

Death in Africa: A History c.1800 to Present Day

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“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.”¹

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.² Against this picture of death sanitized, medicalized and

¹ Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, “Burial and mortuary rites of the Nuer,” *African Affairs* 48, 190 (1949), 62.

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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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

Ranum (London, 1976); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (London, 1981).

³ On the misrepresentations of African beliefs about death see Louis-Vincent Thomas, *La Mort Africaine: Idéologie funéraire en Afrique noire* (Paris, 1982).

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915)

⁵ Filip de Boeck, "The apocalyptic interlude: Revealing death in Kinshasa," *African Studies Review*, 48, 2 (2005): 11-31.

⁶ See Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee, eds., *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, (Cape Town, 1998); Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Meaning in a Democratic South Africa*, (Durham, N.C., 2004); Ananda Breed, *Performing the Nation: Genocide, Violence, Justice, Reconciliation* (Chicago, 2014).

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹ It is not difficult to see why colonial anthropologists viewed the management of death as fundamental to understanding

⁷ Zeph Kajeju, “Funeral services group to list on BSE,” *The Voice* (Francistown), 4 March 2008: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200803040816.html>

⁸ Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (London 1963) and *The American Way of Death Revisited* (London, 1998).

⁹ See Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (trans London, 1960); Robert Hertz, trans. Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham, *Death and the Right Hand* (New York, 1960); Max Gluckman, ed., *The Allocation of Responsibility* (Manchester, 1972); Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, eds., *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, Cambridge, 1982; Yvan Droz, ed., *La violence et les morts: éclairages anthropologiques sur la mort et les rites funéraires* (Geneva, 2003). On Africa: Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington, 1993); J.C. Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (Stanford, 1962); Karen Middleton, ed., *Ancestors, Power and History in Madagascar* (Leiden, 1999); Maurice Bloch, *Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages and Kinship Organisation in Madagascar* (London, 1971); Marja-Liisa Swantz, *Blood, Milk and Death: Body Symbols and the Power of Regeneration Among the Zaramo of Tanzania*, (Westport, 1995); J. M. Schoffeleers, *Religion and the Dramatisation of Life: Spirit Beliefs and Rituals in Southern and Central Malawi* (Blantyre, 1997); Thomas, *Le Mort Africaine*.

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”.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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

¹⁰ Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (Cape Town, 1995).

¹¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, “Magic, science and religion” (1925); Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*

dissension.¹²

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".¹³ 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

¹² Godfrey Wilson, trained by Malinowski, worked extensively on the symbolism of Nyakyusa burial rites, seeing them as part of a larger "system" and connecting them to other "rites of passage". Unusually, he also emphasised the emotional content of these rites. Godfrey Wilson, "Nyakyusa conventions of burial," *Bantu Studies* 13 (1939): 1-3. On the social and emotional dynamics of contemporary funerals, see Casey Golomski, *Funeral Culture: AIDS, Work and Cultural Change in an African Kingdom* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2018); Frederick Klaits, "The widow in blue: Blood and the morality of remembering in Botswana's time of AIDS," *Africa* 75, 1 (2005): 26-62; Deborah Durham and Frederick Klaits, "Funerals and the public space of sentiment in Botswana," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 28, 4 (2002): 777-95.

¹³ Megan Vaughan, "'Divine kings': Sex, death and anthropology in inter-war East/Central Africa," *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008): 383-401.

periods of “contamination” of a woman’s body— for example, during menses or lactation.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.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is evidence from some African societies that deaths from suicide were regarded as particularly problematic, fearful and polluting.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.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.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

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 Klaitz, ‘The widow in blue’.

¹⁵ Sandra Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington, 2002).

¹⁶ See Megan Vaughan “Suicide in late colonial Africa: The evidence of inquests from Nyasaland,” *American Historical Review* 115, 2 (2010): 385-404; Paul Bohannan, ed., *African Homicide and Suicide* (Princeton, 1960).

¹⁷ See Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, 1997); Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumour and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, eds., *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993); Isak Niehaus, with Eliazaar Mohlala and Kally Shokane, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (London, 2001); Henrietta Moore and Todd Saunders, eds., *Magical Interpretations: Material Realities* (London, 2001).

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”

¹⁹ Thomas C. McCaskie, “Death and the Asantehene: A historical meditation,” *The Journal of African History* 30, 3 (1989): 417-44. See also John Parker, “The cultural politics of death and burial in early colonial Accra,” in David Anderson and Richard Rathbone, eds., *Africa’s Urban Past* (Oxford, 2000), 205-21.

²⁰ Terence Ranger, “Dignifying death: The politics of burial in Bulawayo,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, 1-2 (2004): 110-44. Funerals in the 1980s became a key vehicle of political activism for the African National Congress. See Garrey Michael Dennie, “The cultural politics of burial in South Africa, 1884–1990” (Ph.D. thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1996).

²¹ Walima T. Kalusa, “Death, Christianity and African miners: Contesting Indirect Rule on the Zambian copperbelt, 1935-1962,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 44, 1 (2011): 89-112; see also Walima T. Kalusa and Megan Vaughan, *Death, Belief and Politics in Central Africa* (Lusaka, 2013).

²² Peter Geschiere, “Funerals and belonging: Different patterns in south Cameroon,” *African Studies Review* 48, 2 (2005): 45–64; David William Cohen and Elisha S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa* (London, 1992).

espoused by the Treatment Action Campaign has led its volunteers to a vigorous assertion of a rights-based citizenship.²³ Recent debates over the memorialization of key historical figures show the susceptibility of nation-building projects to a continued “politics of death”. Adebani’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.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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

²³ Steven Robins, “From ‘rights’ to ‘ritual’: AIDS activism in South Africa,” *American Anthropologist* 108, 2 (2006): 312-23; ; Deborah Posel, “Democracy in a time of AIDS,” *Interventions* 7, 3 (2005): 310-5.

²⁴ Wale Adebani, “Death, National Memory and the Social Construction of Heroism,” *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008): 419-44; see also Florence Bernault, “Colonial bones: The 2006 burial of Savorgnan De Brazza in the Congo,” *African Affairs* 109, 436 (2010): 367-90.

²⁵ Bob W. White, “The political undead: Is it possible to mourn for Mobutu’s Zaire?,” *African Studies Review* 48, 2 (2005): 65–85.

²⁶ Shane Doyle, “‘The child of death’: Personal names and parental attitudes towards mortality in Bunyoro, western Uganda, 1900-2005,” *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008): 361-82. See also Shane Doyle, *Sexuality, Fertility and Mortality in East Africa, 1900-1980* (Oxford, 2013).

infants, did not love them in life or mourn them in death, has been effectively challenged.²⁷ 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 demographics. 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.²⁸ In some regions, the burden of care of both the elderly and the long-term sick has been increasing in recent decades.²⁹ 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

²⁷ Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900* (Cambridge, 1983).

²⁸ Nana Apt, *Ageing in Africa* (Geneva, 1997); Isabella Aboderin, *Intergenerational Support and Old Age in Africa* (New Jersey, 2006).

²⁹ Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, 2005); Julie Livingston, "Elderly women and concerns over care in southeastern Botswana," *Medical Anthropology* 22, 2 (2003): 205-23.

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-

³⁰ Andreas Sagner, “Ageing and Social Policy in South Africa: Historical Perspectives with particular reference to the Eastern Cape,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, 3 (2000): 523-553.

³¹ John Iliffe, *Africans: the History of a Continent*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, 2007); John C. Caldwell, “The social repercussions of colonial rule: demographic aspects,” in Albert Adu Boahen, ed., *UNESCO General History of Africa, VII* (London, 1985), 458-507; Dennis D. Cordell and Joel W. Gregory, eds., *African Population and Capitalism: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1987).

³² <http://www.unicef.org/sowc03/tables/table9.html>; Debby Potts and Shula Marks, “Fertility in Southern Africa: The Silent Revolution,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 27, 4 (2001): 189-205.

³³ http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/botswana_statistics.html

³⁴ On the latter issue see Charles Nzioka, “The social meanings of death from HIV/AIDS: an African interpretive view,” *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 2 (2002): 1-14; Gad Kilonzo and Nora Hogan, “Traditional African mourning practices are abridged in response to AIDS epidemic: Implications for mental health,”

AIDS era.³⁵ Southern Africa, in particular, has become so saturated with presentist AIDS research, that the impression is sometimes given that history itself began with the HIV/AIDS epidemic.³⁶ There is no doubt that there are particular features of the HIV/AIDS epidemic which make the drawing of historical parallels hazardous. Amongst these is the critical fact that this is a long-term epidemic. This makes it very different from many other epidemic diseases, for which the duration of outbreaks is much shorter-lived. There is almost certainly something to be learned from a comparison with the social, cultural and religious responses of African societies to other epidemic diseases, including smallpox, influenza, meningitis, plague, tuberculosis, and of course, epidemics of other sexually transmitted diseases, but the most salient comparison may, in the end, turn out to be with the effects of the slave trade.³⁷

Violence, war and historical memory

“Death” and “Africa” are words which, unfortunately, seem often to be twinned together. In much western media coverage “Africa” appears as a space of death: epidemic disease, famine, war, and apparently “irrational” violence dominate representations of the continent and give rise to agonised debates about how such images might be countered. This is not a new phenomenon, of course, and dates back at least to the images of the slave trade and the calls from Abolitionists to “save” the continent from darkness and death.

Transcultural Psychiatry 36 (1999): 259-83.

³⁵ There are however notable exceptions to this generalisation: John Iliffe, *The African AIDS Epidemic: A History* (Oxford, 2006); Felicitas Becker and Paul Wenzel Geissler, eds., *Journal of Religion in Africa* Special Issue on Religion and AIDS in Africa 37, 1 (2007); Didier Fassin, *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa* (Berkeley, 2007).

³⁶ Rebekah Lee, “Art, Activism and Productive Tensions in the Next Generation of HIV/AIDS Research in South Africa,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 45, 1 (2019): 1-7.

³⁷ Milton Lewis, Maryinez Lyons and Philip Setel, eds., *Histories of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa* (London, 1999); Terence Ranger and Paul Slack, eds., *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge, 1992); Howard Phillips and David Killingray, eds., *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918-19: New Perspectives* (London, 2003).

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.³⁸ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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

³⁸ David Keen, “A rational kind of madness,” *Oxford Development Studies* 25, 1 (1997): 67-75; William Reno, “African weak states and commercial alliances,” *African Affairs* 96 (1997): 165-88; Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1998); David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 2005); Michael Watts, “Resource curse: Governmentality, oil, and power in the Niger Delta,” *Geopolitics* 9 (2004): 50-80.

³⁹ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, 1 (2003): 11-40.

⁴⁰ Mamoud Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Oxford, 2001); Catherine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860-1960* (New York, 1988); Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide, 1959-1994* (London, 1995).

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

⁴¹ Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: the untold tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London, 2007); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C, 2006); Ashley Jackson, *Botswana, 1939-1945: An African Country at war* (Oxford, 1995).

⁴² David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, 2005).

⁴³ Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002).

⁴⁴ Achille Mbembe, "Provisional notes on the postcolony," *Africa*, 62, 1 (1992), 5-37; De Boeck, "The apocalyptic interlude," 17.

⁴⁵ See Stephen Ellis, "The Okija shrine: Death and life in Nigerian politics," *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008): 445-66; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit: War in Northern Uganda, 1986-1997* (London, 1991).

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

⁴⁶ For a long durée approach see David Schoenbrun, “Violence and vulnerability in East Africa before 1800 CE.,” *History Compass* 4, 5 (2006): 741-60. On warfare and warrior traditions: Ali A. Mazrui, ed., *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* (Leiden, 1977), 20-47; Robert S. Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa*, 2nd edition (Madison, 1989); John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa: 1500-1800* (London, 1999); Bethwell A. Ogot, ed., *War and Society in Africa: Ten Studies* (London, 1972); John Iliffe, *Honour in African History* (Cambridge, 2005). On the history of human sacrifice: Robin Law, “Human sacrifice in pre-colonial west Africa,” *African Affairs* 84, 1 (1985): 52-87; Clifford Williams, “Asante: Human sacrifice or capital punishment? An assessment of the period 1807-1874,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 21, 3 (1988): 443-452. For an interpretation of “imaginary” violence see Wyatt MacGaffey, “Aesthetics and politics of violence in central Africa,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13, 1 (2000): 63-75.

⁴⁷ Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” 32; Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Beatrice Hibou, *The Criminalisation of the State in Africa* (Oxford, 1998). The inadequacy of mortality statistics for most African countries hampers any thorough analysis. See Katherine Kahn, Stephen M. Tollman, Michel Garenne and John S.S. Green, “Who dies from what? Determining causes of death in South Africa’s rural northeast,” *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 4, 6 (1991): 433-41. On suicide in Africa: Megan Vaughan, “The discovery of suicide in East and Southern Africa,” *African Studies*, vol. 71, 2 (2012); Vaughan, “Suicide in late colonial Africa”; Lourens Schlebush, *Suicidal Behaviour in South Africa* (Durban, 2005) and Julie Livingston, “Suicide, risk and investment in the heart of the African miracle”, *Cultural Anthropology* 24, 4 (2009): 652-80; Julie Parle, *States of Mind: Searching for Mental Health in Natal and Zululand 1868-1918* (Scottsville, KZN, 2007); Fatima Meer, *Race and Suicide in South Africa* (London, 1976). On road accidents and fatalities in Africa: Mark Lamont “Accidents have no cure! Road death as industrial catastrophe in eastern Africa,” *African Studies* 71, 2 (2012): 174-94; Rebekah Lee “Death in slow motion: Funerals, ritual practice and road danger in South Africa,” *African Studies* 71, 2 (2012): 195-211.

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.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹ 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 millenial call of Nongqawuse in the Xhosa cattle-killing.⁵²

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 Schapera, 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.

⁵⁰ John P.R. Wallis, ed., *The Matebele Journals of Robert Moffat, 1829-1860* (Salisbury, National Archives of Rhodesia, 1976); Eugene Casalis, *The Basutos, Or, Twenty-Three Years in South Africa* (London, 1861).

⁵¹ Hildegard H. Fast, “‘In at one ear and out at the other’: African response to the Wesleyan message in Xhosaland, 1825-1835,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 23, 2 (1993): 147-74.

⁵² Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856-7* (Johannesburg, 1989); on African millenarianism see Robert Edgar and Hilary Sapire, *African Apocalypse* (Athens, Ohio, 2000); De Boeck, “The apocalyptic interlude”; Yvan Droz and Herve Maupeu, eds., *Les figures de la mort à Nairobi; Une capitale sans cimètiere* (Paris, 2003).

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 Muhammed assented to praying over the dead body and clothing him in a ritual shirt. Later interpretations rebuke the Prophet for these actions on the

⁵³ Jean and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1991).

⁵⁴ King Moshoeshe 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.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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

⁵⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Death, funeral processions, and the articulation of religious authority in early Islam,” *Studia Islamica* 93 (2001), 29-30. See also Arthur S. Tritton, “Muslim Funeral Customs,” *Bulleting of the School of Oriental Studies* 9, 3 (1938): 653-61; Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany, 1981); Lila Abu-Loghod, “Islam and the gendered discourses of death,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 187-205. On Africa: Jose Van Santen, “We attend but we no longer dance: Changes in Mafa funeral practices due to Islamization,” in Catherine Baroin, Daniel Barreteau, and Charlotte von Graffenreid, eds., *Mort et Rites Funéraires dans le Bassin du lac Tchad* (Paris, 1995), 163-86; E. Dada Adelowo, “Death and burial in Yoruba Qur’anic and Biblical religion,” *Orita* 19, 2 (1987): 104-17.

⁵⁷ Felicitas Becker, “Islamic reform and historical change in the care of the dead: Conflicts over funerary practice among Tanzanian Muslims,” *Africa* 79, 3 (2009): 417-34.

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

⁵⁹ Victoria Bernal, “Gender, culture and capitalism: Women and the remaking of Islamic ‘tradition’ in a Sudanese village,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 36, 1 (1994): 36-67.

⁶⁰ Florence Bernault, “Body, power and sacrifice in equatorial Africa,” *Journal of African History* 47 (2006), 231. In east Africa in the 1930s, a Native Authority Ordinance was introduced which banned corpse exposure; Mark Lamont, “Decomposing pollution: Corpses, burials, and affliction among the Meru of central Kenya,” in Joel Noret and Michael Jindra, eds., *Funerals in Africa: Explorations of a Social Phenomenon* (London, 2011), 88-108.

⁶¹ Stacey Hynd, “Killing the condemned: The practice and process of capital punishment in British Africa, 1900-1950s,” *Journal of African History* 49, 3 (2008): 403-18.

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.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.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 of the resilience of culturally specific notions of the body.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.

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;

⁶² See De Witte, *Long Live the Dead*; Lamont, 'Decomposing pollution'; Greene, *Sacred Sites*.

⁶³ Benedict Carton, "'We are being made quiet by this annihilation': Historicizing concepts of bodily pollution and dangerous sexuality in South Africa," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 39, 1 (2006): 85-106; Benedicte Ingstad, Frank Bruun and Sheila Tlou, "AIDS and the elderly Tswana: The concept of pollution and consequences for AIDS prevention," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 12, 4 (1997): 357-72; Klaitz, "The widow in blue"; Golomski, *Funeral Culture*; Adam Ashcroft, *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (Chicago, 2000)

⁶⁴ An uneasy alliance forged between Indian nationalists, led by Mahatma Gandhi, and modernist white health officials resulted in the creation of South Africa's first crematorium, in 1918; Garrey Michael Dennie, "Flames of race, ashes of death: Re-inventing cremation in Johannesburg, 1910-1945," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29, 1 (2003): 177-92.

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

⁶⁵ David B. Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The World Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants* (Chicago, 1994), 124.

⁶⁶ Cemeteries were legally established on South African mines by the first decade of the twentieth century; Tshidiso Maloka, “Basotho and the experience of death, dying and mourning in the South African mine compounds, 1890-1940,” *Cahiers d'Etudes africaines* 38, 1 (1998), 25. On mine-related mortality see Elaine N. Katz, *The White Death: Silicosis on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1886-1910* (Johannesburg, 1994); Shula Marks, “The silent scourge? Silicosis, respiratory disease and gold-mining in South Africa,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, 4 (2006): 569-89; Randall Packard, *White Plague, Black Labour: The Political Economy of Health and Diseases in South Africa* (Berkeley, 1989).

⁶⁷ On slave mortality: Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1989); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and*

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,

African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades (Cambridge, 1990); Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison, 1988). On death in the African diaspora: Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); Karla F.C. Holloway, *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (Durham, NC, 2002); Joao Jose Reis, *Death is a Festival: Funeral Rites and Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007).

⁶⁸ See James Gibbs, “The writer and the road: Wole Soyinka and those who cause death by dangerous driving,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 33, 3 (1995): 469-98; Charles Manga Fombad, “Compensation of victims of motor vehicle accidents in Botswana: An appraisal of the MVA Fund Act,” *Journal of African Law*, 43, 2 (1999), pp. 151-83; Mark Lamont and Rebekah Lee, “Arrive Alive: Road safety in Kenya and South Africa,” *Technology and Culture* 56 (2015): 464-488.

⁶⁹ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 17, 64, 231.

⁷⁰ Maloka, “Basotho and the experience of death, dying and mourning,” 21-3.

⁷¹ 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.⁷² 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.⁷³ Narratives of liminality have also emerged out of the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic. In rural Mpumalanga (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.⁷⁴

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.”⁷⁵ 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

⁷² Abdou Maliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC, 2004).

⁷³ De Boeck, “The apocalyptic interlude”; Ashford, *Madumo*; Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*; Ellis, “The Okija shrine”.

⁷⁴ Isak Niehaus, “Death before dying: Conception of AIDS in the South African Lowveld,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33 4 (2007): 845-60; Andrew Irving, “Ethnography, art and death,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2008): 185-208.

⁷⁵ http://www.eshopafrika.com/acatalog/Ga_Coffins.html, accessed 1 April 2008.

cemeteries into areas of comfortable reflection.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷

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.⁷⁸ 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.⁷⁹ Commodities, therefore, need to be seen as potentially malleable mediators of local cultural values, and not simply as markers of western capitalist consumption.⁸⁰ 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).

⁷⁸ For a version of the ‘transformation’ thesis, see Kwame Arhin, “The economic implications of transformations in Akan funeral rites,” *Africa*, 64, 3 (1994): 307-22

⁷⁹ De Witte, *Long Live the Dead*, 105; Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago, 2004).

⁸⁰ Hikaru Suzuki, *The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan* (Palo Alto, 2000).

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.

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⁸¹Rebekah Lee, “Death ‘on the move’: Funerals, entrepreneurs and the rural-urban nexus in South Africa,” *Africa* 81, 2 (2011): 226-47; see also Sjaak van der Geest, “Between death and funeral: Mortuaries and the exploitation of liminality in Kawhu,” *Africa* 76, 4 (2006): 485-501.

⁸²White, “The political undead”; see Charles Tshimanga, *Jeunesse, formation et société au Congo-Kinshasa 1890–1960* (Paris, 2001).

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