

REVIEW ARTICLE

‘INTERROGER LES MORTS POUR CRITIQUER  
LES VIVANTS, OU EXOTISME MORBIDE?’  
ENCOUNTERS WITH AFRICAN FUNERARY  
PRACTICES IN FRANCOPHONE  
ANTHROPOLOGY

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IVAN VANGU NGIMBI, *Jeunesse, funérailles et contestation socio-politique en Afrique*. Paris: L’Harmattan (pb €20 – 978 2 7384 6309 8). 1997, 240 pp.

JAN-LODEWIJK GROOTAERS (ed.), *Mort et maladie au Zaïre*. Paris: L’Harmattan (pb €18 – 978 2 7384 6233 6). 1998, 176 pp.

YVAN DROZ and HERVE MAUPEU (eds), *Les Figures de la mort à Nairobi: une capitale sans cimetières*. Paris: L’Harmattan (pb €22 – 978 2 7475 3627 1). 2003, 263 pp.

In the past decade, there has been a flurry of ethnographic and historical writing about death and dying in sub-Saharan Africa. *Africa* published no less than thirteen articles between 2001 and 2009 on African ways of death, and other journals such as *African Studies Review* (2005) and the *Journal of African History* (2008) have dedicated special issues under the rubric. Additional scholarship has also appeared in edited volumes (Droz and Maupeu 2003; Jindra and Noret, forthcoming), tempered by a surprisingly limited number of published monographs (de Witte 2001; Ngimbi 1997). Taken together, this is a striking output and raises several initial questions about academic vogue, on the one hand, and historicity, on the other.

To attend to the first question, death is a ‘sexy’ subject, in quite a number of theoretical and empirical senses. But it is also exceptionally difficult to study, no less so than sexuality. Louis Vincent Thomas, francophone theorist of funerary ideologies in African societies, explicitly made a connection between *l’ethno-thanatologie* and sexuality without leaving an ethnographic guide to this intimate relationship (Thomas 1982). As far as ethnography goes, sexuality enters into African death practices in new and emergent conduct at funerals in Kinshasa (Ngimbi 1997) and the politicization of sexuality in post-apartheid South Africa (Posel 2005), just to recall a couple of examples. However ‘sexy’ the topic may be, I am not convinced that death’s current place in African studies is simply a matter of being in fashion. If the volume of recent research is anything to go by, then it can be said that something is happening in Africa that commands our attention.

With respect to the current visibility of death in Africanist scholarship, the question, 'Why now?' must also be asked. The transformations in how death and dying is managed, alongside the politicization of funerals themselves, are striking in the ways in which they depart from precedent, that is, the domain of knowledge and action all too readily recognized as tradition. Severe dislocations in the meanings of death among Africans have been reported, suggesting a source not only in the continent's generalized political and economic crisis, but also in a more acute moral and spiritual one (de Boeck 1998, 2005). Death and dying are being re-imagined in ways that are unsettling the received wisdom of older ethnographies, and directly challenging the methodologies of newer ones. As an organizing concept, death derives its popularity from the manner in which its conceptual breadth can bring together elements of these crises that would otherwise appear inchoate. The meaning of death is, at this juncture in African history, quite elusive in the ways in which the 'African crisis' is mediated and represented.

The emotional and empathic distances created by media images of death in Africa make it easy to entertain what Coulin (1997) has called a 'morbid exoticism', but exceptionally trying if one seeks a well-balanced understanding of the lived relationships to death in African everyday life. Much harder still is comprehension of the interpellation of the living and the dead in such contexts of crisis. Famine in Darfur, AIDS deaths and HIV infections everywhere, the four million Congolese war dead, the Rwandan genocide, gun crime in South Africa, and the under-reported human costs of malaria and malnutrition portray Africa as a 'space of death' in the Western press (Vaughan and Lee 2008: 241). Historically, this representation of Africa as a foil of human suffering has precedent, most notably in the British public's morbid late-nineteenth century obsession with the death toll of the slave trade.

My interest in pursuing the 'Why now?' question through reviewing francophone scholarship about recent changes to African funerary practices stems, in part, from the emphases placed on tracing cultural and social continuities in observed ruptures. In this body of scholarship, from which I have chosen only three books, a keen sense of the historicity of the 'African crisis' is maintained. At stake in this review are clusters of problems that relate to the organization of funerals, changing expressions of mourning, crises of identity and belonging, generational strife between youth and elders, an escalation in witchcraft accusations, the ebb and flow between religious and state governance, the application of new technologies to funerary practices, and an emergent questioning of the ontology of the living and the dead. Although the selected works focus on just two countries, Zaïre (now DRC) and Kenya, and are decidedly focused on urban contexts, the themes explored can be compared broadly across regions.

While this review essay aims to be comparative, it is surprisingly difficult to make generalizations about the symbolism of death in Africa. More fruitful comparisons can be made within the scope of political economy where the 'African crisis' is most visible. One of the salient questions that can arise is whether this interest in death might suggest

avenues through which to resolve the 'tradition/modernity' dichotomy within the awkward conceptual necessity of Africa as a unit of analysis, or field of interpretation.

#### FUNERALS

In tracing the historical origins of funerary ritual in Kinshasa, the late T. K. Biaya (1994) noted the ethnic pluralism of funerals in the 1930s and 1940s, processions that, despite their festive singing and dancing, were greeted by the colonial authorities with a degree of tolerance not extended to other urban institutions (quoted in Grootaers 1998: 29). The authors of the volume *Mort et Maladie au Zaïre* (1998) place funerals within a wider context of aspirant modernity—set within the Kinois aesthetic of *l'ambiance*—that used such occasional events in order to 'escape from the everyday wants of colonial exploitation, then to create a refuge against postcolonial oppression' (Biaya 1994: 89). Set clearly within the politics of domination, funerals continue to be events where the crises of the colonial and post-colonial state telescope into the intimate everyday struggles within the clan, the family and the neighbourhood.

In his richly textured ethnography of the exuberant and, sometimes, violent appropriation of funerals by youth, Ivan Vangu Ngimbi (1997) succeeds in demonstrating how funerals reveal social relations and their frictions. *Jeunesse, funérailles et contestation socio-politique en Afrique* addresses why funerals in Kinshasa reveal the antagonisms within a society deeply entrenched in crisis. Sparing no Zaïrian institution in their critique, youth takeovers of funerals in the 1990s were dramatic events that drew on the frustration and futility of being young and unemployed to lash out against the public enemy of Mobutu, symbolic of suicidal misrule, and the often invisible and clandestine threats of patriarchal uncles, associated with witchcraft.

Ngimbi offers a series of detailed ethnographic case studies of the politicization of funerals in Kinshasa and winds these around sociological analyses that stress the acute material and spiritual insecurity experienced by most Kinois in the 1990s. This contrasts quite dramatically with the volume about death and funerals in Nairobi throughout the same period (Droz and Maupeu 2003). *Les figures de la mort à Nairobi: une capitale sans cimetières* highlights other kinds of insecurity: the pressures of aspirant modernity and the rising costs of death and dying in an emergent consumer society; the burial of the political elite and the redefinition of nation; as well as the public debates over extrajudiciary killings and state-sanctioned violence. The politics of funerals in Nairobi, most notably that of S. M. Otieno, does not resonate the generational idiom as it does in the former Zaïre, so much as the questions and contests over identity and belonging, subsumed under the politically corrosive effects of long-term ethnicization. Ngimbi's ethnography of Kinois funerals stands in opposition to those described in Nairobi by merit of his arrival at a modernity of death and dying by another path.

## YOUTH, POLITICS AND RITUAL INNOVATION

In the aftermath of the spectacular failures of 'L'Authenticité' (1970) and 'Zairianization' (1973), a generation emerged to define itself in contradistinction to the pomp of such state projects, creating in its own forms of extraversion new styles of music, dance, and fashion – indeed, new rituals – that stood out in creative relief against what was perceived as the 'African culture' dominated by elders (see MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; White 2008). In the 1980s, youth movements such as *Le Sape* embodied an aesthetic of experimentation and hedonism that clandestinely challenged the gerontocratic ideology of the Zairian state. Contextualizing the historicity of the generation born under Mobutu's reign, Ngimbi argues that gerontocratic ideology gains its legitimacy through the symbolism of death. Elders, he claims, derived much of their power through the right to organize major life-course rituals, the most important of these being funerals.

Building upon V. T. Thomas (1982), Ngimbi positions his subsequent discussion about funerals around death and personhood. Ontologically stated, death is not an end, but rather the interface between two worlds, that of the living and the dead, and elders were held to be those closest to the ancestors, or *vivants-morts* as Thomas phrased it. According to this theoretical framework, the death of an elder is caused by God, whereas the death of other persons, especially the young, is ascribed to some other external agency, usually witchcraft. In Zaïre during the 1970s, funerals were organized by elders who adhered strictly to ritual forms within which emotions were channelled into specific, recognizable codes. This precedent, called tradition, rejected innovation in funerary rituals, while calling upon the participation of all, regardless of personhood, in prescribed roles. The singing of generic songs by *pleureuses* (professional dirge singers), the clearing of the debts of the deceased before burial, keeping the corpse company at all times during this process, and marked consideration for the pollution of death all defined the social organization of a 'traditional' funeral. While Ngimbi is less clear on when exactly innovations in funerals began in Kinshasa, his insights into the crises of the 1990s seriously test the theoretical assumption that funerals, by dint of convention, are one of the last African frontiers beyond modernity.

Judging by the voluminous literature on the 'modernity of witchcraft' it is something of a wonder that Ngimbi's ethnography of Kinshasa funerals goes uncited. The innovations in funerary ritual created by Kinshasa youth in the 1990s were forged by the social and spiritual insecurity caused by *sorciers* and the material and political insecurity caused by Mobutuists. With the collapse of almost all medical services in Zaïre in the mid-1990s, the occult offered therapy at exorbitant costs, but was at least accessible within the 'second economy' (de Boeck 1998: 152–8). With mortality swelling under the strains of civil war and economic collapse, all deaths were suspected to be caused by witchcraft, including road deaths and AIDS. In the mounting moral crisis gripping residents of Kinshasa, elders – those closest to the

ancestors—became primary suspects in cases of deaths assumed to be caused by witchcraft. A popular formula among the youth at the time was '*cheveux blancs sur la tête = sorcier*' (Ngimbi 1997: 122). Funerals, in this context of suspicion and spiritual tension, became focal events for the identification of potential sorcerers, invariably thought to be a family member, and in particular, paternal uncles. Sorcerers were assumed to be present at the funerals of their victims.

The first reported cases of youth 'hijacking' funerals had little overt political character; these events were taken over to exact revenge upon a suspected *sorcier*. Aligning the aim of witchcraft with the logic of accumulation, youth were reported to have destroyed the property of the deceased to deprive sorcerers of acquiring this wealth (Ngimbi 1997: 124). Sudden deaths among youth, in particular, raised animosity among their friends and colleagues, as in one case witnessed by Ngimbi where local youth rioted and burned the family home of the deceased, and took charge of a spontaneous funeral in which family members were forbidden to attend on pain of violence. The public outrage in the press and through *radio-trottoir* solicited by such instances added to the palpable sense of moral crisis among Kinshasa's youth. The politicization of funerals over-run by dissenting and angry youth gradually took form through their assertion of the right to organize funerals and the formation of *groupes animateurs*, who inverted the traditional role of elders by insisting on investing mortuary rituals with their own symbolic codes and material aspirations.

Once organized, however, there was a general trend in 'popular' residential zones for youth to take charge of funerals. The new youth lobbies used the threat of violence and transgression to raise funds for their new and continually changing rituals. Described as carnivalesque by René Devisch (1995: 611), funerary rituals among youth gradually accentuated the political tone within their songs and dances and became openly hedonistic, emphasizing the ludic alongside the libidinal. Innovations such as the consumption of beer and cannabis, permissive sexual encounters, and the exclusion of certain persons expected to participate turned tradition on its head. To finance such rituals, the practice of *ekobo*, or *bleusaille*, emerged as a form of unpleasant extortion, demanding money from passers-by and threatening to anoint uncooperative members of the public with a mixture of mud, piss and ground-up charcoal.

Such political demonstrations, very much 'weapons of the weak' in the phrase of James Scott (1985), engaged traditional funerals and overturned them (*détournement*) with ludic innovations of funerary songs and dances practised in Kinshasa since the 1930s. A good deal of Ngimbi's analysis is socio-linguistic, examining the creative and subtle changes youth made to Lingala funerary and religious songs, rendering them with their own aesthetic of political challenge to, and derisive mockery of, the failing Zairian state. The angst felt among these youth is directed at their elders and highlights the plight of youth in circumstances where generational reciprocities have failed (see Richards 1995). Eking out a living from the second economy as

shoe-shiners, bodyguards, extortionists, petty thieves, visa and passport brokers, prostitutes, mini-van drivers, and so on, those recruited into these subterranean burial societies are drawn as much by the thrill experienced in taking over funerals as by the relative safety of funerals as a base for political actions against those perceived as responsible for their precarious and vulnerable social position.

In reworking the revolutionary songs of the Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR), for one example, these youths subvert the acronym MPR to mean 'Mourir Pour Rien' (To die for nothing), or play upon SIDA to represent not AIDS, but 'Salaire Insuffisant Difficilement Acquis' (Insufficient Salary Acquired with Difficulty) (Ngimbi 1997: 175, 190). Outside of these groups, protests invoking funerary ritual, at least on one occasion (18 December 1990), staged the symbolic burial of '*le Guide suprême*', Mobutu. Using the imagination to subvert the symbolic dominance of Mobutu's 'L'Authenticité' (1970) and 'Zairianization' (1973), youth encroachment into the organization of funerals, formerly the responsibility of elders, signified a society where death had gained new symbolic force (see de Boeck 2005).

Stressing the degree to which funerals can be turned into political events, Ngimbi does not offer wider comparisons beyond Kinshasa or Zaïre. Analogies can be made, somewhat paralysed by historical discontinuity. For ANC youth, during the apartheid years, dancing *toi-toi* in the wake of funerary marches was the permissible front to an unbearable and, then, interminable assault against a complex of oppressive forces, ranging from policemen to uncles and *tsotsis* (Hirsch 2003). In coastal Tanzania and Kenya, by other paths, Muslim youth—influenced by Salafist lectures, schooled in skilful debate—critique the intercessionary prayer so frequently performed at funerals. Within the past twenty years, Muslim youth activists have succeeded in opening up debate about burial practices, opting for rapid and 'silent' funeral processions, very much in tension with the rituals of older generations (see Becker 2009, this issue). Such examples underscore the capacity of funerary ritual to express emotions, not only of loss and despair, but also of anger and desire, mobilized as 'rituals of provocation' (Ngimbi 1997: 126–7).

Kinois youth face a crisis of spiritual and material insecurity, exacerbated by crises of redistribution and social achievement, in which the primary antagonists are those falling into the category of *vieux* (seniors), which applies to paternal uncles as much as it does to those that benefited from Mobutu's misrule. In seizing funerals and turning them into events of derision and passionate protest, young Kinois men and women found a ritual means to 'celebrate or commemorate the dead to critique the living and society' (Ngimbi 1997: 203).

#### ASPIRANT MODERNITY AND DEATH PRACTICES

If the politics of funerals in the former Zaïre took on a generational character, the politicization of burials in Kenya is directed towards identity and belonging, located at the interstices of ethnicity and class.

Droz and Maupeu's volume (2003) about death practices in Nairobi is subtitled 'a capital without cemeteries', a gesture to the urban geography of this city, with its colonial history of racial segregation that compelled Africans to have one foot in the city and the other in the country.

For the majority of Nairobi's residents, the prospect of being interred in one of the city's municipal cemeteries is a source of considerable ambivalence. As noted by Yvan Droz, among the Kikuyu, for example, the preference is to be buried 'at home', ideally on land owned by one's lineage (Droz 2003: 50–1). In other cases, families permanently established in Nairobi may acquire a small plot as a family cemetery, fencing it off with a picket fence or barbed wire, although this option is restricted to those who can afford such expenditures (Kariuki 2003: 66). In most cases, the moment of death occurs in Nairobi and considerable energy and financial resources go into ensuring that the moral aesthetic of being 'returned' to one's place of origin is accomplished. In Nairobi the organization of funerals among Kikuyu, the city's largest ethnic group, entails great expenditure and may last up to a week, or longer, prior to burial. Droz's contribution shows that Kikuyu funerary rituals are constant innovations, a theme that runs throughout *Les figures de la mort à Nairobi: une capitale sans cimetières*.

What emerges from this volume is a cultural politics of death and dying that reveals much about Kenyan struggles for identity and belonging. In the case of Luo funerals, explored by Carolyn Njue, the stress laid on burying the deceased on their ancestral land, hundreds of kilometres from the capital city, gives rise to a range of debates and ritual innovation. Njue pays attention to a new and quite vocal engagement with the subject of death among urban Luo. Exposure to AIDS deaths, Njue argues, has forced several transformations in Luo funerary rituals, resulting in the 'demystification of death' (Njue 2003: 75). One constraint felt by many families is the cost of transporting the deceased from city mortuary to rural burial place. Reliance on public transport often means long, uncomfortable and risky journeys. A pattern of delaying funerals to save money towards the cost of repatriating bodies 'home' for burial is made possible by long-term refrigeration of corpses, sometimes for as long as three months. Njue reports that ongoing debate within the Luo expresses tensions between those established in the city and their rural kin. Finding time off work to travel to funerals is not easy for many Luo living in Nairobi. While burial in a municipal cemetery is considered a form of 'banishment' and the repatriation of deceased to their ancestral land remains an ideal, there is a growing movement to shorten the length of time between death and burial, as well as to curtail certain rituals at odds with urban life. Arguments for quicker funerals are even made on moral grounds: 'Some even suggest that long mourning periods encourage irresponsible behaviour, like excessive drinking, sexual encounters, and even acts of violence' (Njue 2003: 84). What does not emerge from this particular debate, however, is whether truncated funerals have an impact on the expression of mourning, indicating ways in which the relationships between the living and the recently departed are being reconfigured.

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