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 wailed 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.