“Death is a subject Nuer do not care to speak about,” wrote E.E. Evans-Pritchard in 1949 in the opening paragraph of an article on “Burial and mortuary rites of the Nuer”. What followed from these inauspicious opening remarks, however, was a description of complex burial and mortuary ceremonies. The purpose of these rites was, wrote Evans-Pritchard, perfectly clear: “… the main intention in them is to cut the dead from the living.”

While “Africa” often figures in the western imaginary as a space of death (not least in the era of HIV/AIDS), at the same time, African societies are also frequently represented as being “good” at dealing with death. Africans, we are told, have “proper” funerals, not the truncated affairs so common in Europe and North America. Furthermore, they do not cut themselves off from their dead, but live in relation to the world of the dead, the world of the ancestors. In Africa the living and the dead together constitute the social world. This characterisation is not totally false, but the production of knowledge on death customs and beliefs in Africa has to be seen against the background of a perceived crisis in the “western” relationship to death. In the 1970s Philippe Ariès argued that whilst mediaeval Europeans (like “primitive” peoples) accepted death as part of life, by the twentieth century they were more likely to attempt to deny it. A combination of industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of scientific medicine eventually produced a situation in which death became a private affair, and one drained of meaning. Against this picture of death sanitized, medicalized and

---

2 Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M.
uneasily denied, African attitudes to death could be viewed with a degree of nostalgia.

But as Evans-Pritchard’s very direct statements imply, if African societies evolved elaborate and complex rituals to manage death, this was because for them too death provoked fear and revulsion and posed a problem for the living. The ultimate purpose of mortuary customs was to allow the living to get on with living. And in order for this to be achieved, there was no shortcutting the work of mourning. To simplify, the dead could only find their place as ancestors rather than vengeful ghosts if their loss had been properly registered, not only by the individuals closest to them, but by the social groups of which they were members.

If African societies have found effective ways of managing the universal problems posed by death, their ability to continue to do so has been called into question by contemporary developments. In a chilling account of life and death in Kinshasa, Filip de Boeck sees a society saturated with death, particularly violent death, to such a degree that the work of mourning is now meaningless. Civil war, genocide and the “banalization” of violence in some parts of the continent produce situations in which the normal practices and processes of mourning become impossible. As in Europe after the First World War, mourning is replaced by memorialization, by the creation of museums and national memorial parks.

Rapid urbanization in Africa and international migration have given rise to the use of new

---


4 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1915)


technologies of death, seemingly far removed from the burial practices described by colonial anthropologists. A burgeoning African funeral industry has grown to address these new needs. African corpses are now refrigerated and embalmed and captured on video camera. The funeral industry is big business, especially when allied to the insurance industry. To take just one example, in March 2008 the Botswanan newspaper, The Voice, reported that a local company, the Funeral Services Group, would soon be listed on the Botswana Stock Exchange. The Managing Director of FSG looked forward to a continued period of growth, thanks to new technologies and to a strategic partnership with the Botswana Life Insurance Limited. It is tempting to argue that the “African way of death” is going the same way as the “American way of death”, but as we shall see, the reality is rather more complicated than this.

The African way of death: death rituals analysed

The comparative anthropological study of death is now a large field in which the literature on African societies occupies an important place. It is not difficult to see why colonial anthropologists viewed the management of death as fundamental to understanding

---

the social fabric and belief systems of “traditional” societies. Funerary and mourning practices express and shape a wide range of social relations, including the maintenance of kinship ties, the reproduction of communal values, and notions of succession and property inheritance. Because they attempt to mediate between the world of the living and the world of the dead, mortuary rituals also reveal a society’s spiritual and philosophical orientation.

Although the anthropological literature is too vast to discuss here comprehensively, several elements of that scholarship are relevant to our understanding of African “ways of dying”. Of importance is the view that in “traditional” societies, death introduces forces of physical, spiritual and social rupture. In order to heal these ruptures and ensure the renewal and continuity of life, two transitions must take place. The first is that the deceased must move from a state of impurity or contagion to a state of ritual purity and harmony with the spirit-world. This transition can be guided by the living, through close attention to the ritual preparation and interment of the body. Secondly, as Van Gennep has argued, societal disintegration occasioned by a death has to be repaired through its own transitional process. Through funerary and mourning rituals, survivors are re-integrated back into the community and group-solidarity preserved. Both transitions are related to each other, and death rituals often serve simultaneously to safely guide the deceased and the living into a beneficial and life-giving balance with each other. But this structuralist account of death rituals, whilst revealing, also disguises huge variations, and has a tendency to represent the production of social meaning around death as an unproblematic process, one devoid of emotion or

---

11 Bronislaw Malinowski, “Magic, science and religion” (1925); Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*
Despite their shortcomings, colonial anthropological accounts provide an important historical record of the sometimes elaborate rites through which Africans buried and mourned their dead and of the political significance of death practices. In Audrey Richards’ vivid description of the death and burial of the Bemba Paramount Chief in colonial Northern Rhodesia, one can read in the ritual transformation of Bemba land and of the dead body of the Paramount the hoped-for regeneration of Bemba society itself. The one-year interregnum on all land rites immediately following the Paramount’s death corresponded with the year-long process of embalming the Paramount’s body, until it resembled a “seed”. This carefully orchestrated scene of ritual regeneration – a “good death” – contrasts with the markedly different case, again recorded by Richards (but not appearing in her published work), of the unnamed Bemba woman who died in childbirth and was buried at a crossroads some distance from the village. This ignominious burial meant that the woman’s death could not hold the promise of regeneration.

Divisions made between good and bad deaths often reflected moral concerns over the conduct, in particular the sexual conduct, of the living. A shameful burial in part served as a warning to future generations. This was reinforced by taboos around sexual activity during

---


periods of “contamination” of a woman’s body— for example, during menses or lactation.\textsuperscript{14} An equally precise elaboration is evident in the criteria for good and bad deaths among the Anlo of the colonial Gold Coast, as shown in missionary and colonial records. Bad deaths included Anlo who died before they reproduced and those who died “in blood”, which could be through war, certain diseases or accidents.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, there is evidence from some African societies that deaths from suicide were regarded as particularly problematic, fearful and polluting.\textsuperscript{16} While a good death offered the possibility of reincarnation and a welcome influence on the world of the living, a bad death brought only the spectre of malevolent ancestral spirits. Indeed, a significant body of literature on witchcraft and spirit possession concerns how the “unnaturally dead” exert power over the lives of the living.\textsuperscript{17}

The elaborate mortuary rituals for the Bemba Paramount Chief were essential to maintaining what Audrey Richards described as the “knife-edge” of power over the supernatural. In the context of colonial rule and the depletion of traditional authority within African polities, this “supernatural power” became all the more important to preserve.\textsuperscript{18} Certainly, in the African historical context the veneration of the dead can be seen as a potent political narrative and strategy. The public performance of funerals created a contested space

\textsuperscript{14} In present-day Tswana society, proscriptions on sex with widows feed into a larger AIDS-influenced discourse about the harmful mixing of blood and bodily fluids; see Klaits, ‘The widow in blue’.
\textsuperscript{15} Sandra Greene, \textit{Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana} (Bloomington, 2002).
\textsuperscript{18} Vaughan, “‘Diving kings’,” 385.
within which deeper struggles over state power and communal identity could be signified. Furthermore, death and mourning rituals were by nature deeply “mnemonic” processes.\(^{19}\) Ritual practice could help recall a common, if highly constructed, past, and thus appeals for political reform or renewal could be framed by a mobilising rhetoric of return. This is evident in Southern Rhodesia, where funerals and commemoration ceremonies became a vehicle through which Christianised Africans translated indigenous institutions into more flexible and politically potent markers of a new nationalist identity. These same funerals were also used by residents as an opportunity to instil notions of dignity and respect within an emergent, and distinctly urban, moral economy.\(^{20}\) In Northern Rhodesia, the vibrant “culture of death” forged by mineworkers on the Copperbelt enabled the formation of inter-ethnic allegiances and urban solidarities, which contested traditional authority underpinning Indirect Rule.\(^{21}\)

In the post-colonial period, contestations over the management of death have occasioned a renewed debate over collective identity and statehood, now voiced in terms of “citizenship”. In Cameroon, funerals have become an important arbiter in a new “politics of belonging”, particularly for autochthonous groups.\(^{22}\) In South Africa, the discursive trajectory – made possible by the provisioning of ante-retrovirals – of “near death” to “new life”


espoused by the Treatment Action Campaign has led its volunteers to a vigorous assertion of a rights-based citizenship. Recent debates over the memorialization of key historical figures show the susceptibility of nation-building projects to a continued “politics of death”. Adebanwi’s sympathetic portrayal of Lt. Col. Fajuyi, and his various reincarnations as sacrificial lamb and saviour of a federalist Nigeria argue not only for the plasticity of “heroic” narratives, but for a unique fusion of Christian and traditional imagery. Similarly, the heated discussions among ordinary Congolese sparked by the potential repatriation of the body of Mobutu Sese Seko in 2001 can be viewed as part of a larger effort to reconcile the memory of his violent rule with the imperatives of a “reborn” nation-state.

**Epidemic disease and demography**

Many parents in early twentieth-century Bunyoro (Uganda) apparently did not expect their new babies to live and they named them accordingly: *Kalyongera* (this one will also die) and *Byarufu* (this child belongs to death), for example. As infant survival rates improved in Bunyoro, so these naming practices became less common.

There is no automatic or mechanistic relationship between demography and attitudes to death. The idea that parents in pre-modern Europe, inured to the frequent death of their

---


infants, did not love them in life or mourn them in death, has been effectively challenged. Yet it is also unlikely that the religious, cultural and social practices which surround death in any society are completely free-floating, and unconnected to changing demographies. The rich literature on African beliefs and practices relating to death is largely disconnected from demographic history, and this poses a major challenge for historians of death in Africa. The challenge is all the greater given the paucity of historical sources for the demographic history of the continent, which means that for many regions we have only a very general idea of demographic trends prior to the second half of the twentieth century. But the challenges do also present opportunities, as Doyle’s study on Bunyoro demonstrates. ‘Unconventional’ sources such as naming practices not only play a function for the demographic historian as indirect indicators of changing rates of infant and child mortality, but are also, simultaneously, rich sources for a cultural history of childhood and mortality. In the same way, the ageing of Africa’s population is likely to have some impact on attitudes towards the elderly and towards death in general. In some regions, the burden of care of both the elderly and the long-term sick has been increasing in recent decades. At the same time, in areas affected by HIV/AIDS the elderly themselves are playing an increasing role as care-givers at a time in their lives when they might have expected to be the recipients of care. The conventional life-cycle has been disturbed and the anticipated generational order of deaths up-ended. But there is no unmediated relationship between demographic trends and cultural attitudes to death and dying. Levels of urbanization and education, taxation regimes and (in

some countries) emergent formal welfare systems are amongst the many factors which we might expect to play a role.\(^{30}\)

The determinants of the dramatic rise in population in Africa in the twentieth century are still debated by demographic historians. Some see it as having been driven fundamentally by a fall in mortality rates; others argue that a rise in fertility rates played a critical role.\(^{31}\) Either way, towards the end of the century there were signs in many parts of the continent of a “transition” to lower fertility rates.\(^{32}\) However, in the last twenty years those areas affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic have seen dramatic changes to their population profiles which have greatly complicated any picture of an orderly “demographic transition”. For example, in Botswana life expectancy at birth had risen from 46 years in 1955 to 65 in 1990, but by 2005 it had dropped to 35.\(^{33}\) The speed with which these changes have taken place is remarkable. In particular, the implications of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in eastern and southern parts of the continent, coming on top of the earlier period of population growth and rapid urbanisation, have yet to be fully worked through or understood.

There is now a very large literature on HIV/AIDS and its social and economic ramifications, including its implications for attitudes to death and practices surrounding death.\(^{34}\) But a great deal of the literature on AIDS is written without reference to the pre-


\(^{33}\) http://www.unicef.org/info/country/botswana_statistics.html


Many analyses of civil war in Africa aim to counter the image of a continent overwhelmed by “irrational” violence and urge us to see these conflicts as driven by the very rational motivations of desire for wealth and power. Conflict in Africa cannot be entirely reduced to competition for resources, but the map of wars on the continent is nevertheless revealing. If you do not want to be caught up in violent conflict, it is better not to live in a region dominated by mineral wealth. But for a minority, participation in war can be a very effective accumulation strategy. Many of Africa’s conflicts are simultaneously global and local in character, involving actors ranging from agents of international criminal rings to members of local youth organisations. The state, it is clear from these conflicts, no longer has a monopoly over violence in Africa, if it ever did. In 1994, however, the world’s attention came to be focused on a different kind of war in Africa – the genocide in Rwanda. Though competition over resources could go some way to explain Rwanda’s crisis, the genocidal form which it took necessitated a much longer-historical perspective on the creation of ethnic identities and the nature of political power in Rwanda.

War is not one phenomenon but several, and historically different parts of Africa have experienced different kinds of wars, ranging from the internal conflicts which fed and fed upon the Atlantic slave trade, to the competitive warfare of political opponents in some nineteenth century polities, to the wars of resistance to colonial occupation and wars of


colonial liberation. In between those wars of occupation and liberation millions of Africans were caught up in wars that were not of their making at all. Vast swathes of eastern Africa between 1914 and 1918 were devastated by a war between European powers played out on African soil; during the Second World War African troops fought in Europe and in the jungles of Burma.41 Work on Mau Mau and decolonisation of Kenya has reminded us of the colonial state’s capacity for terror and violence.42 Some parts of the continent have been subject to regimes of violence from the time of the slave trade onwards. Here the haunting memory of past conflicts feeds into the experience of present-day conflict.43 Students of war and conflict in Africa grapple with the very considerable challenges of interpretation and representation in for example, employing or eschewing psychological theories such as that of trauma to analyse these circumstances.

Two apparently quite contradictory analyses of political violence in contemporary Africa stand out in the recent literature. Some regimes of violence and terror are described as being so commonplace as to render death itself banal and emptied of meaning.44 In other cases violence, far from being devoid of meaning appears to be saturated with meanings of the sacred and closely associated with spirituality.45 Given the very diverse nature of African societies, it would be absurd to propose one narrative for the historical relationship between

43 Rosalind Shaw, Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone (Chicago, 2002).
violence and political power in Africa, but clearly there is a need for more work with a long-term perspective on this issue. Much present-day violence in Africa can be understood in general terms of global forces and economic competition. Violence in Africa is no more “exotic” than violence anywhere else. On the other hand, to understand the meanings of violent death in different parts of Africa, the moral economy of violence and the line which societies draw between the legitimate and illegitimate use of violence, does require an understanding of specific histories and of cosmologies.46 Any comprehensive history of death in Africa would have to address the changing of violent death and its meanings and would have to include the nascent scholarship on suicide and road accidents, amongst other subjects alongside criminal and political violence.47

Colonialism and Christianity: Deathly encounters


Like many other missionaries, Dr David Brown, a minister of the Church of Scotland, found the funerary practices of the people amongst whom he worked disturbing and repulsive. Yet the common human experience of death also provided opportunities for the missionary. Brown was horrified by the noise and apparent disorder of “pagan” Nyakyusa burial rites, with their reference to the role of ancestral spirits in the world of the living, the role of animal sacrifice, and perhaps above all by their explicit expression of sexuality. Early Christian converts in southwest Tanganyika, as elsewhere, were asked to make a difficult choice. Banned from attending “pagan” funerals of family members, they risked creating serious social conflict and the anger of the ancestors. In exchange Christianity claimed to have conquered death completely and held out the promise of individual salvation, but this could only be achieved by giving up those relationships with the dead which were so central to the lives of the living. Though Brown and his colleagues drew a stark contrast between “pagan” and Christian practices around death, nevertheless, the experience of death was a constant reminder of the shared human emotion of grief. When Brown’s small daughter died in 1921, just a few months after arriving in Tanganyika, he and his wife were moved by the sympathy of their African neighbours, many of whom had been through similar losses. Over time the practice of Christian burial, whilst still a vital sign of Christian identity, became more open to a degree of negotiation. When Brown himself died, in Northern Rhodesia in 1946, his body was wrapped in a simple white cloth and buried without a coffin. His African friends were impressed. This choice of burial demonstrated, they said, that he had become a “real” African.48

48 Dr David Brown, papers held privately; Godfrey Wilson, “Nyakyusa conventions of burial”; Monica Wilson, Good Company (London, 1951); Monica Wilson, Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa (London, 1959).
Death played a central part in the conversations between missionaries and their converts. The death of Christ represented the once-and-for-all sacrifice. Death itself had been conquered, for those who had the courage to believe. In southern Africa, missionary insistence on speaking about death provoked both fascination and flight amongst their potential converts, and helped to convey a sense of the authority of the Christian god. For some Africans, Christian depictions of the resurrection of the dead and the second-coming of Christ held particular attraction, as these offered an innovative theological perspective on the death-process. Believers no longer had to fear death, nor the wrath of malevolent “shades” or ancestral spirits, and could instead await with anticipation the rising up of their dead.

Conversations about death were also meditations on the very concept of the person, involving tricky linguistic and cultural translations, of the concept of the soul, for example, and of the afterlife. While the efficacy of these “death conversations” in converting Africans remains debatable, one enduring historical legacy of these discursive encounters is that the narrative of resurrection became, for some, incorporated into an autochthonous eschatological framework, as famously evident in the millenarial call of Nongqawuse in the Xhosa cattle-killing.

49 Robert Moffat recalled of his efforts to engage ordinary Tswana in conversation, “Death and a future state are subjects they do not like to contemplate, and when they are introduced it frequently operates like an imperative order for them to depart.” Isaac Seapera, ed., Apprenticeship at Kuruman. The Letters of Robert and Mary Moffat, 1820-1828 (London, 1951), 253; see also William H. Worger, “Parsing God: Conversations about the meaning of words and metaphors in 19th century southern Africa,” Journal of African History 42, 3 (2001): 417-47.


As has been noted in other contexts, the “long conversation” between missionaries and Africans was shaped not only by philosophical concerns but also by material struggles over space, resources and bodies.53 This is no less the case in the realm of death. In depictions of death-bed scenes, missionaries could reveal the triumphant grace of the Christian god as somehow visibly embodied on the peaceful expressions of the dying. Furthermore, the choice to bury one’s kin in newly erected cemeteries under Christian rites represented a “final test” of allegiance, and for the Christian convert it was a decision potentially fraught with doubt, controversy and dissension.54 It is evident some aspects of African beliefs in a spirit world could be incorporated into Christian practice, and others could not, though the huge variety of Christian practice in Africa makes generalisations hazardous. Whilst the “accommodation” between Christian and “traditional” practice and beliefs has been central to more recent analyses of the history of Christianity in Africa, nevertheless, the distinction between a Christian burial and a “traditional” one is still critical for many African Christians.55

Debates over death and funerary practice have also occurred in the Muslim societies of Africa. Some of these debates refer back to the origins of Islam itself. In one account of a funeral “controversy”, upon the death of the leader of a rival group of munafiqun (or “hypocrites”) in Medina, the Prophet Muhammad assented to praying over the dead body and clothing him in a ritual shirt. Later interpretations rebuke the Prophet for these actions on the

54 King Moshoeshoe faced this predicament, as described by Eugene Casalis, upon the sudden death of one of his wives; Casalis, The Basutos, 89-92.
55 See Marleen de Witte, Long Live the Dead: Changing Funeral Celebrations in Asante, Ghana (Amsterdam, 2001); James L. Cox, ed., Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction Between Christian and African Traditional Religions (Cardiff, 1998).
basis of the Qu’ranic injunction against praying over the bodies of dead “disbelievers”, although whether the munafiqun, who had overtly professed the Muslim faith, could be categorised as “disbelievers” was debatable. Even from its earliest beginnings, then, religious authority, textual interpretation, and claims of allegiance were contested in the practice of Muslim funerary rites. Islam’s long history on the continent, particularly in East and West Africa, make any generalisations about its influence on African death cultures particularly problematic. Islamic burial practices were incorporated into one East African society so seamlessly that it was noted even a colonial missionary could not distinguish the Islamic features of a “native” burial ground. Indeed, in contemporary South Africa, recent converts to Islam have adopted a narrative of return, and viewed the practice of Islamic burial rites as an important way to connect with a nostalgic and more authentically “Xhosa” past.

Islamic reform movements have historically involved a questioning of the proper place and conduct of rituals, including funerary and mourning practices. Thus, religious revival is often accompanied by a process of cultural and social reform. We see this for example in the shift to a more orthodox version of Islam in the Sudan, which has had the effect of relegating women’s ritual knowledge to the sphere of the “traditional” as opposed to the more pietist


58 Islamic funerary practices were also perceived to be a welcome bulwark against the encroachment, financial and social, brought on by the demands of a costly Christian funeral; Rebekah Lee, “Conversion or continuum?: The spread of Islam among African women in Cape Town,” Social Dynamics 27, 2 (2001): 62-85.
and privileged male world of the “scriptural”. Thus marginalised, women’s participation in zar spirit possession cults have become emptied of their previous ritual power.59

For European colonial rulers, African burial practices presented a complex set of dilemmas. Although in theory under the rubric of “traditional” structures that were granted some degree of autonomy under Indirect Rule in many parts of Africa, the public performance of funerary and burial rituals often invited the interference of colonial officials. In part, this was because of European fears of harmful emanations from “unsanitary” methods of corpse disposal, such as multiple or shallow graves, burials within homesteads, and practices of corpse exposure. By the 1930s, an increasingly medicalised and rationalised approach to public health had, in some parts of the continent, resulted in closer regulation of the disposal of the dead. For example, in French equatorial Africa, by the 1930s, colonial officials required the immediate burial of corpses, a regulated depth for graves and the use of wooden coffins.60 Even in the confined spaces of Death Row in British-held colonial Africa, we can see the shift to “closed” and privately managed executions as driven by a larger imperative to institute a more “civilised” and sanitised approach to the exercise of imperial law.61

Undoubtedly, the development of these “sanitised” spaces of death helped to alter African ways of burying and remembering their dead. However, we need to be careful not to

---

exaggerate the impact of the colonial state. Africans resisted colonial regulations, whether by refusing to bury their dead in demarcated cemeteries or by overtly protesting what they viewed as intrusive legislation.\textsuperscript{62} In contemporary southern Africa, as elsewhere, the continued relevance of notions of bodily contagion and the persistence of fears over the misuse of corpses for witchcraft show that neither colonial regulation nor missionary indoctrination have successfully eradicated African beliefs around the ontological power of the (dead or dying) body.\textsuperscript{63} The historical lack of adherence among Africans to cremation, despite its widespread practice since the 1930s amongst the white and Indian populations of South Africa, may be another indication or the resilience of culturally specific notions of the body.\textsuperscript{64} A more accurate assessment of these debates would have to acknowledge the complexity and range, as well as the historical specificity, of African responses to colonial and missionary interventions.

\textit{Urbanisation, globalisation and new technologies of death}

I am a cut sprout, ever resprouting.

A poor man has no place in the country…

Poor men, we are long-legged;

\textsuperscript{62} See De Witte, \textit{Long Live the Dead}; Lamont, ‘Decomposing pollution’; Greene, \textit{Sacred Sites}.


You know we shall die far away.65

This stanza from a sefala, or Sotho song of comradeship, speaks of the loneliness and displacement of the migrant labourer. For the many “long-legged” migrants journeying to the mines of South Africa throughout the twentieth century, it was the prospect of dying “far away” which gave a particular pathos to their situation. While the establishment of cemeteries on the mines acknowledged that mines themselves had become spaces of (accidental) death, it was the fact that they could now be spaces of burial which further troubled African labourers and their families.66 How would the dead be ensured safe passage into the afterlife, if not buried at “home” under the watchful eyes of the living? And how would the community attain ritual and spiritual closure without the assurances brought on by the ceremonial treatment of the body of the deceased? Throughout southern Africa, the migrant labour system imposed a necessary mathematics of distance into the delicate calibrations of social and kinship relations. African relations to death and the dying process were no less affected.

The rich scholarship on the impact of the slave trade reminds us that the more recent shaping of African mortality patterns through urbanisation, labour migration, and globalisation can not be seen as entirely “new” historical processes.67 Road accidents, which

are currently referred to as reaching “epidemic” proportions in some African countries, may be considered an unfortunate consequence of modern forms of motorised transport.\(^{68}\)

However, in Sierra Leone, the phenomenon of death “on the road” was deeply associated with older forms of capitalist consumption, namely slavery. The road, like the sea which carried away enslaved Africans, became feared as a “man-eater”, a voracious devourer of human flesh.\(^{69}\) That Sotho migrants drew on similar cannibalistic imagery to cast South African mines as a giant belly which swallowed African bodies suggests that forces of global capitalism influenced not only economies of death but African imaginaries as well.\(^{70}\)

In the post-colonial period, the growth of regional and international networks, increased mobility (within Africa and globally), and the speed of telecommunications have contributed to a re-mapping of the ways in which people understand and daily exercise a sense of “belonging”.\(^{71}\) Some analyses have argued that, in the context of escalating violence and political instability in many post-independence African countries, this re-mapping has been marked by a profound “un-mooring” of social ties. Particularly in the fluid and often marginalised and violent spaces of African metropolises, a dynamics of disconnection – from socio-economic, legal, and moral structures – has operated. In this space of disconnectedness,


\[^{69}\text{Shaw, Memories of the Slave Trade, 17, 64, 231.}\]

\[^{70}\text{Maloka, “Basotho and the experience of death, dying and mourning,” 21-3.}\]

\[^{71}\text{Geschiere, ‘Funerals and belonging’.}\]
the division between life and death has become easily ruptured, and the world of the dead freely intrudes on the living. The use of apocalyptic time-scales in Kinois music, the circulation of witchcraft rumours, and the re-emergence of the Okija shrine in Nigeria can all be understood as African attempts to re-orientate themselves to this different, spectral topography. Narratives of liminality have also emerged out of the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic. In rural Mpumulanga (South Africa), those with HIV/AIDS are considered the “walking dead” while in Kampala, the cyclical nature of AIDS-related illnesses has meant that AIDS sufferers live in a state of moving back and forth from the brink of death to life.

If the problems of modernity have brokered a different relation to the spectral, the products of modernity have themselves mediated shifts in the meaning and management of death. The commoditisation of funeral rites in recent decades in many parts of Africa has, at least materially, transformed burial and mourning practices. “Fantasy” coffins from Ga carpenters in Accra are now marketed and sold via the Internet, with one website robustly proclaiming their coffins are free-trade “antiques of the future”. Purchasing (and being buried in) a coffin modelled exactly on a popular Nokia cellphone can, claims the website, “keep your line to heaven open.” In South Africa, township-based funeral homes offer families a range of products and services, including in-house embalming, refrigerated transport of the deceased, and the use of double-decker buses and portable green “lawns” to transform dusty

---

cemeteries into areas of comfortable reflection. Fueling this consumption is an equally vibrant and competitive funeral insurance industry, with both commercial and informal sector schemes offering financial security for those seeking a “dignified” funeral for themselves and their dependants. In west and southern Africa, where the commoditization process seems most apparent, social pressures to participate in increasingly elaborate and expensive funerals have sparked a lively and contentious debate about the burdensome “price” of respectability.

Although it would be tempting to argue that commodization has emptied the spiritual content of death rituals and marked a “great transformation” in African death cultures, there is reason to suggest this is an oversimplification. Firstly, colonial anthropological and missionary accounts remind us that the elaboration of funerals is not a “new” African invention. A focus on the commercialisation of contemporary funerals would thus obscure older, historical dynamics at work. Furthermore, as Jane Guyer and others have stressed, monetary transactions in Africa cannot be understood in isolation away from locally derived systems of belief, sociality and exchange. Commodities, therefore, need to be seen as potentially malleable mediators of local cultural values, and not simply as markers of western capitalist consumption. For example, African incorporation of new technologies and

---

76 However, a sense of solemnity at a burial may be marred by aggressive marketing campaigns on the funeral site itself – participants in a funeral ceremony can expect to see phone numbers of that funeral’s service provider emblazoned prominently across the backs of seats and on marquee tents. Rebekah Lee, ‘Entrepreneurship in South Africa’s emergent township funeral industry’, in Ute Roschenthaler and Dorothea Schultz, eds., *Cultural Entrepreneurship in Africa* (London, 2016), 121-38.
77 These trends are satirised in Mda’s *Ways of Dying* and are the subject of Rebekah Lee’s film, “The Price of Death” (documentary, 2012).
communications networks, which implicitly link greater and more disparate geographical areas, has arguably increased the possibilities of spiritual engagement with the dead and the community of the deceased. For example, newly introduced mortuary technologies such as embalming and refrigerated transport of the corpse has allowed a type of reverse migration, where the dead in urban areas can be transported back to their natal homes for burial and subsequent commemoration ceremonies.81 Internet chat rooms have become, for the Congolese diaspora in the West, an important medium through which to debate death and shape mourning culture.82 Even the consumption of prescriptive drugs, in the face of certain death from AIDS, has been imbued with a particularly spiritual significance.83 Evidently, then, the forces of globalisation and technological change have helped fashion alternative cultural landscapes within which Africans could re-invent their relations to death and the dying process. That these dynamics could be simultaneously “modern” and deeply “historical” attests to Africans’ extensive and multi-faceted engagement with death over the course of the last two centuries. The challenge remains for historians of Africa to explore the development of this complex, and compelling, relationship.

Acknowledgments:
An earlier version of this chapter appeared in the *Journal of African History* as “Death and dying in the history of Africa since 1800,” *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008): 341-59. The authors wish to acknowledge the Arts Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom for funding the larger collaboration on which this chapter is based. For further information on the project, please visit: [www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/deathinafrica](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/deathinafrica).

---


83 Robins, “From ‘rights’ to ‘ritual’”; Golomski, *Funeral Culture*. 