldly Bangladeshi professionals sympathized with her and criticized her kin. Dhaka academics waxed eloquent about the vanishing genre of lament represented in my recordings of Latifa.

Yet my story is even more layered than it appeared to me when I first wrote about lament in 1998; this book critically reanalyzes such representations of lament. The critique starts with my own work. In my earlier book I had positively bewailed the loss of tuneful texted weeping, never critically reflecting on the modernist vantage-point from which that sort of meta-lament made sense. I even expressed some envy of those whose cultural resources might help canalize the griefs we all face. Writing *Eloquence in Trouble* provoked me to explore why I might have been attracted initially to study lament – a useful start. But today I find the limited reflexivity of these words inadequate – “Like those who occupy later pages, I had to deal with loss; unlike them, I was not privy to a tradition of poetic public weeping. This book probably displays some envy of the tradition it describes” (1998a:vi). *Crying Shame* probes the meaning of representing Others as “people who lament,” and the desire or repugnance those Others might stir in modern people who see themselves as having no laments or “no stories” (Grima 1991) – perhaps even no culture.

Since my encounter with Latifa, lament has often seemed to seek me out. Whatever the origin of my interest, life keeps lament in my face. I was returning from the annual anthropology meetings once when I had to change planes in a major hub airport. In the gate area near me was a woman I took to be Iranian. She had apparently flown from elsewhere to be with a dying relative. She called ahead on her cellphone from the gate and was shocked to discover that her relative had already died. She began to weep–and-speak, sometimes with a singsong intonation.

After the 2001 anthropology meetings in Washington, DC, I took a shuttle to the airport. The driver, who happened to be from Bangladesh, made one last stop after picking me up. The man who got on there had represented the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe after “peace” had come to Bosnia. He had overseen OSCE security measures in Srebrenica. From there he had traveled on many a weekend to the coast, where he sometimes visited local bars frequented by Serbs who had fought in the recent wars. One such man told him how the Serb troops had sung sad old songs around the campfire before facing the next day
of fighting – songs lamenting the defeat of Serbian forces at the hands of Muslims (Ottoman Turks) centuries before. I actively elicited his story of Srebrenica. But the Iranian woman seemed to be scarcely aware of my presence; her story struck me in the face (the ears, to be exact).

I presented some of the material in this book during my time as a visiting scholar in Paris in the summer of 2003. During the previous year, I had heard of a newly formed Lamenters’ Society in Finland (Äänellä Itkijät RY; the name means “with-voice [i.e. words] criers”; RY stands for rekisteröity yhdistys, registered group <http://itkuvirsi.net/index.html>). Two months before I left for Europe, I arranged to visit Finland with my wife, ostensibly to interview leaders of Äänellä Itkijät. But so strong was the interest of these leaders in having me experience the revival that they pushed me to rearrange my travel dates to be there during Juhannus, Midsummer, when they would be teaching roughly the tenth course on lament they had offered to date. My wife Sarah and I did participate in the course, and found it powerfully moving. In this way I was pushed toward the participant end of the participant-observer role fieldworkers have professed ever since Malinowski (1961[1922]). Äänellä Itkijät’s leaders did not exactly seek me out; but lament grabbed me once again on that occasion – more deeply than this book will ever be able to reflect.

Lament has sought me out as much as I have sought it out. My aim is to do justice to it and to the myriad questions for cultural studies that lament raises.

A Myth to Orient the Reader

I have already let on that I have found it necessary not just to study lament but to study those who study it, and to critically examine modernist narratives that sound suspiciously like laments even when some of them speak of the putative death of (traditional) lament. This analytical move requires most of the book to explain. But, to give some idea of where I am going, I offer this hint in the form of a myth.

Once upon a time, at least in England, there was no science. There were no experimental scientists – no Bacon or Boyle, no Royal Society of emergent scientific elites in England. There were no human scientists – no archaeologists, folklorists, anthropologists, Orientalists. . . . Instead, people (specifically, rural
English peasants) were simply living their lives, in a world populated with supernatural beings, a world untroubled by any Protestant Reformation, a world with no ambition to become Modern. There was no self-conscious Modernity. Science and Modernity had yet to be born.

Imagine the emergence of (English) Modernity as a real birth, involving a real Mother. As the Mother of Modernity, imagine a personification of Tradition – a woman who epitomized all the women, the poor, the marginal people of Europe, and ALL peoples outside Europe – the soft folds/folks in which the embryonic bourgeoisie grew to become a Protestant fetus, which finally emerged as a new babe in the world, a babe with an inordinate interest in the sciences of Man and Nature.

In order for Scientific Modernity to be born, his Mother had to die. She died giving birth. But as the babe with the cumbrous name emerged through her birth canal (the years of religious wars in Europe, the English Civil War), he heard something – a tearful song that had been sung from antiquity. The song vanished as soon as he heard it. He forgot it as soon as its echo faded. But as he grew older he was haunted by it, hearing it in his dreams. He was, after all, the child of his Mother, Tradition; the plaintive song was a part of him. Despite that, the song was not quite his, and he could not truly mourn what his birth had caused to die.

As Modernity grew into adulthood and gave birth to sons – Antiquarianism and Philology, who in their turn gave birth to sons like Archaeology, Classics, Anthropology, Linguistics, Orientalism – he became obsessed with the haunting song of tears. The song stamps itself profoundly on the “project of Modernity.” Modernity sent out squadrons of his progeny to seek out the song. He himself would never sing it the way his Mother had; yet his triumphalist tune was increasingly tinged with her sad melody, and Modernity was increasingly haunted by nostalgia – at best a “failed mourning.”

And at the end of the twentieth century, hundreds of those dedicated to the human sciences had collected laments from the ends of the earth. Scores of folklorists had described lament traditions. Dozens of Orientalists had unearthed ancient laments. Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists had described laments’ musical forms, semiotic complexity, and social functions.

Finally – in an era in which some anthropologists were teaching urban Americans to become shamans – a handful of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists began to sing the very song that had so long haunted Modernity. His origins, his Mother’s song of loss and her stamp on his very nature, came to light as a few of his sons in Finland taught people how to lament, in workshops that drew on decades of folkloristic research.

My little myth resembles other versions of the founding myth of modernity (Bauman and Briggs 2003) – intentionally so. Savvy readers
will recognize its kinship to the early, mystical, theologically oriented writings of Walter Benjamin on the Fall, nature, and lament (Benjamin 1996 [1916]).

So, did the Mother die? Well, not exactly. The refusal of Tradition to die, despite centuries of predictions that it would, and its presence in the fabric of modernity, are themes occupying me in later chapters. Hers was not a natural (reputed) death, not a natural result of childbirth, but rather an act of war by iconoclastic Puritan zealots against Catholic folk and their folklore throughout England. Yet the fading of traditions and the folk who bore them – their “death,” which seemed to stretch out interminably as every generation of antiquarians and (later) folklorists spoke of the death of the folk and their lore (Bauman and Briggs 2003:222) – led to nostalgia in some of 16th- and 17th-century England’s intelligentsia (2003:72), including (perhaps) Shakespeare (Greenblatt 2004). The human sciences did devote increasing attention to lament, culminating in the 1989 Austin Lament Conference, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, in the many publications that emerged from the conference – and in movements to revive lament in Finland, New Zealand, and the US.

Post-Austin publications on lament reached me as a graduate student in the late 1980s, several years before I met Latifa and more than a decade before my wife and I performed our own laments along with a dozen others at the workshop in a village in rural Finland. To tell these stories requires a book like this.
1

Introduction

Opening Up Lament

Perhaps you have been with someone who, in the midst of describing a loss, begins to weep. Perhaps you’ve heard someone trying to continue speaking while sobbing. Or you might have heard someone begin to weep as they sang a song that moved them. Apart from these scenarios, you have heard the label “lament” applied to all sorts of calmer discourses decrying some situation or event. But this book begins by describing something you might have only glimpsed in the media – in the first episode of the HBO television series *Six Feet Under*, or in media coverage of Iraq (including footage used in *Fahrenheit 9/11*). You might have deemed this blend of words, tears, and melody quite foreign. Those three elements are familiar by themselves, but perhaps unfamiliar in combination.

By lament I mean, first and foremost, this combination of three elements – tuneful, texted weeping. Lament – including (but not limited to) the funeral dirge (Lee 2002) – is often sung or chanted. It is also composed of coherent words, like the lyrics of a song; thus lament has text. And lament appears overwhelmingly emotional; in most traditions treated here, a performance without sobbing would not be a lament (for example a *bilāp* or *itkuvirsi*, a Bangla’ or Finnish lament).

If you want to think productively about history, life, suffering, or culture, lament (to borrow from Lévi-Strauss) is good to think with. As a means of grappling with loss, lament has served societies both ancient and recent. Today, observers of culture – journalists, literary critics, anthropologists, and anyone else commenting on any form of culture – and performers of culture (especially revivalists, but also psychotherapists and American clergy) *invoke lament* as they try to grapple with change. For “ancients” and “moderns,” lament is very useful indeed.
Introduction

It would be a crying shame if lament passed from the scene. And if shame over tuneful, wordy crying is spreading, that too demands our attention. But so do the lament-like ways in which people of all sorts – scholars, priests, psychologists, relatives of lamenters and lamenters themselves – talk about lament. All of these stories I must tell. It is best, however, to turn first to defining the domain of inquiry. What do we mean by lament?

Lament is a typically improvisational genre in which women (and some men) have expressed grief and aired grievances, one in which communities have ritually reconstituted themselves in the face of loss. Lament is thus a lens through which many scholars have examined emotions, musics, poetic languages, and the societies in which those take shape.

And there is more. Instead of simply asking “Why (and how) do the far-off so-and-so’s cry as they do – and do they do so as they once did?” I ask, too, about feelings – including ours – about ritual wailing and the possibility that it might vanish. It is important to investigate this second topic in order to better understand lament’s power over us as well as over apparently exotic Others.

In fact, I argue that, even if traditional lament is fast disappearing from our modern world, something related – call it postmodern mourning – is alive and well. The study of lament thus gives us a new perspective on modernity and postmodernity. In fact, for some, the loss of lament – or even the loss of culture – is what’s lamented. The recitation of our losses is the modern ritual, and it is strikingly similar to lament. And so, in addition to other warrants for such a book as this, we have another – that, even as lament “disappears” along with “vanishing cultures,” it attempts to redefine our modern experience.

Three Scenarios: An Overview

This book is about lament as a genre of crying with melody and words. But it is a layered cake of three different stories. Consider the first framework a kind of Myth of the Fall.

First scenario: positively losing lament

The first, relatively positivist, story begins in mythic (once upon a) time. There was once a “traditional world” consisting of thousands of different human societies in which some women and men made up and sang laments on various occasions. They performed these laments when someone died.
Introduction

In societies where women married men outside of their villages and left their own kin to live with their husbands’ families, women sang bridal laments. These were conventional. Yet they were not what, say, an Anglican might mean if she referred to rituals, i.e., acts of speaking or chanting whose text and melody were quite fixed. Instead, laments, though ritualistic in function, were improvised for the occasion. Women (and occasionally men [Greene 1999]) would perform laments at the time of death and other moments of leave-taking like marriage. In that sense laments were predictable. Yet performers creatively improvised on predictable themes (sorrow, sometimes anger; melodies; words, etc.). Audiences could consistently recognize them, because performances bore a strong family resemblance to one another.

In some places, the dual nature of these performances as “improvised convention” was reflected in solo verses, set against choral sections. A professional or relatively expert lamenter (Böckel 1913:97; Tenhunen 2007) – or a woman linked to the family of the deceased – might lead the lament, improvising verses. Between such lines, a group of singers might echo the verses or join in for a set of repeated lines. Or the leader might take up the sometimes unmusical cries or shouts of the most sorely grieving, the closest kin, making them into a more musical line to be echoed by a chorus of neighbors and more distant kin.

Here is the climax of this first story: In the last century, such laments have become increasingly rare; an enormous body of evidence supports this claim (e.g., Dwyer 2008, on the disappearance of bridal laments from the Turkic world). In my own field site (Bangladesh) I heard people laugh at, or express religious disapproval of, crying out loud. Quiet crying is becoming more common, particularly among urban classes and upwardly mobile modern rural people. They express a kind of shame about “traditions” like loud crying.

That first scenario motivates the first part of the title, Crying Shame. It poses a problem whose solution the other scenarios provide: If what many call cultures, and not only persons, are said to “die” (rhetoric I do not judge here), and these “cultures” are composed of knowledge grouped into somewhat scripted scenarios – including how to grieve – who laments their death, and how?

Second scenario: exploiting lament

The first story is incomplete without a second. Rather than mythic time, I open this story with a case study from the late 20th century.
Introduction

During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Serbian soldiers would gather in their camps at night and sing songs – “national epic laments” (Lee 2002:10) – about the storied losses of the distant past, some memorializing the defeat of the Serbs at the hands of Ottoman Turks and the eclipse of Serbian culture resulting from it. Nationalist forces revived songs that had been underground during Tito’s socialism, exploiting them to stoke genocidal passion. Thus this scenario speaks not of lost lament but of modernist-nationalist-militarist forces co-opting a song-form that, though not quite improvised, is related to lament.

Some laments tell stories. There are also stories (like this book) about lament – metastories, stories about stories. The second scenario complicates the first metastory about lament. Neither crying, nor music, nor the verbalization of grief and grievance are “dying.” Yet something is changing. The nexus of tears, music, and words that constituted performance genres we call lament is breaking apart, sometimes reassembled in what Andrei Codrescu describes as the fetishization of folklore in eastern Europe (personal communication, April 1999). Milosevic’s legitimation strategy twisted grievance rhetorics to serve the cause of violent post-socialist ethno-nationalism.

Whereas the first scenario ends in the loss of lament, the second ends in its co-optation. The record of 20th-century nation-states is mixed: some (for example China during the Cultural Revolution) promulgate policies that restrict lamenting (Kipnis 1997:1, 27) – while others give lament a new life and save it from the dustbin of history to which the first story consigns it.

Third scenario: the lament of postmodernity

Finally, this book tells a third, very different, sort of story. It is about other stories – including one I’ve told (Wilce 1998a:vi) – that use lament to construct a larger tale about modernity as loss (Benjamin 1996[1916]; Ivy 1994). This book analyzes such metalaments as Foucault might have, looking around the world and tracing connections between forces – especially explicit critiques of “backward” forms of grieving – that push lament onstage or backstage. I reflect on cultural globalization and on the metacultural forces (Urban 2001) that affect culture-in-motion. Thus this book contributes to that genre of anthropology analyzing not single societies but global cultural processes (Appadurai 1996; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Erlmann 1999).
But let us suspend such abstract claims for a moment and look at evidence that lament is either disappearing or being twisted into something totally new.

“The Language You Cry In”:
Illustrating the Three Scenarios

The 1999 film *The Language You Cry In* illustrates all three of the scenarios above. It offers not only an account of, but also a remedy for, genre loss – in this case, the loss of lament (Scenario 1). The distributor’s website plugs it as a “scholarly detective story” (www.newsreel.org/films/langyou.htm). It is also the story of the collaboration of black and white Americans with Sierra Leoneans in recovering the steps by which “an ancient funeral dirge” left Africa and its ritual context, traveled to the Gullah Islands, was recorded by linguist Lorenzo Turner (Wade-Lewis 2007), and was rediscovered while the cameras rolled in Africa in the 1990s.

The history behind the film begins in 1933 when Lorenzo Turner recorded Amelia Dawley singing this song in “a Georgia fishing village” in Gullah country (www.newsreel.org/films/langyou.htm):

**AMELIA’S SONG**

Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay tambay
Ah wakuh muh monuh kambay yah lee luh lay kah.
Ha suh wilcego seehai yuh gbangah lilly
Ha suh wilcego dwelin duh kwen
Ha suh wilcego seehi uh kwendaityah.

Everyone come together, let us work hard;
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be perfectly at peace.
Everyone come together, let us work hard:
the grave is not yet finished; let his heart be at peace at once.
Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,
like a firing gun.
Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,
oh elders, oh heads of family
Sudden death commands everyone’s attention,
like a distant drum beat.¹