David Lipset and Eric Kline Silverman (eds)


*Mortuary Dialogues* is an initiated contribution to the ethnography of Oceania, with relevance far beyond the Pacific. The edited volume consists, with few exceptions, of work by scholars based in the US. *Mortuary Dialogues* is also a thought-provoking attempt to revitalize anthropological theory on meanings of mortuary ritual. The main subject, collective and personal responses to death, is of course an issue all humans have to face. The common denominator for the societies analyzed in the book is their status as marginalized postcolonial communities, bereft of many things but not of agency. Methodologically, *Mortuary dialogues* demonstrates the value of anthropologists revisiting their fieldwork sites. The authors share a longstanding engagement with the communities they describe. By juxtaposing personal experiences from repeated intervals of fieldwork with readings of historical sources, they achieve solid depth to their analyses of continuity and change in ritual responses to death.

In the introduction the editors Eric K. Silverman and David Lipset set out to destabilize dominant discourses on mortuary rituals in French and Anglophone sociology and anthropology. In essence, they question functionalist understandings of mortuary ritual. Their discussion includes theories associated with the French journal *L’Année Sociologique*, together with now classical works by Arnold van Gennep (1908), Emile Durkheim (1912), Robert Hertz (1907) and others—all sharing the conviction that death, in addition to its biological, existential and psychological aspects, poses moral challenges to the community and that this requires a moral solution: the collective funeral. In twentieth-century theory, mortuary ritual is a passage rite that eventually brings community back to its original order.

The ethnographic evidence presented in the volume shows that in the Pacific, where often marginalized, local communities live in a world formed by encounters with Christianity, capitalism, state, development and social media, death continues to cause moral disruption, but mortuary rituals do not necessarily restore order. Silverman and Lipset argue that modernity calls for a re-theorization of mortuary rituals, and for this purpose, they follow the lead of several contemporary scholars in turning to Mikhail Bakhtin. The ‘Mortuary dialogues’ found in the title of the volume draws on Bakhtin’s concept of dialogue where many voices are engaged but no single voice takes command. Ritual performances of personhood and moral community are part of a glob-
alized polyphony where in the words of Silverman and Lipset ‘Death provokes arguments, quarrels, and juxtapositions, but no last word’ (p. 7).

Mortuary dialogues includes nine chapters grouped under the headings: ‘Tenacious voices’ and ‘Equivocal voices’, indicating both the persistence and the ambivalent nature of death rituals. Seven of the nine chapters concern communities in Papua New Guinea, one deals with the Marshall Islands, another with New Zealand/Aotearoa. Initially I found the geographical concentration a weakness, but the issues raised have universal relevance, and while it is invigorating when the editors make connections with African contexts in the introduction it is also fascinating to delve into the particularities of place. The problem I see is rather the artificial boundaries unintentionally created through area studies. Of the seven chapters dealing with Papua New Guinea, none is located on the western side of the national border dividing the island. In academia, Oceania is a million miles away from ‘eastern Indonesia’. In reality it is a stone’s throw.

First among the ‘Tenacious voices’ is Laurence Marshall Carucci’s chapter on mortuary rites of Marshall Islanders. Carucci brings to the fore a captivating and horrifying story of people facing ecocide: Enewetak is one of the atolls the US used for nuclear testing after World War II, adding to the kinds of colonial burdens that other Pacific Islanders have faced. The inhabitants had moved, but were eventually allowed to return to their decontaminated but destroyed homelands. The story continues into recent times when parts of the Enewetak community began to settle in Hawaii. The first to die in Hawaii was a newborn child. Hospital staff did not appreciate it when women from the family waited to express their grief, nor when the family wanted to carry the body away wrapped in sheets and placed in a plastic box. They wanted to take the dead child home, prepare her body and bury her in the back yard. Instead, the family had to engage in a mortuary dialogue with Pacific modernity: learning that in America, you pay professionals to care for the dead, and that modern death is a costly undertaking distanced from the intimacy of the family.

In their chapter on Maori mortuary rites in New Zealand/Aotearoa, Che Wilson and Karen Sinclair make visible the role of women in mourning the dead. Gender is clearly an important aspect in mortuary practices. Moreover, the two authors shed light on the negotiated balance between Māori and non-Māori (Pakeha) actors in relation to death rituals of the Ngāti Rangi tribal confederation. Notably this is the only contribution where one of the authors is a member of the group under discussion. Che Wilson is a prominent member of the Ngāti Rangi tribal confederation. It is not surprising to find an indigenous co-author in the Māori context, which raises the question why it rarely happens elsewhere.
With Doug Dalton’s contribution, the geographical focus moves to Papua New Guinea and the Rawa peoples living in the southern Finisterre mountains. In the 1930s Lutheran missionaries introduced Christianity to the Rawa community. Among many other things this led to a change in burial practices, instead of keeping the dead in their houses they were told to bury them in cemeteries. Both burial customs reflect two strategies to deny death: a western one separating death from life and the Rawa one where death is part of social and physical life. Dalton shows how the Rawa community balance both discourses in their ongoing mortuary dialogues with modernity.

The changing geography of funeral sites is a recurring theme in the book. David Lipset analyses instances of death that have occurred among the Murik Lakes people at the mouth of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea over a time span of 75 years. Here Lipset combines the dialogism of Bakhtin with psychoanalytic ideas formulated by Melanie Klein. The exercise reveals elements of both consistency and change in mortuary rituals among the Murik Lakes people, but the psychoanalytic strand makes the chapter stand out. I am not entirely convinced it is for the good.

Historical change is also the subject addressed by Nicholas A. Bainton and Martha Macintyre in their chapter dealing with two communities in insular Papua New Guinea where an influx of wealth from the gold mining industry has affected mortuary practices. In one case, that of the Lihir Islands, the mining is still ongoing, while in Misima Island the mine has shut down. This enticing chapter demonstrates how economic fluctuations affect the ceremonial sphere and that ‘a mortuary dialogue of creative, persistent, local answers to global capitalism is taking place’ (p. 119).

The following four chapters, the ‘Equivocal voices’, are all located in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Nancy C. Lutkehaus writes about peoples originating from the small volcanic island Manam, near the mouth of the Sepik river. Lutkehaus began research in Manam in the late 1970s. In 2005, the volcano on Manam erupted and the entire population was evacuated to the mainland. Since then the Manam Islanders have become an internally displaced population, though some have chosen to return without sanction from the state authorities, meaning that they lack any kind of infrastructure associated with the modern state. Lutkehaus’ insightful analysis of birth, death, and reproduction in Manam society underlines the strong relationship of person to place.

Working in Kayan, a village on the north coast of Papua New Guinea, Alexis Th. von Poser focuses on male initiation and mortuary rites. He identifies parallels between initiation and death in both traditional and in modern mortuary rites. Death is a reversal of initiation. He observed two major shifts in the mindset of Kayan villagers: a reconceptualization of time from cyclic to linear, along
with a new understanding of personhood from people as holding interchangeable positions in a group to being individuals with individual rights. As shown by von Poser, these fundamental transformations, attributed to Christianization and other external influences, have great impact on mortuary practices. These conceptual shifts of time and personhood are relevant far beyond Kayan village in New Guinea.

Eric K. Silverman has worked in Tambunum, a village located along the middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea. Silverman argues that mortuary ritual in Tambunum fails to achieve psychologic closure, and that this is due to changes to family, marriage, and personhood in contemporary Papua New Guinea. A strength in Silverman’s chapter is the way he highlights sensory experiences, including aural aspects of mortuary rites. As does his co-editor David Lipset, Silverman applies psychoanalytical theory in his analysis. In Silverman’s case, the references go to Sigmund Freud (1917, 1923) who developed understandings of mourning as a state without resolution. Silverman argues that the inexhaustible properties of grief muddy the orderliness of functionalist social theory. In the Tambunum case, death and mortuary ritual do not offer consolation. However, instead of ambivalent feelings towards the diseased, Tambunun mourners express frustration with society’s failure to deliver anticipated developments. With the psychoanalytical perspective proposed by Silverman, individual and society merge in a manner that I find both thought-provoking and disputable.

Working in Mapaio village in the southern part of Papua New Guinea, Joshua A. Bell opens his chapter with his experiences as a researcher becoming involuntarily involved in the death of a prominent local person who had helped him during his research. His entanglement unveiled jealousy and struggle for economic resources in the community. Having discussed changing mortuary rituals in the past and present, Bell finishes off by raising moral questions about ‘how one can truly help’ people who are subject to structural violence caused by resource extraction in an era of globalization. Disease and death become rampant in such surroundings, the inequality and injustice undeniable. When anthropologists like Bell (among others) witness these things close up, we are confronted with difficult and uncomfortable issues.

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References


