DEATH 'ON THE MOVE': FUNERALS, ENTREPRENEURS AND THE RURAL–URBAN NEXUS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Rebekah Lee

In South Africa, death figures prominently in the lives of ordinary urban Africans. This is expressed not only in the everyday management of financial and social networks, but also in displays of conspicuous consumption occurring every weekend in township funerals. In the last two decades, the phenomenal growth of both informal and formal burial insurance schemes has ensured a ready, if uneven, supply of capital enabling even the poorest to participate in the funeral industry; and the range of products and services available – from personalized memorabilia of the deceased to portable green 'grass' and tents which frame the burial site, as well as increasingly sophisticated photographic and video recording services – has dramatically increased. While providing a potential gold mine for some entrepreneurs, this emergent funeral economy has necessitated on the part of mourners a precarious balancing act between spiralling costs and the social pressures of providing for a 'dignified' funeral. These developments have surfaced in popular culture as well. In South African novelist Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying,* Nefolovhodwe, a village carpenter, becomes a rich man in the city by setting up as a manufacturer of coffins. One of Nefolovhodwe's more macabre innovations is a flat-pack 'collapsible coffin', which could be 'carried like a suitcase and put together in easy steps even by a child' (Mda 1995: 117). The 'funeral frenzy' in South Africa is similarly lampooned through the travails of the hapless itinerant mourner Max in Teddy Mattera's film, *Max and Mona* (2004).

The ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic has certainly focused concerns regarding the burgeoning costs, financial and otherwise, of dying in contemporary South Africa. In some quarters, the commoditization of burial rites has been cast as the unfortunate consequence of increasing Western-influenced consumerism, on the one hand, and widespread AIDS mortality on the other (Duguid 2002; Itano 2001).[1] However, this narrative tends to obscure older and more complex dynamics at work in the shaping of African responses to death. First, the elaboration of funerals in urban South Africa can hardly be called a 'new' phenomenon. More than five decades ago, Mia Brandel observed in her study of

---

REBEKAH LEE is a lecturer in the Department of History, Goldsmiths College, University of London. She has published work on various aspects of the social and cultural history of South Africa, including her recent monograph *African Women and Apartheid: migration and settlement in urban South Africa* (I. B. Tauris, 2009). Her research interests include gender and migration, religion, identity, health and material culture. She is currently engaged in a collaborative project with Professor Megan Vaughan at the University of Cambridge, on a history of death in Africa from *c.* 1800 to the present day. Email: r.lee@gold.ac.uk

[1]Annual AIDS-related mortality in South Africa reached 350,000 in 2007 alone, and AIDS deaths over the course of the epidemic accounted for the approximately 1.4 million AIDS orphans living in South Africa in the same year (UNAIDS/WHO 2008: 6, 7).

township social organization that 'death in town is expensive' and added that for Africans 'life in town is dull and a funeral provides as good a form of entertainment as anything' (Brandel 1955: 296). The longevity of informal funeral-finance mechanisms, dating back to the early years of labour migration to the mines of the Rand, similarly attests to an older, yet no less apprehensive, positioning against heightened burial costs (Lukhele 1990). Second, as the rich scholarship on contemporary West African mortuary rituals has shown, the recent commercialization of the funeral sector has not necessarily signalled a 'great transformation' of 'traditional' burial rites (see Arhin 1994). Far from being emptied of meaning, commodities could themselves become malleable, potent and highly localized markers of cultural practice (de Witte 2001; Guyer 2004). Finally, although HIV/AIDS has undoubtedly redrawn the discursive boundaries between life and death in Africa – by, for example, introducing a new and haunting vocabulary of liminality (Niehaus 2007; Irving 2007) and of resurrection (Robins 2006) – larger forces which cannot be captured entirely by the HIV/AIDS epidemic need to be taken into account. Wide-scale migration, urbanization and technological change have not only shaped the manner in which death may be experienced. They have also yielded new tools through which Africans may negotiate, and understand, the dying process (Lee and Vaughan 2008).

This article primarily concerns the intersection of the changing management of death with the problems and possibilities presented by the growing mobility of the African, and specifically Xhosa-speaking, population in South Africa from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day. I am interested in how moral and material economies of death are mediated by individuals, households and communities who have a historical affinity towards movement, particularly across what has been called the 'rural–urban nexus'. In what ways has this more mobile orientation influenced the perception of rites and responsibilities surrounding death? And how have more mobile 'ways of dying' in turn created new subjectivities and new ways in which to imagine relations between the living and the dead? I argue that a growing category of African funeral directors based in Cape Town and the rural areas of the Eastern Cape are well-placed to shape these processes through their role as cultural mediators and technological innovators, and their particular emphasis on maintaining a flow of bodies (both dead and alive) between rural and urban areas. I focus on two aspects of contemporary South African funerals – embalming and exhumations – that are suggestive of how the migration dynamic, and the continuing demand from mobile mourners for innovations from the funeral industry, have encouraged new perceptions of and relations to the dead body. The historical trajectory of these developments is confined to the last decade, with an emphasis on contemporary dynamics.

I draw my thoughts and material for this article from two main bodies of research over the last ten years. The first is a trans-generational history of urbanizing African women in Cape Town (Lee 2009; 2002). From this study, I utilize oral testimonies and organizational profiles of three generations of township women that describe their participation in and perceptions of funerary events in the apartheid and immediate post-apartheid period. I also take from this research an awareness of the delicate calibrations of resources, bodies and ideas which urban African households have balanced across sometimes large distances.

The second corpus of research that I draw from is more recent, and is part of an ongoing collaborative project on the history of death in Africa.[2] Interviews with those associated with the funeral business (undertakers, embalmers and drivers) as well as participant observations at funerals and funeral parlours in the Cape Town metropole, as well as in the Eastern Cape, form the basis of this study.[3]

MOBILITY, MIGRATION AND DEATH

The problems posed by death 'on the move' were clearly evident even in the early days of migration to the gold mines of the Rand from the late nineteenth century onwards. Sotho migrants developed an elaborate and evocative corpus of idioms and *sefala* songs of comradeship through which they could characterize the hazardous conditions they faced daily on the mines as well as reflect on their fears of death (Maloka 1998; Coplan 1994). Interestingly, this fear of death was expressed not so much in any anxiety associated with the premature ending of one's life, but rather in the possibility that death could happen 'far away' or 'far from home'. The prospect of being separated from one's ancestral home even in death – and buried without traditional burial rites administered through appropriate social and kin networks – was a fearful one, and motivated African migrants on the mines to construct South Africa's first burial societies to prevent such an eventuality. These informal funeral-finance associations tended to emphasize processes of ethnic identification already at work in mining compounds, and aided in the transport of the deceased body and mourners back to the society's 'home' area (Maloka 1998; Moodie 1994; Lukhele 1990). The creation of cemeteries on mine property at the turn of the twentieth century and the tendency of mining companies to bury Africans hastily in unmarked graves at the lowest possible expense only served to reinforce in the minds of their employees the conviction that a mine burial was to be avoided at all cost. That migrant Africans had found an effective strategy to prevent such an indignity was underscored by the fact that, by 1955, mine cemeteries had ceased to operate (Dennie 2003; 1997).

From the latter half of the twentieth century, as women migrants entered urban areas in increasing numbers and participated in the settlement process, new gendered dynamics emerged which shaped how Africans experienced and attempted to resolve the predicaments posed by death on the move. These debates were intimately connected to changing notions of 'home' and belonging.

For example, an important facet of African women's engagement with the process and consequences of migration was their aggressive appropriation and transformation of burial society membership. Far from being a simple tool that reaffirmed one's connection to a rural 'home' through the faithful maintenance of 'traditional' burial rites, burial society membership was used to consolidate women's position *in town*. Elderly women were particularly adept at maintaining a dense and often layered involvement in burial societies, and developed a complex pattern of participation in both formal and informal burial insurance schemes. Certainly, some urban-based burial societies affirmed migrant 'homeboy' networks, and these were often the first burial societies that women who are now elderly joined upon their migration to the city.

However, migrant women added new layers to these networks, and crafted their membership in burial societies to embrace a less ethnically specific yet distinctly urban African identity, and to cement their growing prominence in the moral and material economies of township life. Indeed, they spoke of a growing allegiance in later decades to women-only burial societies, because of what they perceived as corruption and lack of responsibility in male-run associations. Younger generations of urban-born women in the transitional and post-apartheid period have tended to abandon any pretence of attachment to a natal rural home and have understood their burial society membership as a necessary bulwark against the precarious nature of life in the city, dominated by what they see as a distinctly urban dynamic of violence, crime and HIV/AIDS (Lee 2009). Elderly women's professed preference for being buried in town similarly appears to affirm the enduring quality of their settlement endeavours.

One may be tempted to characterize the shift in migrant African death cultures as an inexorable march towards urban-located forms, at the expense of a more complicated series of transactions and movements that spanned the rural–urban nexus in the early decades of apartheid. Not only have more Africans decided to live in the city – 58 per cent of Africans were recorded by the 2001 national census as resident in urban areas, in contrast to 27 per cent in 1951 – but they seem to have chosen to die and be buried there too. Certainly, the overflowing of cemeteries in historically African townships attests to the growing utilization of municipal burial grounds in the transitional and post-apartheid periods (Settlement Planning Services 2003). The emergence of a highly commoditized funeral industry in African townships can be seen as part of the same 'modernization' at work in the shift towards burials in town.

However, some of the processes which may at the outset seem to confirm the dominant paradigms of 'modernization' or 'urbanization' have not collapsed the intricate connectedness Africans continue to feel between rural and urban areas, but are in fact providing new techniques and pathways through which ordinary Africans may interrogate their own histories of migration and participation in the urbanization process. The link between migration and the 'modernization' of death has already been problematized in much of the recent scholarship on changing funerary practices in the West African context (Noret 2004; van der Geest 2006; Page 2007). These studies in part explore the role of technological innovations that have facilitated the performance of burial rites over distance,

such as the introduction of refrigerated mortuaries which enable the preservation of the corpse for longer periods of time. Although seen as a modern and hygienic development, the use of mortuaries has become a central mechanism through which mourners in West African cities, but also amongst the international diaspora, have participated in a reinvigoration of 'traditional' funerary rites based in a rural locale. Debates over the 'proper' site and conduct of funerals can thus be viewed as part of an emergent, and contentious, cultural 'politics of belonging', increasingly defined along ethnic lines (Geschiere 2005; Page 2007).

This study seeks to extend the analyses presented in much of the literature on migration and contemporary West African funerary practices, transferred to the particular environs of transitional and post-apartheid South Africa. Although South Africanist historical scholarship on the changing management of death has contributed to our understanding of early twentieth-century mine compound life (Maloka 1998), and the intricacies and absurdities of racialized rule during apartheid (Dennie 2003), thus far less attention has been given to more recent funerary innovations, especially those associated with the nascent African-run funeral industry.

Furthermore, this article argues for a greater sensitivity to the ways in which mobility – as both practice and sensibility – has influenced African perceptions of, and relations to, the dead. For many South Africans, movement has been part of the historical script of their lives. Urban apartheid policy, made manifest in coercive tactics such as forced removals and expulsions from the city of so-called 'illegal' Africans, forced a certain type of orientation towards movement, focused around state manipulation of the migrant labour system and the close surveillance and restriction of African movement in urban areas more generally. In addition, mobility and immobility strategies, involving the movement or stasis of members across sometimes vast geographical distances, were an essential aspect of the settlement process enacted within African households in the latter half of the twentieth century. And while these diverse mobility strategies can be read in part as a response to the changing exigencies of urban apartheid policy, they can also be seen as a means through which households could express and balance acutely felt moral and emotional requirements (Lee 2009). It is this multi-faceted engagement with movement that has led AbdouMaliq Simone to suggest that in African cityscapes a 'highly mobile collective subject is configured' (Simone 2004: 65, 120). Indeed, my own findings have indicated that mobility itself became a key trope around which urban women in particular fashioned a new language of selfhood and difference (Lee 2009).

If it is the case that mobility has become embedded in the everyday life strategies and subjectivities of Africans, then it becomes no less important to examine the dynamics of mobility in death. As will be shown, mobility has become an integral aspect of African approaches to death. Not only is mobility essential to the execution of funerary rites and responsibilities, but these more mobile 'ways of dying' influence the manner and content of an already self-reflexive narrative of personal and social change. As will be shown in the examples below, these evolving 'scripts' are writ large on the bodies of the dead themselves. Didier Fassin has argued powerfully that, in the context of the ongoing and often presentist depictions of the experience of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa, 'bodies resist the obliteration of the mark left by

history'. Bodies are themselves repositories of individual and collective memory (Fassin 2007: 175). The ways we handle and remember the dead thus become themselves embodied, and deeply historicized, practices (Klaits 2005; Parpart 2000).

FUNERAL ENTREPRENEURS AS A CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS

There is little doubt that in recent years the funeral industry in urban South Africa has evolved into a lucrative field. In particular, African-run, township-based funeral parlours have proliferated rapidly since the transitional period to democracy approximately two decades ago, altering previous patterns of interaction between predominantly Asian and white parlour owners and their African clients. The growth of these informal enterprises has also contributed towards competition in an industry known for its corruption.

> Wantuntu Khanye of Khanye's Funeral Services, c.c. was born in the rural town of Indwe in the Eastern Cape and moved to Cape Town in 1968. After holding various jobs as a farm worker, petrol station service attendant and transport manager, in 1983 he decided to buy two ten-seater mini-vans to help funeral directors transport mourners to the Eastern Cape. While moonlighting in the funerals business on weekends, he noticed there was a gap in the market for quality funeral services, especially for funerals held in the Eastern Cape. He noticed how mourners heading there from Cape Town were often stuck on the road in ageing broken-down vehicles with bodies decomposing in the back, with the only recourse an impromptu burial by the side of the road. He claimed he was the first man in the Western Cape to buy a seven-foot trailer in which to place coffins on long journeys, an innovation he felt was far more hygienic than placing the deceased with the mourners in the same vehicle. He stressed to his customers, 'It's a healthy way which I'm bringing to you.' He gradually built up his fleet of vehicles, and was able to register his own company in 1990. It is now based in a predominantly African township 20 kilometres from central Cape Town.
>
> By 2000, Khanye had eight employees and a growing fleet of vehicles and trailers, with 40 per cent of his funerals based in Cape Town and 60 per cent in the Eastern Cape. His biggest problems were road accidents on the busy route connecting Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, which cost him many thousands of rands in damage to vehicles and compensation to mourners who were hurt or killed in the process. He also had to contend with the complaints of his customers, who were dissatisfied for example with the visual appearance of the embalmed corpse, in particular the face. In 2008, he complained about the 'terrible, terrible' rise in petrol prices, which were eating into his company profits.
>
> Khanye credited the success of his business to shrewd purchasing practices, such as buying coffins in bulk or in parts and assembling them in-house. His commitment to personalized service – to 'show your face' – and his ability to stick to his word were key. He stressed that undertakers have to understand the responsibility of their position as the 'last one' to touch the deceased. For example, he believed undertakers should take an active role in the counselling of mourners. He admitted to business being healthy, though he claimed the risks often offset the profits. But he knew that, with HIV/AIDS decimating the local community, many other aspiring undertakers would become competitive, in the hope that they too would be able to cash in on what he said was a 'gold mine'. Commenting on his African customers, he said, 'We are the people who bury very expensive today … we don't have money, but we want those high things.'

Wantuntu Khanye is a member of the Western Cape Black Funeral Undertakers Association.[4]

To date, funeral entrepreneurs like Wantuntu Khanye have seldom entered the gaze of academic scholarship on the management of death in Africa. Much of the now voluminous literature on funerals in Africa has focused on how the experiences, perspectives and practices of *mourners* have shaped African death cultures. What little work that does exist on the funeral industry tends to cast the sector in undifferentiated terms as, at best, the provider of a vast and sometimes fantastical array of products and services that are consumed by their willing clients (de Witte 2001; Arhin 1994) or, at worst, a voracious exploiter of naïve, impoverished families and mourners (McNeill 2009). My research suggests that neither characterization is wholly accurate in the South African case. Much of the funeral industry that services the African community in Cape Town is comprised of small-scale funeral parlours, often operating from the owner's home stoop with family members deployed to oversee key aspects of the business. Funeral entrepreneurs thus see their business as an extension of their previous and current community-based activities, and they often use these local networks (gathered through church connections, street committee membership, or simply word of mouth) to increase their client base.

Furthermore, as will be shown below, funeral entrepreneurs are not merely instruments (or exploiters) of mourners' consumerist expectations. They actively mediate and shape the mourning process. Hikaru Suzuki's (2000) influential study of the funeral industry in contemporary Japan has shown how funeral service professionals were integral to the production of new cultural values and innovative funeral forms. Although the South African funeral industry differs in significant ways from its more thoroughly commercialized counterpart in Japan, nonetheless, we may learn from Suzuki's emphasis on funeral professionals' aggressive appropriation and transference of 'knowledge capital' (in the form of cultural values and ritual knowledge) into the industry. African funeral directors are similarly placed to influence the evolution of the meaning and management of death in South Africa, through their central position in the handling of the dead body, their involvement in burial and funerary rites, and their role as counsellors of grieving families and mediators between competing groups of mourners.

Finally, as a growing and significant feature of the informal economic landscape in urban South Africa, the funeral parlour itself merits more careful consideration. To some extent, this research can be seen as part of a growing interest in describing Africans' patterns of participation and experience (as both providers and consumers) in the vast and complex informal economies which have developed in post-apartheid South Africa (see, for example, James 2010; Bahre 2007). Indeed, the funeral business is embedded within the larger informal and formal sectors in intricate ways. Funeral finance is a case in point. Local burial societies, which provide a form of funeral insurance (usually a cash payout) based on regular contributions from members, are often affiliated to a

---

[4]Interview, Wantuntu Khanye, 17 October 2000 and 4 August 2008.

particular funeral parlour. The relationship may be mutually beneficial, in that members may be able to leverage better deals on the cost of funeral services provided to themselves and any named dependants, and undertakers can be sure to have a ready supply of customers who have the funds to foot the bill. However, some of the larger funeral businesses have also begun to offer their own in-house funeral insurance schemes, while still others have chosen to market insurance policies underwritten by recognized corporate insurance firms such as Old Mutual.

One of the features of the funeral industry in Cape Town is its persistent orientation towards movement, in particular movement across the rural–urban nexus. It may be helpful to consider how funeral entrepreneurs' own work profiles and life histories have fed this development. Echoing the migration histories of the communities in which they live, many Xhosa-speaking funeral undertakers, like Wantuntu Khanye, were born in the rural areas or small towns of the Eastern Cape, and risked the hazards of urban apartheid to migrate into Cape Town to find employment. Most of these undertakers, primarily middle-aged men, have over the course of their urban lives maintained familial and communal connections with their natal areas of origin. Unlike many urban African women – who, as I have argued have gradually renounced a moral or material connection to a rural 'home' (Lee 2009) – these men long for and often actively invest in a vision of a peaceful rural retirement and homestead life. Thus, these funeral entrepreneurs' own personal trajectories reveal a prolonged engagement with the movement of bodies, resources and even expectations across an extended geographical area.

Moreover, one of the interesting commonalities in their work profiles is a shared history of involvement in the lucrative 'black taxi' or minibus transport business, an industry likewise known for its competitiveness and corruption. We see from the example above how Wantuntu Khanye worked his way up a 'transport ladder' of sorts, from petrol service station attendant to transport manager, to the owner of a fleet of vehicles which he hired out to other undertakers, and finally to director and owner of his own funeral business. Similarly, Mphumelelo Mfundisi owned and operated his own minibus taxi in Khayelitsha township until he answered a request in the early 1990s from his uncle, who was then head of a burial association in rural Lady Frere, to help 'homeboys' in Cape Town who wanted to be buried back in Lady Frere. Mfundisi duly transformed his taxi business into Duma Funerals.

Some respondents recalled how the funeral business offered a welcome respite from the violence of the taxi industry. At the same time, it allowed a select few women to enter the field, although primarily through family affiliations. Noncedo Mesilane decided to join the funeral industry as an apprentice at Duma Funerals after her husband, who was in the taxi business, was shot and killed in 2005. Beauty Nyati, one of the operators of family-run Fundani Funeral Services in the Eastern Cape, related that she got her first job at a petrol station in 1985, at the age of 28. Her younger brother, Gerald, who was a medical doctor at the time, soon bought a minibus taxi which he gave to Beauty to manage. Between 1991 and 1998, she ran taxi routes from the rural town of Idutywa to East London, and also to Cape Town, often driving the vehicle herself. However, escalating violence between rival taxi associations resulted in family tragedy: in 1998, Beauty's son was shot and killed; one year later, her elder brother was also murdered. After

another, albeit unsuccessful, assassination attempt on Gerald, the family collectively decided to end their taxi business:

> And so this second attempt at his life prompted me to leave the taxi industry altogether. One day [Gerald] told us to leave the industry and venture into the funeral business – as a family, build up a mortuary and bury the dead. And so that anyone prying after our blood would find us in one place, kill us and we all get to be buried the same way, by our own funeral parlour.[5]

Fortunately for the family, and contrary to Beauty's wryly conveyed predictions, taxi-related violence did not accompany them into the enclosed space of their new business.

One of the lessons these budding entrepreneurs seemed to have learned through their experience in the transport industry, which they then transferred to the funeral trade, was that maintaining the mobility of South Africans, particularly across vast distances, could mean big profits. As we can see from the example of Khanye Funeral Services, transporting mourners and dead bodies between rural and urban centres had become one of the main cornerstones around which a successful funeral business could be built. Indeed, funeral directors in Cape Town often directed whatever profits they could towards the accumulation of more and more vehicles for mourners and trailers for the corpse. The more profitable businesses made sure they included expensive brand-name cars and four-wheel-drive vehicles to ply the route on the N2 national highway linking Cape Town to the Eastern Cape. They set aside large sums of money to insure against the road accidents which seemed to occur all too frequently on the way to, or back from, funerals.

Certainly, the consolidation of an urban African population would be perceived as a threat to this business. Indeed one of the complaints, especially amongst fledgling funeral entrepreneurs in contemporary Cape Town, is that more urban Africans are choosing to be buried in town, which negates the need for expensive transport and removes their central profit-making strategy. Funeral entrepreneurs thus have a vested interest in maintaining a migration dynamic within the funeral business. In addition, I suggest that some savvy funeral directors have encouraged the resurgence of African 'traditional' practices around the handling of the dead in the urban context, such as the ritual wrapping of the body of the deceased in blankets. This is not only to provide the sort of 'dignified' African funeral which was impossible during apartheid. This resurgence of the traditional implicitly reinforces the moral authority of the 'rural', which in turn helps to maintain the necessary politics of distance crucial to the migration dynamic, and further feeds a profitable funeral business.

Rural-based funeral entrepreneurs are contributing to this as well. On a visit to the Eastern Cape in November 2008, I was invited to an AmaMyirha clan celebration in a semi-rural area near Idutywa. Gerald Fundani, the organizer and main protagonist of the event, was a former medical doctor and district surgeon turned funeral entrepreneur and head of a growing franchise of parlours across the Eastern Cape. That he used the event to showcase his successes in the funeral

---

[5]Interview, Beauty Nyati, 8 November 2008.

business was obvious. But there were other equally important dynamics at work. By asking the 500 or so invitees to accept the detailed history of the Myirha lineage as proclaimed during the event, and to witness his elaborate coronation as the ritual head of the clan, this funeral director could activate and enlarge the clan-based affiliations on which his modern business had so far been successfully based.

DEAD BODIES IN MOTION

Embalming

Embalming, which is the hygienic treatment and chemical preservation of the corpse, is one area which demonstrates how the intersection of emergent technologies with the demands of mobile mourners has altered relations with the dead:

> Wantuntu Khanye claimed he first began embalming African bodies in 1995 after an American funeral director visited the Western Cape and began teaching the technique to members of the Western Cape Black Funeral Directors Association. Khanye soon incorporated embalming as part of the range of services he offered his clients, and he credited this provision of in-house services for his initial success in attracting a loyal customer base. Embalming was, in fact, one of two different techniques he was experimenting with in the late 1990s to ensure the preservation of the body. Khanye also toyed with the idea of designing a refrigerated trailer that would ensure excellent preservation, a type of portable refrigerated mortuary. But when I spoke to him again in 2008 about his business, he informed me that he had scrapped the idea of refrigerated transport simply because embalming had removed the need for it.[6]

Although the embalming of African bodies subject to medical autopsies has a much longer history, for the purposes of this article I am interested less in the medicalized practice of embalming within the clinical setting than in the creation and consolidation of embalming as standard practice in the handling of African corpses, regardless of manner of death, in the urban setting. Certainly, the idea of preserving the body of the deceased is not necessarily new to African societies. The anthropologist Audrey Richards recorded in detail how embalming was part of a series of death rituals designed to maintain the authority of the Paramount Chief of the Bemba in colonial northern Rhodesia. After this ruler's death, a specially preserved fluid was poured daily over his corpse for about a year, until the body resembled a 'desiccated seed'. The physical shrivelling up of the body was meant to mirror the ritual depletion of the land set in motion through his death, and could only be reversed through the proper interment of the body at the end of the mourning period (Vaughan 2008). De Witte has shown how in rural Ghana clay is used to beautify the dead and hide imperfections such as sores on the skin. But typically such measures are applied by kin and close friends who prepare the body, and are much less invasive than modern embalming techniques (de Witte forthcoming). In the South African context, funeral director Bekisa

---

[6]Interview, Wantuntu Khanye, 17 October 2000 and 4 August 2008.

Dwangu recalled former Xhosa methods of preservation using ash burned from wood gathered in the local forest: 'Blacks used to put ash on the bodies, to preserve it so that it doesn't get decomposed immediately. . . . Even now if you put the ash it works far better than embalming itself. It holds the odour. The odour can't come out of the ash if it is done properly.'[7] Although the extent and historical trajectory of this practice need to be borne out by a more thorough analysis of missionary and ethnographic sources, it is evident that the use of ash as a preservative is no longer a common practice.

Embalming has become, in the last decade, part of the standard repertoire of African funeral parlours in urban areas. Embalming involves the siphoning off of human fluids such as blood and its replacement with a cocktail of chemicals that help keep the body in state. Winston van der Kemp, a colourful Afrikaans-speaking mortician (and former physician) employed by a group of African funeral directors in Cape Town who value his expert technique, explained his own personal 'formula' for embalming fluid, which was perfected after a great deal of his own 'private research' on pauper burials:

> As far as chemicals are concerned, yes, perhaps a slight improvement. I have my, once again, my own formula, it's a number of chemicals [later explained to be formaldehyde, glycerin, methanol]. Not only chemicals, [but] spices and wine … and even a small amount of sea salt, coarse sea salt. . . . It [the wine] helps to allow the other ingredients to saturate, same as the methanol would.[8]

More than the morbid comedy of an embalming recipe infused with a dash of Western Cape wine, what struck me as I observed van der Kemp methodically embalming the body of an African woman who lay on a metal table in the middle of a makeshift room, was the sheer invasiveness of this procedure on a bodily level.

Bekisa Dwangu, who was trained by van der Kemp, further clarified what happens to the body as it is embalmed:

> I mean the person is not himself, the body is not the person himself. It's full of almost [inaudible] litres of foreign liquid. Newspapers inside. And even some cases sawdust. These are done to contain blood. During the embalming itself, they contain it so that it doesn't flow out of the body. And then the brain itself is taken away from the skull and kept inside here [gestures to his stomach]. And then the intestines and other parts they are put in a jar which has got embalming fluid, and then put in a plastic container and buried with the body.[9]

Evidently, although Dwangu and other African funeral directors like him may express in private an apprehension at the enormity of the bodily transformation wrought by embalming procedures, to their clientele they succinctly explain the necessity of the procedure. As Dwangu reminded me, 'It is necessary, because embalming preserves the body, prevents further decay if anything happens. It is very, very important to embalm bodies.' Moreover, when asked whether

---

[7]Interview, Bekisa Dwangu, 27 November 2008.
[8]Interview, Winston van der Kemp, 8 August 2008.
[9]Interview, Bekisa Dwangu, 27 November 2008.

undertakers ever publicly elaborate the details of the embalming process, Dwangu stressed, 'You can't tell a family that this is like this! Yeah, some people wouldn't like it. Not at all. They would say, "Stop, don't embalm the body."'

Given the concern with European handling of African corpses in South Africa and in other African regions in the colonial period, and the often vocal protests in the historical record against perceived European mutilations of African dead bodies (Shaw 2002; Bernault 2006; Maloka 1998), the silences here are instructive. One can view this as another discursive victory on the part of public hygiene campaigns, which historically have suppressed African concepts of bodily contagion (Vaughan 1991; Burke 1996). However, it would be rash to assume that embalming has rendered the African corpse ontologically inert. Dead bodies, and bones, as we will see in the next section, still do matter in both a ritual and deeper cosmological sense (see also Fontein 2009). And for African funeral directors like Dwangu, who have been trained to pitch embalming as a modern hygienic procedure, it is evident that their own personal experiences of handling the deceased are far less clear-cut:

> I will tell you, to prove that that black belief is still in me, there are days when I visit the mortuary I feel like coming into this house, not feeling like I want to talk to my children, sit there and give myself a bit of rest. And after I felt that the weight of those people, or of that particular person that I've touched has gone, then I come to the house. Some people have a touchy feeling. When you handle them you feel the whole body sort of tired. I don't know whether it is a feeling or myself or something happen but I do have that. ... I still have it. And some weeks I don't even want to touch the body.[10]

Dwangu's sensitively expressed acknowledgment of the toll of handling the very physicality of dead bodies – the heaviness brought on through contact with the 'touchy feeling' of corpses – contrasts with the enforced silence around embalming which he maintains with his clients.

Interestingly, in the rural areas and small towns of the Eastern Cape, the practice of embalming is virtually non-existent. Few people, even those who worked in the funeral business, knew what embalming entailed. Winston van der Kemp recalled that two decades previously certain chiefs in the Eastern Cape had actively discouraged the introduction of this procedure to the areas under their jurisdiction, for environmental reasons: 'They said, "Please don't bring embalmed bodies here because it will poison our water systems."'[11] Embalming, then, appears to be an innovation which has marked urban African bodies, and more specifically, bodies *in motion*. Dwangu predicted in the case of his own death, 'I will be embalmed because I've got to move from here [Cape Town] to the Eastern Cape. But if I die that side, I will be glad if they don't embalm myself.'[12] Thus, migrant bodies bound for their journey 'home' are distinguished by their transformation through the embalming process. Mfundisi explained, 'Eastern Cape doesn't do embalming. I don't know how to say it but their bodies are not like ours. Their bodies are not embalmed... those bodies don't last long. You can

---

[10]*Ibid.*
[11]Interview, Winston van der Kemp, 8 August 2008.
[12]Interview, Bekisa Dwangu, 27 November 2008.

feel it, it's softer and smells very quick.'[13] Embalming thus enables a novel, and evocative, categorization of difference in which historical processes of migration are indelibly imprinted on the bodies of the newly deceased. In the recollections of migrant Africans like Mfundisi, rural and urban bodies become, in death, recognizably distinct from each other, in physically palpable ways.

Embalming not only marks the migrant body, but enables a more intimate communion between the living and the dead.[14] Sometimes, as in the case of Dwangu's weariness at 'touching' the body of the deceased, this increased interaction is fraught with unforeseen spiritual and emotional consequences. Recounting one of his more memorable achievements as an embalmer, Winston van der Kemp recalled how a Sudanese migrant whom he had embalmed was retrieved by the family a year later:

> W: So then it was exhumed and the health inspector insisted, he wanted to see the contents of the casket before it goes, before he gives the OK. And the undertaker reluctantly opened it. And he told me afterwards, with tears in his eyes, that he cried there and then and the inspector wouldn't believe it.
> R: Why did he cry?
> W: It looked the same as the day he put it in the casket.[15]

For others, embalming introduces a new vocabulary through which to judge the body, and particularly the face, of the deceased before the final interment. Implicitly, the skills of the embalmer are being reviewed. What seems to be important is that the dead look at peace or in a state of rest. To accomplish this is harder than it appears, as the appearance of peaceful slumber may be undermined by a stubbornly open mouth or an eye gazing out to the distance. Wantuntu Khanye recalled that one memorable complaint he had received was that a deceased female he had embalmed had not looked 'dead enough'. She seemed so alive that people thought she was inhabited by spirits.[16] Yet, a poor embalming job introduces the possibility of distortion, swelling, and discolouration of the deceased body. Negative observations along these lines are given a second life as comments circulate widely through kin and other social networks long after the

---

[13]Interview, Mphumulelo Mfundisi, 6 October 2008.

[14]One could argue that embalming has enabled the prolongation of the period between the moment of death and the body's disposal, thereby lengthening the period in which funerary rituals could be practised and encouraging the participation of extended kin from far-flung areas who now have time to make the journey. Indeed, a typical township funeral takes place approximately two weeks after the death is announced, allowing ample opportunity for mourners and kin to arrive from across the country and participate in daily remembrance ceremonies. This prolongation of the funerary event has undoubtedly contributed to the spiralling of costs borne by the family of the deceased. However, as Noret and van der Geest have shown in the West African context, refrigerated mortuaries introduced many decades earlier had served the same purpose (Noret 2007; van der Geest 2006). Indeed, Harriet Ngubane, the noted African anthropologist of the Zulu, remarked in 1978 that refrigeration had increased the interval between death and interment to two weeks for a typical Sowetan funeral. Thus embalming, coming as a relatively recent funerary innovation, has had minimal impact in South Africa on the issue of timing of death rituals.

[15]Interview, Winston van der Kemp, 8 August 2008.

[16]Interview, Wantuntu Khanye, 17 October 2000.

funeral itself is over, and can leave the loved ones of the deceased with a lingering sense of unease.

Exhumations

Exhumation, the removal of the remains of the body from its initial resting place and its subsequent reburial in another location, presents another locus through which to view the relationship between mobility and death:

> Bekisa Dwangu's brother died an untimely death in the violence which swept the country following the Soweto riots of 1976. Dwangu recalled he was unable to attend his brother's funeral because he was in political detention at the time, although he eventually heard from others that the brother's corpse 'fell out of the coffin' whilst on the way to the burial. This event provided the catalyst for Dwangu joining the funeral business in the early 1990s, after experiencing that 'respect for the dead was not there', especially amongst white funeral undertakers. Many years later, his brother came to Dwangu in dreams, 'nice dreams', which Dwangu conveyed to the family. The dreams were interpreted to mean that the brother wanted to be reburied in the family homestead, with his father, who died in Cape Town in 1997 but was buried in the Eastern Cape. Dwangu recalled that this was a deeply collaborative process, involving consultation not only with the elders in his family but also with the dead brother and the family ancestors. He recalled asking his dead brother for financial and practical assistance to cope with the transport of his bones across the large distance. He appealed to his deceased brother, 'Please help us to get the wings.' In 2003, Dwangu's brother was exhumed and reburied in the Eastern Cape.[17]

The reburial of politically suspect dead bodies has become a highly contested topic played out in the public sphere, evidenced by the vigorous online debates of the Congolese diaspora over the repatriation of the corpse of Mobutu Sese Seko, and in the dispute over the relocation of the remains of ardent colonialist Savorgnan de Brazza to Congo-Brazzaville (White 2005; Bernault 2010). In Zimbabwe, the dominant nationalist commemorative narrative surrounding the recently launched, UNESCO-sponsored reburial of liberation war dead has been uncomfortably contested by the resurfacing from shallow mass graves of bodies from the *gukurahundi* massacres in Matabeleland in the 1980s (Fontein 2009). In the South African historical context, the exhumation and triumphant reburial orchestrated by the ANC in 1989 of Sabata Dalindyebo, three years after his having been consigned to a humiliating burial in the female section of a pauper's grave, recast the former Paramount Chief as a hero of the anti-apartheid struggle and the rightful authority over the Thembu people (Dennie 1992). Similarly, the repatriation in 2002 to South Africa of the remains of Saartjie Baartman, known as the 'Hottentot Venus', enabled a fledgling country in its first decade of democratic rule to rescue a key icon of indigenous identity from the darker repositories of colonial history (Crais and Scully 2009). These examples reveal how debates over the material body focus larger politicized anxieties around identity, ethnicity, citizenship and the destructive legacies of colonial and post-colonial rule.

---

[17]Interview, Bekisa Dwangu, 27 November 2008.

What I am interested in is perhaps far removed from the public glare that has inevitably accompanied debates over the resting place of the politically potent dead body. I suggest that the growing practice of exhumations of *ordinary* Africans is in its own way a significant, and highly contested, reimagination of belonging. Exhumations also provide a new platform for an intensely historical retrospection, a way in which urban African households have interrogated, and found wanting, their own histories of migration and change.

Funeral directors in Cape Town noted to me that a growing proportion of their business is taken up by exhumations, particularly the retrieval of the dead from a municipal cemetery and its reburial in the Eastern Cape.[18] Often the exhumation process is initiated by a visitation: the dead person appears to a family member in a dream or series of dreams. In Bekisa Dwangu's case, the dreams of his brother were 'nice dreams'. However, there are other more disquieting visitations: Mphumulelo Mfundisi recalled that on 5 January 2006, 'I had to dig [out] my father [who died in 1976]. … He came to me when I sleep, he say, "I'm not sleeping well in this place. I'm getting cold." So then I went to dig him out, wrapped that bones with a blanket. … I buy another coffin. I put the bones on the coffin, then I buried again.'[19]

We can better understand the dead's injunction to ease their feeling of 'cold' in the context of the Western Cape's particular climate of cold, wet winters and the historical fact that municipal cemeteries for the African population tended to be located in the sandy soil of the Cape Flats. The 2003 'Metropolitan Cemetery Study' compiled for the Cape Town Directorate of City Parks and Nature Conservation (Settlement Planning Services 2003) recognized a 'looming cemetery crisis', stating that sixteen of thirty-one municipal cemeteries were 'subject to high water table conditions for up to six months of the year'. The resultant 'saturated grave condition' has impacted negatively on cemetery operations, posing potential pollution hazards, restricting and inconveniencing burials, and ultimately jeopardizing a given cemetery's ability to perform as a public 'place of memory'. Mfundisi expressed his understanding of the predicament faced by those buried in Cape Town: 'They don't want to stay by the water.' He suggested that in 'maybe three years time, four years time, you feel you can hear your mother now who's been buried here … she came to you [in a dream] and say, "I'm not staying all right here because here there is water."' In contrast to the inundated environs of the city, then, the warm soil of the ancestral home provides a welcome respite. As Mfundisi affirmed: 'It's dry there.'[20]

I read the emergence of this practice, and its attendant discourse, in several ways. These visitations by the dead are part of a longer series of claims to belonging that are negotiated by urbanizing Africans whose families have

---

[18]This contention has yet to be supported by a more thorough survey of the numerical extent of exhumations in Cape Town. Supervisor Daweti of Cape Town City Parks and Nature Conservation estimated there were three exhumations per year occurring in 2004 in the two cemeteries under his jurisdiction, in the historically African townships of Langa and Guguletu (Interview, Daweti, 21 April 2004). I do not have more recent figures for these two cemeteries, nor do I have official figures for exhumations in Khayelitsha cemetery, the largest cemetery of the three in the Cape Town metropole which service predominantly African communities.

[19]Interview, Mphumulelo Mfundisi, 6 October 2008.

[20]*Ibid.*, 6 October 2008.

straddled disparate geographical spaces. These competing claims are made throughout one's life, and the dead body returns to make further claims even after death (see also Whyte 2005). In families whose lives may be increasingly centred in the urban context, the visitation of the dead and the exhortation to re-bury at 'home' may provoke an historical introspection, sometimes spanning many decades, over their decisions and conduct across the rural–urban divide. Guilt may be one consequence of this introspective process (Ashforth 2000). Furthermore, reburials provide an opportunity for families to redress disquieting reminders of the inequities of apartheid social and spatial engineering, and, as in Bekisa Dwangu's case, effectively to replace the memory of white undertakers' 'disrespectful' handling of the dead with their own negotiated and initiated practices.

Exhumations have become a part of the holiday calendar, scheduled at times of the year such as Christmas and Easter when there are long vacations and extended kin can travel back to the Eastern Cape. These large gatherings of family provide an arena in which further cultural and historical reflections occur. Bekisa Dwangu explained:

> If you change anything, the ancestors know, you need to go down there. And shout at them and tell them. … You go there, get inside the kraal and talk to them. … Talk to them. Slaughter or make up some beer. … When you are finished, then you go on with whatever you want to do.[21]

Dreams always have more than one interpretation, so a dead kin's visitation through dreams can provoke an extended series of discussions and disputations, not only amongst living kin but also including familial ancestors. One exhumation during the course of this fieldwork had to be postponed to the next year because family members could not agree to the 'proper' procedures and ritual specialists involved. Thus, the possibility of an exhumation offers a way for kin to reflect on the evolution of the kin group, the location of moral and ritual authority, and, ultimately, the meaning that can be derived from the urbanization process.

What is also significant in the case of exhumations is the agency given to the dead through their appearance in dreams. Instead of happily moving onto the spirit world of the ancestors or a Christian heaven, the body, although reduced to bones, in this case demands to be handled. In Xhosa culture, there is little precedent for regular visits to cemeteries as in much of the West, where flowers are laid at the grave of the deceased and the visitor embarks on imaginary conversations with the dead. If you visit the large municipal cemeteries of major townships such as Khayelitsha and Gugulethu on a weekday, when burials are not taking place, these are silent and empty spaces. Exhumation presents, like the case of embalming, an opportunity for a prolonged conversation with the material remains of the body.

Finally, exhumations can be seen as a part of a broader, reimagined cultural politics of belonging in post-apartheid South Africa in which, as elsewhere in Africa, the (re-)location of burial rites plays a significant role (Geschiere 2005;

---

[21]Interview, Bekisa Dwangu, 27 November 2008.

Smith 2004; Cohen and Atieno Odhiambo 1992). In a political context in which African claimants' demonstrated possession of ancestral knowledge of burial sites on disputed territory has become a key part of the land claims process (James 2009), the performance of reburials on rural soil may help consolidate families' legal and material entitlement to land. Moreover, through its invocation of a return to 'tradition', exhumations provide an opportunity for migrant Africans and their rural kin to fashion a 'localist' style for public display (Ferguson 1999). Such fluency in a revived 'politics of localism' may, in the face of continued economic insecurity and the sharpening of ethnic allegiances in public discourse, serve as a valuable asset.

CONCLUSION

For South Africans profoundly marked by the migration process, the imperative of movement features centrally in the renegotiation of relations, practices and perceptions, even in death. Embalming and exhumation, though not similar in every respect, offer intriguing solutions to some of the long-standing dilemmas posed by death on the move. Both techniques provide the simple convenience of time, its own precious commodity in a fast-paced, mobile society. Embalming allows mourners and the deceased to be transported long distances without fear of the deceased's bodily decay, while the prospect of exhumation means even the most ignominious burial can be corrected at a later stage. Within this expanded temporality, new dialogues with the dead emerge which express a developing sensory vocabulary associated with mortal remains, and yield novel discursive frameworks through which difference across the rural–urban divide can be viewed. Yet, this prolonged conversation is not without its hazards. Through dreams, the dead may bring with them disquieting reminders of past events, and may provoke a potentially contentious debate among kin seeking harmonious resolution. And while embalming may introduce a more familiar relationship with the corpse itself, this very intimacy may mask lingering fears over the power of the dead body.

Funeral entrepreneurs and their innovations have played a central role in mediating these new cultural forms. To some extent African undertakers have led this process simply by example, through the application of new technologies to their own dead kin. Indeed, funeral directors' own personal histories of migration have influenced their specific orientation to this industry, and have encouraged them to remain sensitive to the challenges of operating a business across great distances, and to the particular needs of their mobile client base. In the increasingly competitive environment of the township funeral industry in South Africa, success is predicated on personalized service, on the one hand, and innovation on the other. A measure of cultural fluency is essential to both, and the funeral entrepreneurs profiled here have largely demonstrated a savvy appropriation of 'knowledge capital' into their business endeavours.

These African-run funeral parlours, modelled on their colonial and apartheid-era white counterparts to provide a range of mortuary services and products all under one roof, offer a salient contrast to the funeral industry at work in other parts of the continent. In West Africa, mourners (or selected family members) in effect become their own undertakers for a given funeral, purchasing from a broad

range of individual vendors the services and products necessary to conduct a burial (de Witte 2001). In South Africa, then, undertakers are given a striking level of control over key features of funerary practice – such as the handling and transport of bodily remains – which in other African contexts would still be retained by kin or other ritual specialists.[22] Funeral directors' centrality in the performance of contemporary mortuary rites has allowed them to introduce, with evidently minimal disturbance, procedures such as embalming, an invasive technology that elsewhere could have provoked fierce resistance.

Regional particularities may be at work as well. The funeral industry portrayed is by and large not seen by township residents as the work of 'outsider' or 'exploitative' elements, as McNeill, for example, details in the case of Shangaan funeral entrepreneurs in Venda (McNeill 2009). This may be because these Xhosa-speaking funeral directors and their families tend to be embedded, socially and culturally, in the communities which they serve. It may also reflect the greater premium placed on cultural fluency and sensitivity in the more competitive setting of the urban funeral industry. Also, it remains to be seen whether the mobile orientation of funeral businesses across this particular rural–urban axis is replicated across other regions in South Africa. One can argue that it is the convergence of select factors – the lengthy distance between Cape Town and its rural pole, the relative ethnic homogeneity of its urban African population, and (in the case of exhumations) the specific environmental conditions of the Western Cape – which have shaped the character and reception of recent funerary innovations. This specificity may limit the geographical scope of these practices.

A final, important consideration is the gendered nature of these developments. The appearance of a predominantly male-led funeral industry has displaced women's central role in the ritual care and treatment of the deceased (Brandel 1955). Similarly, a cultural revivalism based on a repositioning of 'home' towards the rural pole may reverse some of the trends towards the concentration of moral and material authority in the hands of women, particularly elderly women, evident in township households (Lee 2009). I would caution, however, against reading this as a total erasure of women's participation in African funerals, and the migration dynamic which underpins it. That many of these businesses rely on the labour of female family members (and especially the participation of literate, educated daughters) suggests the future evolution of the funeral industry may be shaped intimately by their involvement. Furthermore, women may to some extent benefit from, and exploit, the new politics of localism at work (Bank 2002). For example, the need for dream interpretation in the case of exhumations has involved among the Xhosa-speaking community an increased level of consultation with female *sangoma* ritual specialists.

That these processes need to be historicized further is without question. Yet I am hopeful that the discussion and debate already occurring within African households around deeply historical questions about the nature and space of belonging, and the cultural politics of distance in an urbanizing context, may present a helpful place to start.

---

[22]I am grateful to Joel Noret and fellow panelists at the Nordic Africa Days conference (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, 1–3 October 2010), for pointing this out.

REFERENCES

Arhin, K. (1994) 'The economic implications of transformations in Akan funeral rites', *Africa* 64 (3): 307–22.

Ashforth, A. (2000) *Madumo: a man bewitched*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bahre, E. (2007) *Money and Violence: financial self-help groups in a South African township*. Leiden: Brill.

Bank, L. J. (2002) 'Xhosa in Town Revisited: from urban anthropology to an anthropology of urbanism'. PhD thesis, University of Cape Town.

Bernault, F. (2006) 'Body, power and sacrifice in equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History* 47 (2): 207–39.

—— (2010) 'Colonial bones: the 2006 burial of Savorgnan de Brazza in the Congo', *African Affairs* 109 (436): 367–90.

Brandel, M. (1955) 'The needs of African women', University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Historical Papers, South African Institute of Race Relations papers, SAIRR AD 1725.

Burke, T. (1996) *Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: commodification, consumption and cleanliness in modern Zimbabwe*. London: Leicester University Press.

Cohen, D. W. and E. S. Atieno Odhiambo (1992) *Burying SM: the politics of knowledge and the sociology of power in Africa*. London: James Currey.

Coplan, D. (1994) *In the Time of Cannibals: the word music of South Africa's Basotho migrants*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Crais, C. and P. Scully (2009) *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: a ghost story and a biography*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dennie, G. M. (1992) 'One king, two burials: the politics of funerals in South Africa's Transkei', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 11 (2): 76–87.

—— (1997) 'The Cultural Politics of Burial in South Africa, 1884–1990'. PhD thesis, Johns Hopkins University.

—— (2003) 'Flames of race, ashes of death: re-inventing cremation in Johannesburg, 1910–1945', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (1): 177–92.

de Witte, M. (2001) *Long Live the Dead!: changing funeral celebrations in Asante, Ghana*. Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers.

—— (forthcoming 2011) 'Of corpses, day, and photographs: body imagery and changing technologies of remembrance in Asante funeral culture', in M. Jindra and J. Noret (eds), *Funerals in Africa: explorations of a social phenomenon*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Duguid, S. (2002) 'New life in death business', *Mail and Guardian*, 3–9 May 2002.

Fassin, D. (2007) *When Bodies Remember: experiences and politics of AIDS in South Africa*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

Ferguson, J. (1999) *Expectations of Modernity: myths and meanings of urban life in the Zambian copperbelt*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

Fontein, J. (2009) 'The politics of the dead: living heritage, bones and commemoration in Zimbabwe', *ASA Online* 1 (2): 1–27, <http://www.theasa.org/publications/asaonline/articles/asaonline_0102.htm>, accessed 6 January 2011.

Geschiere, P. (2005) 'Funerals and belonging: different patterns in south Cameroon', *African Studies Review* 48 (2) (Special issue on mourning and the imagination of political time in contemporary Central Africa): 45–64.

Guyer, J. (2004) *Marginal Gains – monetary transactions in Atlantic Africa*. Chicago IL and London: University of Chicago Press.

Irving, A. (2007) 'Ethnography, art and death', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (1): 185–208.

Itano, N. (2001) 'AIDS puts extra burden on poor', *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 May 2001.

James, D. (2009) 'Burial sites, informal rights and lost kingdoms: contesting land claims in Mpumalanga, South Africa', *Africa* 79 (2): 228–51.

—— (2010) 'Making money from nothing: money lending, debt and popular economies in South Africa', paper presented at Goldsmiths Department of Anthropology Seminar Series, 10 March 2010.

Klaits, F. (2005) 'The widow in blue: blood and the morality of remembering in Botswana's time of AIDS', *Africa* 75 (1): 46–62.

Lee, R. (2002) 'Locating "Home": strategies of settlement, identity-formation and social change among African women in Cape Town, 1948–2000'. DPhil thesis, University of Oxford.

—— (2009) *African Women and Apartheid: migration and settlement in urban South Africa*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Lee, R. and M. Vaughan (2008) 'Death and dying in the history of Africa since 1800', *Journal of African History* 49 (3) (Special issue on death in African history): 341–59.

Lukhele, A. K. (1990) *Stokvels in South Africa: informal savings schemes by blacks for the black community*. Johannesburg: Amagi Books.

Maloka, T. (1998) 'Basotho and the experience of death, dying and mourning in the South African mine compounds, 1890–1940', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 38 (149): 17–40.

McNeill, F. G. (2009) 'From gogos to grave diggers: paying for funerals and reading rumours in post-apartheid Venda', paper presented at Popular Economies in South Africa workshop, London School of Economics, 17–18 June 2009.

Mda, Z. (1995) *Ways of Dying*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Moodie, D. (1994) *Going for Gold: men, mines and migration*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

Niehaus, I. (2007) 'Death before dying: understanding AIDS stigma in the South Africa lowveld', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33 (4): 845–60.

Noret, J. (2004) 'Morgues et prise en charge de la mort au Sud-Bénin', *Cahiers d'études africaines* 4 (176): 745–67.

—— (2007) 'The redistribution of funerary work in the Abomey region (Southern Benin) *c.* 1930–present day', paper delivered at 'Death in African History: an interdisciplinary conference', University of Cambridge, 5–6 May 2007.

Page, B. (2007) 'Slow going: the mortuary, modernity and the hometown association in Bali-Nyonga, Cameroon', *Africa* 77 (3): 419–41.

Parpart, J. (2000) 'The widow refuses: embodied practices and negotiations over inheritance in Zimbabwe' in G. Youngs (ed.), *Political Economy, Power and the Body: global perspectives*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.

Robins, S. (2006) 'From "rights" to "ritual"; AIDS activism in South Africa', *American Anthropologist* 108 (2): 312–23.

Settlement Planning Services (2003) 'Metropolitan Cemetery Study', Report No. 1376/1 June 2003, compiled for the Cape Town Directorate of City Parks and Nature Conservation. Cape Town: Cape Town City Council.

Shaw, R. (2002) *Memories of the Slave Trade: ritual and the historical imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.

Simone, A. M. (2004) *For the City Yet to Come: changing African life in four cities*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Smith, D. J. (2004) 'Burials and belonging in Nigeria: rural–urban relations and social inequality in a contemporary African ritual', *American Anthropologist* 106 (3): 569–79.

Suzuki, H. (2000) *The Price of Death – the funeral industry in contemporary Japan*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

UNAIDS/WHO (2008) 'Epidemiological fact sheet on HIV and AIDS, 2008 update: South Africa'. Geneva: UNAIDS/WHO.

van der Geest, S. (2006) 'Between death and funeral: mortuaries and the exploitation of liminality in Kwahu', *Africa* 76 (4): 485–501.

Vaughan, M. (1991) *Curing Their Ills: colonial power and African illness*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

—— (2008) '"Divine kings": sex, death and anthropology in inter-war East/ Central Africa', *Journal of African History* 49 (3) (Special Issue on Death in African History): 383–401.

White, B. (2005) 'The political undead: is it possible to mourn for Mobutu's Zaire?', *African Studies Review* 48 (2) (Special issue on mourning and the imagination of political time in contemporary Central Africa): 65–85.

Whyte, S. R. (2005) 'Going home: belonging and burial in the era of AIDS', *Africa* 75 (2): 154–72.

ABSTRACT

This article primarily concerns the intersection of the changing management of death with the problems and possibilities presented by the growing mobility of the African, and specifically Xhosa-speaking, population in South Africa from the latter half of the twentieth century to the present day. I am interested in how shifts in the practices and beliefs around death are mediated by individuals, households and businesses who have an historical affinity towards movement, particularly across what has been called the 'rural–urban nexus'. In what ways has this more mobile orientation influenced the perception of rites and responsibilities surrounding death? And how have more mobile 'ways of dying' in turn created new subjectivities and new ways in which to imagine relations between the living and the dead? I argue that African funeral directors based in Cape Town and the rural areas of the Eastern Cape – a steadily more numerous and prominent group of entrepreneurs – are well-placed to shape these processes, through their role as cultural mediators and technological innovators, and their particular emphasis on maintaining a flow of bodies (both dead and alive) between rural and urban areas. I focus on two aspects of contemporary South African funerals – embalming and exhumations – that are suggestive of how the migration dynamic, and the continuing demands from mobile mourners for innovations via the funeral industry, have encouraged new perceptions of and relations to the dead body.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite principalement de l'intersection de la gestion changeante de la mort avec les problèmes et les possibilités que présente la mobilité croissante de la population africaine de langue xhosa en Afrique du Sud de la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle à nos jours. Il s'intéresse à la manière dont les changements de pratiques et de croyances autour de la mort se produisent à la faveur des individus, des ménages et des entreprises qui ont une affinité historique avec la mobilité, notamment dans ce que l'on appelle le « lien rural-urbain ». En quoi cette orientation plus mobile a-t-elle influencé les rites et responsabilités subjectifs qui entourent la mort? Et comment des « manières de mourir » plus mobiles ont à leur tour créé de nouvelles subjectivités et de nouvelles manières d'imaginer les relations entre les vivants et les morts? L'article soutient que les entrepreneurs de pompes funèbres africains installés à Cape Town et dans les régions rurales de l'Eastern Cape (un groupe d'entrepreneurs qui gagne constamment en nombre et en importance) sont bien placés pour façonner ces processus, à travers leur rôle de médiateurs culturels et d'innovateurs technologiques, et leur attachement particulier à préserver le flux de corps (morts et vivants) entre zones rurales et urbaines. Il examine en particulier l'embaumement et l'exhumation, deux aspects des funérailles contemporaines sud-africaines révélateurs de la manière dont la dynamique migratoire, ainsi que la constante demande d'innovation dont fait l'objet l'industrie funéraire de la part des parents du défunt, ont favorisé de nouvelles perceptions de la dépouille mortelle et de nouvelles relations à son égard.