

JINDRA, MICHAEL & JOËL NORET (eds).
Funerals in Africa: explorations of a social phenomenon. xii, 232 pp., map, illus., bibliogr. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. £50.00 (cloth)

Funerals in Africa contains eight historical-ethnographic case studies about various aspects of funerals in Sub-Saharan Africa, respectively in Zimbabwe, Kenya (two chapters), Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Ghana (two chapters). In their introduction and first chapter the two editors emphasize that funerals are not repositories of static 'traditions', as some authors seem to suggest, but practices caught up in processes of change and globalization, in which 'the complexities of local social and religious conditions, family dynamics, and aesthetic sensibilities ... play key roles' (p. 32). All contributions do in fact show the historical development of funerary rites.

Funerals are more than what they appear to be: rituals to mark and celebrate the transition from life to death. They can be political statements and signs of agency in a racist society (Terence Ranger about Zimbabwe); stakes to mark landownership (Yvan Droz about the Kikuyu in Kenya); a battleground of conflicting concepts of hygiene (Mark Lamont about Meru funerals in Kenya); manifestations of religious syncretism (Michael Jindra about the Cameroon Grassfields); tools of conversion (Katrin Langewiesche about Burkina Faso); demonstrations of social prestige (Joël Noret about South Benin); feasts of visual aesthetics and commemoration (Marleen de Witte about Southern Ghana); and inspiration for evil magic (Jonathan Roberts about Accra, Ghana).

Jan Vansina, who writes a foreword, captures the most striking conclusion that can be drawn from this collection of essays: funerary rituals are full of contradictions. They are for the dead but even more for the living; they are traditional *and* modern; they are celebrations of sociality but also crises of social cleavage; they are outbursts of emotion yet carefully planned; they are acts of extravagance in economically deprived communities; they waste *and* produce money; they are social and political events under a religious disguise.

What fascinates me most (and is not mentioned in this volume) is that funerals produce exemplary forms of planning and calculation through which people organize themselves in risk-sharing groups while policy-makers are unable to convince the same people to join health insurance. The foresight

and solidarity that individuals and families show in preparing themselves for death evaporate when it comes to protecting themselves against the high costs of ill health and hospital treatment.

Another paradox, only briefly discussed in some chapters, is the role of migrants in the organization of funerals. Migrated relatives in richer countries abroad send remittances to help their relatives at home to build a house, start a business, attend schools, and pay hospital bills. But the most inescapable obligation – often to their dismay – is to contribute to the expenses of lavish funerals.

Let me pick out two contributions to illustrate the rich multidimensional and dynamic character of funerals in Africa. Both Droz and Lamont describe how local ‘tribes’ in colonial Kenya were forced by political authorities and missionaries to abandon their practice of leaving the dead to scavengers such as hyenas and vultures and start to bury their deceased. Droz, writing about the Kikuyu, focuses on the opportunities that this new rule offered. Burial, which was at first reserved for the high ranked, now became available to all and thus democratized the dignification of death. But the rule of interment also provided a new possibility to distinguish between those who had lived successfully and those who had not. Being buried on one’s own land was a token of success and respect, but a grave in a public cemetery signified a less than successful life. Conversely, this way of indicating the merits of the deceased led to concerted efforts to purchase land. Thus, a grave on one’s own land worked in two directions: it promoted landownership and became a measure of a successful life.

Lamont, who describes roughly the same historical process, from scavenging to burial, among the Meru people, focuses on the conflict between local views and ideas of colonizers and missionaries concerning pollution and hygiene. For the Meru people, touching a dead body was extremely polluting and led to illness and other misfortune, whereas the colonial agents tried to impose their concepts of hygiene and forbade the practice of non-burial. Funerals, thus, became an arena where this clash was played out. Converts to Christian churches, who buried their dead in the Western way, became living proofs of the superiority of the imported concept of hygiene; funerals became demonstrations of a new public health ideology.

Thanks to its historical approach, this book is a valuable addition to the already rich ethnographic literature on African funerals.

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