

DEATH AND DYING IN THE HISTORY OF AFRICA SINCE 1800*

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ABSTRACT: In this Introduction to the Special Issue on Death in African History we explore issues raised by the existing literature and suggest ways forward for future research. Death has long been a central concern of social anthropological writing on African societies, and of the extensive literature on African belief systems. Until recently, however, little attention has been paid to the history of death practices in Africa in relation to demographic change, urbanization, the interventions of the colonial and postcolonial state and the availability of new technologies. We explore the ways in which these forces have contributed to re-inventions of practices and beliefs surrounding death which are both self-evidently ‘modern’ and yet also rooted in a much longer history.

KEY WORDS: Historiography.

‘DEATH is a subject Nuer do not care to speak about’, wrote E. E. Evans-Pritchard in 1949 in the opening paragraph of an article on ‘Burial and mortuary rites of the Nuer’. What followed from these inauspicious opening remarks, however, was a description of complex burial and mortuary ceremonies. The purpose of these rites was, wrote Evans-Pritchard, perfectly clear: ‘the main intention in them is to cut the dead from the living’.¹

While ‘Africa’ often figures in the Western imaginary as a space of death (not least in the era of HIV/AIDS), at the same time African societies are also frequently represented as being ‘good’ at dealing with death. Africans, we are told, have ‘proper’ funerals, not the truncated affairs so common in Europe and North America. Furthermore, they do not cut themselves off from their dead, but live in relation to the world of the dead, the world of the ancestors. In Africa the living and the dead together constitute the social world. This characterization is not totally false, but the production of

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¹ Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, ‘Burial and mortuary rites of the Nuer’, *African Affairs*, 48 (1949), 62.

knowledge on death customs and beliefs in Africa has to be seen against the background of a perceived crisis in the 'Western' relationship to death. In the 1970s Philippe Ariès argued that, whilst Europeans in the Middle Ages (like 'primitive' peoples) accepted death as part of life, by the twentieth century they were more likely to attempt to deny it. A combination of industrialization, urbanization and the rise of scientific medicine eventually produced a situation in which death became a private affair, and one drained of meaning.² Against this picture of death sanitized, medicalized and uneasily denied, African attitudes to death could be viewed with a degree of nostalgia.

But as Evans-Pritchard's very direct statements imply, if African societies evolved elaborate and complex rituals to manage death, this was because, for them too, death provoked fear and revulsion and posed a problem for the living.³ The ultimate purpose of mortuary customs was to allow the living to get on with living. And in order for this to be achieved, there was no short-cutting the work of mourning.⁴ To simplify, the dead could only find their place as ancestors, rather than vengeful ghosts, if their loss had been properly registered, not only by the individuals closest to them, but by the social groups of which they were members.

If African societies have found effective ways of managing the universal problems posed by death, their ability to continue to do so has been called into question by some recent developments. In a chilling account of life and death in Kinshasa, Filip de Boeck sees a society saturated with death, particularly violent death, to such a degree that the work of mourning is now meaningless.⁵ Civil war, genocide and the 'banalization' of violence in some parts of the continent produce situations in which the normal practices and processes of mourning become impossible. As in Europe after the First World War, mourning is replaced by memorialization, by the creation of museums and national memorial parks.⁶ Rapid urbanization in Africa and

² Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (London, 1976); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (London, 1981). For one of many criticisms of Ariès's work, see Roy Porter, 'The hour of Philippe Ariès', *Mortality*, 4 (1999), 83–90.

³ On the misrepresentations of African beliefs about death, see Louis-Vincent Thomas, *La mort africaine: idéologie funéraire en Afrique noir* (Paris, 1982).

⁴ In 'Mourning and melancholia' *Standard Edition*, 14 (1917), 243–58. Sigmund Freud argued that mourning involves detachment from the ones we have lost. In a recent book, psychoanalyst Darian Leader revisits Freud's essay in a discussion of the relationship between loss and depression. Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression* (London, 2008).

⁵ Filip de Boeck, 'The apocalyptic interlude: revealing death in Kinshasa', *African Studies Review*, 48 (2005), 11–31. De Boeck's paper forms part of a special issue of the *African Studies Review* on 'Mourning and the imagination of political time in contemporary Central Africa'. See the Introduction to this special issue by Bogumil Jewsiewicki and Bob W. White, 1–9, in which they argue for the importance of mourning as a 'terrain for the production of social meaning' and for the centrality of mourning as a 'way of rethinking time', 2.

⁶ On memorialization and the First World War, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Meaning, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995). On memorialization and memory in post-apartheid South Africa, see Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town, 1998); Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Meaning in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham NC, 2004). On the memorialization of the victims of

international migration have given rise to the use of new technologies of death, seemingly far removed from the burial practices described by colonial anthropologists. A burgeoning African funeral industry has grown to address these new needs. African corpses are now refrigerated and embalmed and captured on video camera. The funeral industry is big business, especially when allied to the insurance industry. To take just one example, in March 2008, as we write, the Botswana newspaper, the *Voice*, reported that a local company, the Funeral Services Group (FSG), would soon be listed on the Botswana Stock Exchange.⁷ The managing director of FSG looked forward to a continued period of growth, thanks to technological innovation and a strategic partnership with Botswana Life Insurance Limited. It is tempting to argue that the 'African way of death' is going the same way as the 'American way of death', but, as we shall see, the reality is rather more complicated than this.⁸

THE AFRICAN WAY OF DEATH: DEATH RITUALS ANALYSED

The comparative anthropological study of death is now a large field in which the literature on African societies occupies an important place.⁹ It is not difficult to see why colonial anthropologists viewed the management of death as fundamental to understanding the social fabric and belief systems of 'traditional' societies. Funerary and mourning practices express and shape a wide range of social relations, including the maintenance of kinship ties, the

genocide in Rwanda, see Sarah L. Steele, 'Memorialisation and the Land of the Eternal Spring: performative practices of memory on the Rwanda genocide' (paper delivered at PASSAGES: Law, Aesthetics, Politics, University of Melbourne, 13–14 July 2006).

⁷ Zeph Kajeju, 'Funeral services group to list on BSE', *Voice* (Francistown), 4 Mar. 2008: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200803040816.html>.

⁸ Jessica Mitford's polemic against the American funeral industry, *The American Way of Death* (London, 1963), attracted a huge readership when it was published. She later updated the book as *The American Way of Death Revisited* (London, 1998). Mitford's work is placed in context by Gary Lederman, *Rest in Peace: Death and the Funeral Haven in Twentieth Century America* (Oxford, 2003).

⁹ Key studies include: Arnold Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (trans. London, 1960); Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham (New York, 1960); Max Gluckman (ed.), *The Allocation of Responsibility* (Manchester, 1972); Sarah C. Humphreys and Helen King (eds.), *Mortality and Immortality: The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death* (New York, 1981); Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington (eds.), *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1991); Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (Cambridge, 1982); Yvan Droz (ed.), *La violence et les morts: éclairages anthropologiques sur la mort et les rites funéraires* (Geneva, 2003). On Africa: Simon Bockie, *Death and the Invisible Powers: The World of Kongo Belief* (Bloomington, 1993); J. C. Goody, *Death, Property and the Ancestors* (Stanford, 1962); Karen Middleton (ed.), *Ancestors, Power and History in Madagascar* (Leiden, 1999); Maurice Bloch, *Placing the Dead: Tombs, Ancestral Villages and Kinship Organisation in Madagascar* (London, 1971); Marja-Liisa Swantz, *Blood, Milk and Death: Body Symbols and the Power of Regeneration Among the Zaramo of Tanzania* (Westport, 1995); J. M. Schoffeleers, *Religion and the Dramatisation of Life: Spirit Beliefs and Rituals in Southern and Central Malawi* (Blantyre, 1997); Thomas, *La mort africaine*; Gillian Feeley-Harnik, 'The political economy of death: communication and change in Malagasy colonial history', *American Ethnologist*, 11 (1984), 1–19.

reproduction of communal values, and notions of succession and property inheritance. Because they attempt to mediate between the world of the living and the world of the dead, mortuary rituals also reveal a society's spiritual and philosophical orientation.

Although the anthropological literature is too vast to discuss here comprehensively, several elements of that scholarship are relevant to our understanding of African 'ways of dying'.¹⁰ Of importance is the view that, in 'traditional' societies, death introduces forces of physical, spiritual and social rupture. In order to heal these ruptures and ensure the renewal and continuity of life, two transitions must take place. The first is that the deceased must move from a state of impurity or contagion to a state of ritual purity and harmony with the spirit world. This transition can be guided by the living, through close attention to the ritual preparation and interment of the body. Secondly, as Van Gennep has argued, societal disintegration occasioned by a death has to be repaired through its own transitional process. Through funerary and mourning rituals, survivors are re-integrated back into the community and group-solidarity preserved.¹¹ Both transitions are related to each other, and death rituals often serve simultaneously to guide the deceased and the living safely into a beneficial and life-giving balance with each other. But this structuralist account of death rituals, whilst revealing, also disguises huge variations, and has a tendency to represent the production of social meaning around death as an unproblematic process, one devoid of emotion or dissension.¹²

Despite their shortcomings, colonial anthropological accounts provide an important historical record of the sometimes elaborate rites through which Africans buried and mourned their dead and of the political significance of death practices. In Audrey Richards's vivid description of the death and burial of the Bemba paramount chief in colonial Northern Rhodesia, one can read, in the ritual transformation of Bemba land and of the dead body of the paramount, the hoped-for regeneration of Bemba society itself. The one-year interregnum on all land rites immediately following the paramount's death corresponded with the year-long process of embalming the

¹⁰ This expression was recently popularized in a novel of the same name by South African writer Zakes Mda. Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (Cape Town, 1995).

¹¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays* (Boston, 1948); Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*.

¹² Godfrey Wilson, trained by Malinowski, worked extensively on the symbolism of Nyakyusa burial rites, seeing them as part of a larger 'system' and connecting them to other 'rites of passage'. Unusually, he also emphasized the emotional content of these rites. Later scholars such as Renato Rosaldo and Nancy Scheper-Hughes argued for an anthropology of the emotions to explain the palpable and sometimes crippling force of grief they encountered while immersed in research on the place of death in human society; Godfrey Wilson, 'Nyakyusa conventions of burial', *Bantu Studies*, 13 (1939), 1–31; Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley, 1993); Renato Rosaldo, 'Grief and a headhunter's rage', in Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois (eds.), *Violence in War and Peace* (Oxford, 2004). On the dynamics of guilt and shame in funerals, see Frederick Klaitis, 'The widow in blue: blood and the morality of remembering in Botswana's time of AIDS', *Africa*, 75 (2005), 26–62; Deborah Durham and Frederick Klaitis, 'Funerals and the public space of sentiment in Botswana', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 28 (2002), 777–95.

paramount's body, until it resembled a 'seed'.¹³ This carefully orchestrated scene of ritual regeneration – a 'good death' – contrasts with the markedly different case, again recorded by Richards (but not appearing in her published work), of the unnamed Bemba woman who died in childbirth and was buried at a crossroads some distance from the village. This ignominious burial meant that the woman's death could not hold the promise of regeneration.

Distinctions made between good and bad deaths often reflected moral concerns over the conduct, in particular the sexual conduct, of the living. A shameful burial in part served as a warning to future generations. This was reinforced by taboos around sexual activity during periods of 'contamination' of a woman's body – for example, during menses and lactation.¹⁴ An equally precise elaboration is evident in the criteria for good and bad deaths among the Anlo of the colonial Gold Coast, as shown in missionary and colonial records. Bad deaths included Anlo who died before they reproduced and those who died 'in blood', which could be through war, certain diseases or accidents.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is evidence from some African societies that deaths from suicide were regarded as particularly problematic, fearful and polluting.¹⁶ While a good death offered the possibility of reincarnation and a welcome influence on the world of the living, a bad death brought only the spectre of malevolent ancestral spirits. Indeed, a significant body of literature on witchcraft and spirit possession concerns how the 'unnaturally dead' exert power over the lives of the living.¹⁷

The elaborate mortuary rituals for the Bemba paramount chief were essential to maintaining what Audrey Richards described as the 'knife-edge' of power over the supernatural. In the context of colonial rule and the depletion of traditional authority within African polities, this 'supernatural power' became all the more important to preserve.¹⁸ Certainly, in the African historical context the veneration of the dead can be seen as a potent political narrative and strategy. The public performance of funerals created a contested space within which deeper struggles over state power and communal identity could be signified. Furthermore, death and mourning rituals were

¹³ Vaughan, "Divine kings".

¹⁴ Elements of this can be seen in present-day Tswana society, where proscriptions on sex with widows feed into a larger AIDS-influenced discourse about the harmful mixing of blood and bodily fluids; see Klaitz, 'The widow in blue'.

¹⁵ Sandra Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter: A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington, 2002).

¹⁶ See Paul Bohannan (ed.), *African Homicide and Suicide* (Princeton, 1960).

¹⁷ Recent work on witchcraft in Africa includes: Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa* (Charlottesville, 1997); Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumour and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, 2000); Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago, 1993); Adam Ashforth, *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (Chicago, 2000); Isak Niehaus, with Elizaar Mohlala and Kally Shokane, *Witchcraft, Power and Politics: Exploring the Occult in the South African Lowveld* (London, 2001); Henrietta Moore and Todd Saunders (eds.), *Magical Interpretations: Material Realities* (London, 2001); Rosalind Shaw, 'The production of witchcraft/witchcraft as production: memory, modernity, and the slave trade in Sierra Leone', *American Ethnologist*, 24 (1997), 856–76.

¹⁸ Vaughan, "Divine kings".

by nature deeply ‘mnemonic’ processes.¹⁹ Ritual practice could help recall a common, if highly constructed, past, and thus appeals for political reform or renewal could be framed by a mobilizing rhetoric of return. This is evident in Southern Rhodesia, where funerals and commemoration ceremonies became a vehicle through which Christianized Africans translated indigenous institutions into more flexible and politically potent markers of a new nationalist identity. These same funerals were also used by residents as an opportunity to instil notions of dignity and respect within an emergent, and distinctly urban, moral economy.²⁰

In the postcolonial period, contestations over the management of death have occasioned a renewed debate over collective identity and statehood, now voiced in terms of ‘citizenship’. In Cameroon, funerals have become an important arbiter in a new ‘politics of belonging’, particularly for autochthonous groups.²¹ In South Africa, the discursive trajectory – made possible by the provisioning of anti-retrovirals – from ‘near death’ to ‘new life’ espoused by the Treatment Action Campaign has led its volunteers to a vigorous assertion of a rights-based citizenship.²² Recent debates over the memorialization of key historical figures show the susceptibility of nation-building projects to a continued ‘politics of death’. Adebani’s sympathetic portrayal of Lt-Col. Fajuyi in this collection, and his various reincarnations as sacrificial lamb and saviour of a federalist Nigeria, argue not only for the plasticity of ‘heroic’ narratives, but for a unique fusion of Christian and traditional imagery.²³ Similarly, the heated discussions among ordinary Congolese sparked by the potential repatriation of the body of Mobutu Sese Seko in 2001 can be viewed as part of a larger effort to reconcile the memory of his violent rule with the imperatives of a ‘reborn’ nation-state.²⁴

¹⁹ Thomas C. McCaskie, ‘Death and the Asantehene: a historical meditation’, *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), 417–44. See also: John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra* (Oxford, 2000); John Parker, ‘The cultural politics of death and burial in early colonial Accra’, in David Anderson and Richard Rathbone (eds.), *Africa’s Urban Past* (Oxford, 2000), 205–21.

²⁰ Terence Ranger, ‘Dignifying death: the politics of burial in Bulawayo’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 34 (2004), 110–44. Funerals in the 1980s became a key vehicle of political activism for the African National Congress (ANC). See Garrey Michael Dennie, ‘The cultural politics of burial in South Africa, 1884–1990’ (Ph.D. thesis, Johns Hopkins University, 1996).

²¹ Peter Geschiere, ‘Funerals and belonging: different patterns in south Cameroon’, *African Studies Review*, 48 (2005), 45–64. In Cohen and Odhiambo’s rich evocation of the death and burial of S. M. Otieno in Kenya, competing notions of nationhood and identity fuelled the creation of multiple narratives and meanings drawn from the event. David William Cohen and Elisha S. Atieno Odhiambo, *Burying SM: The Politics of Knowledge and the Sociology of Power in Africa* (London, 1992).

²² Steven Robins, ‘From “rights” to “ritual”: AIDS activism in South Africa’, *American Anthropologist*, 108 (2006), 312–23; Steven Robins ‘“Long live Zackie, long live”: AIDS activism, science and citizenship after apartheid’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30 (2004), 651–72; Deborah Posel, ‘Democracy in a time of AIDS’, *Interventions*, 7 (2005), 310–15.

²³ Adebani, ‘Death, national memory and the social construction of heroism’; see also Florence Bernault, ‘Colonial bones, continued: the 2006 burial of Savorgnan De Brazza’ (paper delivered at ‘Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference’).

²⁴ Bob W. White, ‘The political undead: is it possible to mourn for Mobutu’s Zaire?’ *African Studies Review*, 48 (2005), 65–85.

Many parents in early twentieth-century Bunyoro (Uganda) apparently did not expect their new babies to live and they named them accordingly: Kalyongera (this one will also die) and Byarufu (this child belongs to death), for example.²⁵ As infant survival rates improved in Bunyoro, so these naming practices became less common.

There is no automatic or mechanistic relationship between demography and attitudes to death. The idea that parents in pre-modern Europe, inured to the frequent death of their infants, did not love them in life or mourn them in death, has been effectively challenged.²⁶ Yet it is also unlikely that the religious, cultural and social practices which surround death in any society are completely free-floating, and unconnected to changing demographies. The rich literature on African beliefs and practices relating to death is largely disconnected from demographic history, and this poses a major challenge for historians of death in Africa. The challenge is all the greater given the paucity of historical sources for the demographic history of the continent, which means that for many regions we have only a very general idea of demographic trends prior to the second half of the twentieth century. But the challenges do also present opportunities, as Doyle's paper in this issue demonstrates. 'Unconventional' sources such as naming practices not only perform a function for the demographic historian as indirect indicators of changing rates of infant and child mortality, but also are, simultaneously, rich sources for a cultural history of childhood and mortality. In the same way, the ageing of Africa's population is likely to have some impact on attitudes towards the elderly and towards death in general.²⁷ In some regions, the burden of care of both the elderly and the long-term sick has been increasing in recent decades.²⁸ At the same time, in areas affected by HIV/AIDS the elderly themselves are playing an increasing role as care-givers at a time in their lives when they might have expected to be the recipients of care. The conventional life-cycle has been disturbed and the anticipated generational order of deaths up-ended. But there is no unmediated relationship between demographic trends and cultural attitudes to death and dying. Levels of urbanization and education, taxation regimes and (in some countries) emergent formal welfare systems are amongst the many factors which we might expect to play a role.²⁹

The determinants of the dramatic rise in population in Africa in the twentieth century are still debated by demographic historians. Some see it as having been driven fundamentally by a fall in mortality rates; others argue

²⁵ See Doyle, 'The Child of Death'. See also Odile Journet-Diallo, 'Un enfant qui ne vient que pour repartir', in Joel Clerget (ed.), *Bébé est mort* (Paris, 2005), 29–45.

²⁶ Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500–1900* (Cambridge, 1983).

²⁷ Nana Apt, *Ageing in Africa* (Geneva, 1997); Isabella Aboderin, *Intergenerational Support and Old Age in Africa* (New Jersey, 2006).

²⁸ Julie Livingston, *Debility and the Moral Imagination in Botswana* (Bloomington, 2005); Julie Livingston, 'Elderly women and concerns over care in southeastern Botswana', *Medical Anthropology*, 22 (2003), 205–23.

²⁹ Andreas Sagner, 'Ageing and social policy in South Africa: historical perspectives with particular reference to the Eastern Cape', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26 (2000), 523–53.

that a rise in fertility rates played a critical role.³⁰ Either way, towards the end of the century there were signs in many parts of the continent of a 'transition' to lower fertility rates.³¹ However, since the late 1980s those areas affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic have seen dramatic changes to their population profiles which have greatly complicated any picture of an orderly 'demographic transition'. For example, in Botswana life expectancy at birth had risen from 46 years in 1955 to 65 in 1990, but by 2005 it had dropped to 35.³² The speed with which these changes have taken place is remarkable. In particular, the implications of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in eastern and southern parts of the continent, coming on top of the earlier period of population growth and rapid urbanization, have yet to be fully worked through or understood.

There is now a very large literature on HIV/AIDS and its social and economic ramifications, including its implications for attitudes to death and practices surrounding death.³³ But a great deal of the literature on AIDS is written without reference to the pre-AIDS era.³⁴ Southern Africa, in particular, has become so saturated with presentist AIDS research, that the impression is sometimes given that history itself began with the HIV/AIDS epidemic.³⁵ There is no doubt that there are particular features of the HIV/AIDS epidemic which make the drawing of historical parallels hazardous. Amongst these is the critical fact that this is a long-term epidemic. This makes it very different from many other epidemic diseases, for which the duration of outbreaks is much shorter-lived. There is almost certainly something to be learned from a comparison with the social, cultural and religious responses of African societies to other epidemic diseases, including smallpox, influenza, meningitis, plague, tuberculosis, and of course, epidemics of other sexually transmitted diseases, but the most salient

³⁰ John Iliffe, *Africans: The History of a Continent* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 2007); John C. Caldwell, 'The social repercussions of colonial rule: demographic aspects', in Albert Adu Boahen (ed.), *UNESCO General History of Africa*, vol. VII (London, 1985), 458–507; Dennis D. Cordell and Joel W. Gregory (eds.), *African Population and Capitalism: Historical Perspectives* (London, 1987).

³¹ www.unicef.org/sowco3/tables/table9.html; Debby Potts and Shula Marks, 'Fertility in southern Africa: the silent revolution', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27 (2001), 189–205. ³² www.unicef.org/infobycountry/botswana_statistics.html.

³³ On the latter issue, see, for example, Durham and Klaitis, 'Funerals and the public space of sentiment in Botswana'; Charles Nzioka, 'The social meanings of death from HIV/AIDS: an African interpretive view', *Culture, Health and Sexuality*, 2 (2002), 1–14; Gad P. Kilonzo and Nora M. Hogan, 'Traditional African mourning practices are abridged in response to the AIDS epidemic: implications for mental health', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 36 (1999), 259–83; Alinah K. Segobye, 'Places to remember: heritage sites, death and the reincorporation of memory in Botswana' (paper delivered at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference').

³⁴ There are, however, some very notable exceptions to this generalization: John Iliffe, *The African AIDS Epidemic: A History* (Oxford, 2006); a recent special issue of the *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 37 (2007), on religion and AIDS in Africa, ed. Felicitas Becker and Paul Wenzel Geissler; and Didier Fassin's work on the politics of AIDS in South Africa: *When Bodies Remember: Experiences and Politics of AIDS in South Africa* (Berkeley, 2007).

³⁵ This point was made forcibly by participants at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference'.

comparison may, in the end, turn out to be with the effects of the slave trade.³⁶

VIOLENCE, WAR AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

'Death' and 'Africa' are words which, unfortunately, seem often to be twinned together. In much Western media coverage, 'Africa' appears as a space of death: epidemic disease, famine, war and apparently 'irrational' violence dominate representations of the continent and give rise to agonized debates about how such images might be countered. This is not a new phenomenon, of course, and dates back at least to the images of the slave trade and the calls from Abolitionists to 'save' the continent from darkness and death.

Many analyses of civil war in Africa aim to counter the image of a continent overwhelmed by 'irrational' violence and urge us to see these conflicts as driven by the very rational motivations of desire for wealth and for power. Conflict in Africa cannot be entirely reduced to competition for resources, but the map of wars on the continent is nevertheless revealing.³⁷ If you do not want to be caught up in violent conflict, it is better not to live in a region dominated by mineral wealth. But for a minority, participation in war can be a very effective accumulation strategy. Many of Africa's conflicts are simultaneously global and local in character, involving actors ranging from agents of international criminal rings to members of local youth organizations. The state, it is clear from these conflicts, no longer has a monopoly over violence in Africa, if it ever did.³⁸ In 1994, however, the world's attention came to be focused on a different kind of war in Africa – the genocide in Rwanda. Though competition over resources could go some way to explaining Rwanda's crisis, the genocidal form which it took necessitated a much longer historical perspective on the creation of ethnic identities and the nature of political power in Rwanda.³⁹

³⁶ Terence Ranger and Paul Slack (eds.), *Epidemics and Ideas: Essays on the Historical Perception of Pestilence* (Cambridge, 1992); Myron Echenberg, *Black Death, White Medicine: Bubonic Plague and the Politics of Public Health in Colonial Senegal, 1914–45* (Montreal, 2001); Randall Packard, *White Plague, Black Labour: The Political Economy of Health and Diseases in South Africa* (Berkeley, 1989); Howard Phillips and David Killingray (eds.), *The Spanish Influenza Pandemic of 1918–19: New Perspectives* (London, 2003); Karen Jochelson, *The Colour of Disease: Syphilis and Racism in South Africa, 1880–1950* (Basingstoke, 2001).

³⁷ David Keen, 'A rational kind of madness', *Oxford Development Studies*, 25 (1997), 67–75; David Keen, *The Economic Functions of Civil Wars* (Oxford, 1998); William Reno, 'African weak states and commercial alliances', *African Affairs*, 96 (1997), 165–88; Paul Richards, *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 1998); David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (Oxford, 2005); Michael Watts, 'Resource curse: governmentality, oil, and power in the Niger Delta', *Geopolitics*, 9 (2004), 50–80.

³⁸ Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15 (2003), 11–40.

³⁹ Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Oxford, 2001); Catherine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and Ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (New York, 1988); Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide, 1959–1994* (London, 1995); Jan Vansina, *Antecedents to Modern Rwanda: The Nyiginya Kingdom* (Madison, 2005).

War is not one phenomenon but several and, historically, different parts of Africa have experienced different kinds of wars, ranging from the internal conflicts which fed, and fed upon, the Atlantic slave trade, to the competitive warfare of political opponents in some nineteenth-century polities, to the wars of resistance to colonial occupation and wars of colonial liberation. In between those wars of occupation and liberation, millions of Africans were caught up in wars that were not of their making at all. Vast swathes of eastern Africa between 1914 and 1918 were devastated by a war between European powers played out on African soil; during the Second World War, African troops fought in Europe and in the jungles of Burma.⁴⁰ Recent work on Mau Mau and the decolonization of Kenya has reminded us of the colonial state's capacity for terror and violence.⁴¹ Some parts of the continent have been subject to regimes of violence from the time of the slave trade onwards. Here the haunting memory of past conflicts feeds into the experience of present-day conflict.⁴² Students of war and conflict in Africa grapple with the very considerable challenges of interpretation and representation in, for example, employing or eschewing psychological theories such as that of trauma to analyse these circumstances.

Two apparently quite contradictory analyses of political violence in contemporary Africa stand out in the recent literature. Some regimes of violence and terror are described as being so commonplace as to render death itself banal and emptied of meaning.⁴³ In other cases, violence, far from being devoid of meaning, appears to be saturated with meanings of the sacred and closely associated with spirituality.⁴⁴ Given the very diverse nature of African societies, it would be absurd to propose one narrative for the historical relationship between violence and political power in Africa, but clearly there is a need for more work with a long-term perspective on this issue. Much present-day violence in Africa can be understood in general terms of global forces and economic competition. Violence in Africa is no more 'exotic' than violence anywhere else. On the other hand, to understand the meanings of violent death in different parts of Africa, the 'moral economy' of violence and the line which societies draw between the legitimate and illegitimate use of violence does require an understanding of specific histories and of

⁴⁰ Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London, 2007); E. E. Sabben-Clare, 'African troops in Asia', *African Affairs*, 44 (1945), 151–7; Myron Echenburg, *The Tirailleurs Senegalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Oxford, 1990); Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century* (Durham NC, 2006); Ashley Jackson, *Botswana, 1939–1945: An African Country at War* (Oxford, 1995).

⁴¹ David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London, 2005); Caroline Elkins, *Britain's Gulag: The Brutal End of Empire in Kenya* (London, 2005).

⁴² Rosalind Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone* (Chicago, 2002).

⁴³ Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional notes on the postcolony', *Africa*, 62 (1992), 5–37; De Boeck, 'The apocalyptic interlude', 17. De Boeck employs both the notion of death having become 'banal' in Kinshasa, and a detailed analysis of Congolese understandings of death and time in terms of millenarianism.

⁴⁴ See Ellis, 'The Okija shrine'. Also Stephen Ellis, 'Liberia 1989–1994: a study of ethnic and spiritual violence', *African Affairs*, 94 (1995), 165–98; Heike Behrend, *Alice Lakwena and the Holy Spirit: War in Northern Uganda, 1986–1997* (London, 1991).

cosmologies.⁴⁵ Any comprehensive history of death in Africa would have to address the changing of violent death and its meanings and would have to include the as yet unwritten histories of suicide and road accidents, amongst other subjects, alongside criminal and political violence.⁴⁶

COLONIALISM AND CHRISTIANITY: DEATHLY ENCOUNTERS

Like many other missionaries, Dr. David Brown, a minister of the Church of Scotland, found the funerary practices of the people amongst whom he worked disturbing and repulsive. Yet the common human experience of death also provided opportunities for the missionary. Brown was horrified by the noise and apparent disorder of 'pagan' Nyakyusa burial rites, with their reference to the role of ancestral spirits in the world of the living, the role of animal sacrifice and, perhaps above all, their explicit expression of sexuality. Early Christian converts in southwest Tanganyika, as elsewhere, were asked to make a difficult choice. Banned from attending the 'pagan' funerals of family members, they risked arousing serious social conflict and the anger of the ancestors. In exchange, Christianity claimed to have conquered death completely and held out the promise of individual salvation, but this could only be achieved by giving up those relationships with the dead which were

⁴⁵ For a *longue durée* approach to the study of violence in East African history, see David Schoenbrun, 'Violence and vulnerability in East Africa before 1800 CE', *History Compass*, 4 (2006), 741–60. There is a substantial literature on the history of warfare in Africa, on human sacrifice and on violence and state formation. On warfare and warrior traditions: Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, 'The warrior and the state in pre-colonial Africa', in Ali A. Mazrui (ed.), *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* (Leiden, 1977), 20–47; Robert S. Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa* (2nd ed., Madison, 1989); John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa: 1500–1800* (London, 1999); Bethwell A. Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa: Ten Studies* (London, 1972); John Iliffe, *Honour in African History* (Cambridge, 2005), especially chs. 5 and 13. On the history of human sacrifice, see Robin Law, 'Human sacrifice in pre-colonial West Africa', *African Affairs*, 84 (1985), 52–87; Robin Law, "'My head belongs to the king": on the political and ritual significance of decapitation in precolonial Dahomey', *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), 399–415; Clifford Williams, 'Asante: human sacrifice or capital punishment? An assessment of the period 1807–1874', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 21 (1988), 443–52. For an interpretation of 'imaginary' violence and political power in Central Africa, see Wyatt MacGaffey, 'Aesthetics and politics of violence in central Africa', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 13 (2000), 63–75.

⁴⁶ Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', 32; Jean-François Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Beatrice Hibou, *The Criminalisation of the State in Africa* (Oxford, 1998). Political violence is, of course, not the only cause of violent death in Africa. In South Africa, violence (including self-inflicted violence and road accidents, as well as criminal violence) is the leading cause of mortality and morbidity. The inadequacy of mortality statistics for most African countries hampers any thorough analysis. On the use of statistics in South Africa see Katherine Kahn, Stephen M. Tollman, Michel Garenne and John S. S. Green, 'Who dies from what? Determining causes of death in South Africa's rural northeast', *Tropical Medicine and International Health*, 4 (1991), 433–41. For recent trends in 'suicidal behaviour' in southern Africa, see Lourens Schlebusch, *Suicidal Behaviour in South Africa* (Durban, 2005), and Julie Livingston, 'Suicide and the unbearable disappointments of modern life in Botswana' (paper delivered at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference'). For the history of suicide in South Africa, see Julie Parle, *States of Mind: Searching for Mental Health in Natal and Zululand 1868–1918* (Scottsville, KZN, 2007), and Fatima Meer, *Race and Suicide in South Africa* (London, 1976). Megan Vaughan is working on a history of suicide in southern Africa.

so central to the lives of the living. Though Brown and his colleagues drew a stark contrast between ‘pagan’ and Christian practices around death, nevertheless the experience of death was a constant reminder of the shared human emotion of grief. When Brown’s small daughter died in 1921, just a few months after arriving in Tanganyika, he and his wife were moved by the sympathy of their African neighbours, many of whom had been through similar losses. Over time, the practice of Christian burial, whilst still a vital sign of Christian identity, became more open to a degree of negotiation. When Brown himself died, in Northern Rhodesia in 1946, his body was wrapped in a simple white cloth and buried without a coffin. His African friends were impressed. This choice of burial demonstrated, they said, that he had become a ‘real’ African.⁴⁷

Death played a central part in the conversations between missionaries and their converts. The death of Christ represented the once-and-for-all sacrifice. Death itself had been conquered, for those who had the courage to believe. In southern Africa, missionary insistence on speaking about death provoked both fascination and flight amongst their potential converts, and helped to convey a sense of the authority of the Christian god.⁴⁸ For some Africans, Christian depictions of the resurrection of the dead and the second-coming of Christ held particular attraction, as these offered an innovative theological perspective on the death-process.⁴⁹ Believers no longer had to fear death, nor the wrath of malevolent ‘shades’ or ancestral spirits, and could instead await with anticipation the rising up of their dead. Conversations about death were also meditations on the very concept of the person, involving tricky linguistic and cultural translations – of the concept of the soul, for example, and of the afterlife.⁵⁰ While the efficacy of these ‘death conversations’ in converting Africans remains debatable, one enduring historical legacy of these discursive encounters is that the narrative of resurrection became, for some, incorporated into an autochthonous eschatological framework, as is famously evident in the millenial call of Nongqawuse in the Xhosa cattle-killing.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Dr. David Brown, papers held privately; Godfrey Wilson, ‘Nyakyusa conventions of burial’; Monica Wilson, *Good Company* (London, 1951); Monica Wilson, *Communal Rituals of the Nyakyusa* (London, 1959).

⁴⁸ Robert Moffat recalled of his efforts to engage ordinary Tswana in conversation, ‘Death and a future state are subjects they do not like to contemplate, and when they are introduced it frequently operates like an imperative order for them to depart’. Isaac Schapera (ed.), *Apprenticeship at Kuruman. The Letters of Robert and Mary Moffat, 1820–1828* (London, 1951), 253; see also William H. Worger, ‘Parsing God: conversations about the meaning of words and metaphors in 19th century southern Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 42 (2001), 417–47.

⁴⁹ John P. R. Wallis (ed.), *The Matebele Journals of Robert Moffat, 1829–1860* (Salisbury, 1976); Eugene Casalis, *The Basutos, Or, Twenty Three Years in South Africa* (London, 1861).

⁵⁰ Hildegarde H. Fast, ‘“In at one ear and out at the other”: African response to the Wesleyan message in Xhosaland, 1825–1835’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 23 (1993), 147–74.

⁵¹ Jeff Peires, *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–7* (Johannesburg, 1989); for more recent treatments of African millenarianism, see Robert Edgar and Hilary Sapire, *African Apocalypse* (Athens OH, 2000); De Boeck, ‘The apocalyptic interlude’; Filip de Boeck, ‘Dancing the apocalypse in

As has been noted in other contexts, the 'long conversation' between missionaries and Africans was shaped not only by philosophical concerns but also by material struggles over space, resources and bodies.⁵² This is no less the case in the realm of death. In depictions of death-bed scenes, missionaries could reveal the triumphant grace of the Christian god as somehow visibly embodied on the peaceful expressions of the dying. Furthermore, the choice to bury one's kin in newly erected cemeteries under Christian rites represented a 'final test' of allegiance, and for the Christian convert it was a decision potentially fraught with doubt, controversy and dissension.⁵³ It is evident that some aspects of African beliefs in a spirit world could be incorporated into Christian practice, and others could not, though the huge variety of Christian practice in Africa makes generalizations hazardous. Whilst the 'accommodation' between Christian and 'traditional' practice and beliefs has been central to more recent analyses of the history of Christianity in Africa, nevertheless the distinction between a Christian burial and a 'traditional' one is still critical for many African Christians.⁵⁴

Debates over death and funerary practice have also occurred in the Muslim societies of Africa. Some of these debates refer back to the origins of Islam itself. In one account of a funeral 'controversy', upon the death of the leader of a rival group of *munafiqun* (or 'hypocrites') in Medina, the Prophet Muhammad assented to praying over the dead body and clothing him in a ritual shirt. Later interpretations rebuke the Prophet for these actions on the basis of the Qur'anic injunction against praying over the bodies of dead 'disbelievers', although whether the *munafiqun*, who had overtly professed the Muslim faith, could be categorized as 'disbelievers' was debatable.⁵⁵ Even from their earliest beginnings, then, religious authority, textual interpretation and claims of allegiance were contested in the practice of

Congo', *Royal Academy of Overseas Science*, 47 (2001), 55–76; Yvan Droz and Herve Maupeu (eds.), *Les figures de la mort à Nairobi: une capitale sans cimetièrre* (Paris, 2003).

⁵² Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1991).

⁵³ King Moshoeshe faced this predicament, as described by Eugene Casalis, upon the sudden death of one of his wives. Casalis, *The Basutos*, 89–92.

⁵⁴ For a discussion of this complex negotiation in one African context, see Marleen de Witte, *Long Live the Dead: Changing Funeral Celebrations in Asante, Ghana* (Amsterdam, 2001), ch. 5. See also James L. Cox (ed.), *Rites of Passage in Contemporary Africa: Interaction Between Christian and African Traditional Religions* (Cardiff, 1998).

⁵⁵ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 'Death, funeral processions, and the articulation of religious authority in early Islam', *Studia Islamica*, 93 (2001), 29–30. Other sources on Islam and death: Arthur S. Tritton, 'Muslim funeral customs', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*, 9 (1938), 653–61; Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Albany, 1981); Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Islam and the gendered discourses of death', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 25 (1993), 187–205. On Africa: Jose Van Santen, 'We attend but we no longer dance: changes in Mafa funeral practices due to Islamization', in Catherine Baroin, Daniel Barreteau and Charlotte von Graffenreid (eds.), *Mort et rites funéraires dans le bassin du lac Tchad* (Paris, 1995); E. Dada Adelowo, 'Death and burial in Yoruba Qur'anic and Biblical religion', *Orita*, 19 (1987), 104–17; Edward W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (New York, 1973 [1836]). On non-African Muslim societies: Clifford Geertz, 'Ritual and social change: a Javanese example', in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973); John Bowen, *Muslims Through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society* (Princeton, 1993).

Muslim funerary rites. Islam's long history on the continent, particularly in East and West Africa, makes any generalizations about its influence on African death cultures particularly problematic. Islamic burial practices were incorporated into one East African society so seamlessly that it was noted even a colonial missionary could not distinguish the Islamic features of a 'native' burial ground.⁵⁶ Indeed, in contemporary South Africa, recent converts to Islam have adopted a narrative of return, and viewed the practice of Islamic burial rites as an important way to connect with a nostalgic and more authentically 'Xhosa' past.⁵⁷ Islamic reform movements have historically involved a questioning of the proper place and conduct of rituals, including funerary and mourning practices. Thus, religious revival is often accompanied by a process of cultural and social reform. We see this, for example, in the shift to a more orthodox version of Islam in the Sudan, which has had the effect of relegating women's ritual knowledge to the sphere of the 'traditional' as opposed to the more pietist and privileged male world of the 'scriptural'. Thus marginalized, women's participation in *zar* spirit possession cults has become emptied of its previous ritual power.⁵⁸

For European colonial rulers, African burial practices presented a complex set of dilemmas. Although in theory, under the rubric of 'traditional' structures that were granted some degree of autonomy under Indirect Rule in many parts of Africa, the public performance of funerary and burial rituals often invited the interference of colonial officials. In part, this was because of European fears of harmful emanations from 'unsanitary' methods of corpse disposal, such as multiple or shallow graves, burials within homesteads, and practices of corpse exposure. By the 1930s, an increasingly medicalized and rationalized approach to public health had, in some parts of the continent, resulted in closer regulation of the disposal of the dead. For example, in French Equatorial Africa, by the 1930s, colonial officials required the immediate burial of corpses, a regulated depth for graves and the use of wooden coffins.⁵⁹ Even in the confined spaces of Death Row in British-held colonial Africa, we can see the shift to 'closed' and privately managed executions as

⁵⁶ Felicitas Becker, 'Ritual and politics: conflicts over funerary practice among Tanzanian Muslims' (paper delivered at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference').

⁵⁷ Islamic funerary practices were also perceived to be a welcome bulwark against the encroachments, financial and social, brought about by the demands of a costly Christian funeral. Rebekah Lee, 'Conversion or continuum?: the spread of Islam among African women in Cape Town', *Social Dynamics*, 27 (2001), 62–85.

⁵⁸ Victoria Bernal, 'Gender, culture and capitalism: women and the remaking of Islamic "tradition" in a Sudanese village', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 36 (1994), 36–67.

⁵⁹ Florence Bernault stresses these were first European regulations which were then exported to Africa. Florence Bernault, 'Body, power and sacrifice in equatorial Africa', *Journal of African History*, 47 (2006), 231. In East Africa in the 1930s, a Native Authority Ordinance was introduced which banned corpse exposure. Mark Lamont, 'Decomposing pollution: corpses, burials, and affliction among the Meru of central Kenya', in Joël Noret and Michael Jindra (eds.), *The Living and the Dead in Africa* (forthcoming). For colonial intervention in Gold Coast burial practices, see Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*.

driven by a larger imperative to institute a more 'civilized' and sanitized approach to the exercise of imperial law.⁶⁰

Undoubtedly, the development of these 'sanitized' spaces of death helped to alter African ways of burying and remembering their dead. However, we need to be careful not to exaggerate the impact of the colonial state. Africans resisted colonial regulations, whether by refusing to bury their dead in demarcated cemeteries or by overtly protesting against what they viewed as intrusive legislation.⁶¹ In contemporary southern Africa, as elsewhere, the continued relevance of notions of bodily contagion and the persistence of fears over the mis-use of corpses for witchcraft show that neither colonial regulation nor missionary indoctrination have successfully eradicated African beliefs around the ontological power of the (dead or dying) body.⁶² The historical lack of adherence among Africans to cremation, despite its widespread practice since the 1930s amongst the white and Indian populations of South Africa, may be another indication of the resilience of culturally specific notions of the body.⁶³ A more accurate assessment of these debates would have to acknowledge the complexity and range, as well as the historical specificity, of African responses to colonial and missionary interventions.⁶⁴

URBANIZATION, GLOBALIZATION AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES OF DEATH

I am a cut sprout, ever resprouting.
A poor man has no place in the country ...
Poor men, we are long-legged;
You know we shall die far away.⁶⁵

This stanza from a *sefala*, or Sotho song of comradeship, speaks of the loneliness and displacement of the migrant labourer. For the many 'long-legged' migrants journeying to the mines of South Africa throughout the twentieth century, it was the prospect of dying 'far away' which gave a

⁶⁰ However, the chilling case Hynd relates in this collection of a botched execution, offers a powerful counter-narrative to the colonial administration's discourse of a more 'humane' practice.

⁶¹ See De Witte, *Long Live the Dead*, ch. 6; Lamont, 'Decomposing pollution'; Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*.

⁶² Benedict Carton, "'We are being made quiet by this annihilation': historicizing concepts of bodily pollution and dangerous sexuality in South Africa', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 39 (2006), 85–106; Benedicte Ingstad, Frank Bruun and Sheila Tlou, 'AIDS and the elderly Tswana: the concept of pollution and consequences for AIDS prevention', *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 12 (Dec. 1997), 357–72; Klaitis, 'The widow in blue'; Ashcroft, *Madumo*.

⁶³ An uneasy alliance forged between Indian nationalists, led by Mahatma Gandhi, and modernist white health officials resulted in the creation of South Africa's first crematorium, in 1918. Garrey Michael Dennie, 'Flames of race, ashes of death: re-inventing cremation in Johannesburg, 1910–1945', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 29 (2003), 177–92.

⁶⁴ Greene helpfully argues for an analytics of 'displacement', rather than 'erasure' or 'replacement', to locate and explain the process of ritual and spiritual change among the Anlo. Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter*.

⁶⁵ David B. Coplan, *In the Time of Cannibals: The World Music of South Africa's Basotho Migrants* (Chicago, 1994), 124.

particular pathos to their situation. While the establishment of cemeteries at the mines acknowledged that mines themselves had become spaces of (accidental) death, it was the fact that they could now be spaces of burial which further troubled African labourers and their families.⁶⁶ How would the dead be ensured safe passage into the afterlife, if not buried at 'home' under the watchful eyes of the living? And how would the community attain ritual and spiritual closure without the assurances brought on by the ceremonial treatment of the body of the deceased? Throughout southern Africa, the migrant labour system imposed a necessary mathematics of distance upon the delicate calibrations of social and kinship relations. African relations to death and the dying process were no less affected.

The rich scholarship on the impact of the slave trade reminds us that the more recent shaping of African mortality patterns through urbanization, labour migration and globalization cannot be seen as entirely 'new' historical processes.⁶⁷ Road accidents, which are currently referred to as reaching 'epidemic' proportions in some African countries, may be considered an unfortunate consequence of modern forms of motorized transport.⁶⁸ However, in Sierra Leone, the phenomenon of death 'on the road' was deeply associated with older forms of capitalist consumption, namely slavery. The road, like the sea which carried away enslaved Africans, became feared as a 'man-eater', a voracious devourer of human flesh.⁶⁹ That Sotho migrants

⁶⁶ Cemeteries were legally established at South African mines by the first decade of the twentieth century. Tshidiso Maloka, 'Basotho and the experience of death, dying and mourning in the South African mine compounds, 1890–1940', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 38 (1998), 25; see also Tshidiso Maloka, 'Christianity and Basotho in the gold mine compounds, 1900–1940', *South African Historical Journal*, 31 (1994). On mine-related morbidity and mortality: Elaine N. Katz, *The White Death: Silicosis on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1886–1910* (Johannesburg, 1994); Shula Marks, 'The silent scourge? Silicosis, respiratory disease and gold-mining in South Africa', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32 (2006), 569–89; Jock McCulloch, *Asbestos Blues: Labour, Capital, Physicians and the State in South Africa* (Oxford, 2002); Jock McCulloch, 'Asbestos mining in southern Africa, 1893–2002', *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, 9 (2003), 230–5; Packard, *White Plague, Black Labour*.

⁶⁷ On slave mortality: Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); David Eltis, *Economic Growth and the Ending of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New York, 1989); Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, 1983); Patrick Manning, *Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental and African Slave Trades* (Cambridge, 1990); Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730–1830* (Madison, 1988); Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge MA, 1982). On death in the African diaspora: Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge MA, 2008); Karla F. C. Holloway, *Passed On. African American Mourning Stories: A Memorial* (Durham NC, 2002); Joao Jose Reis, *Death is a Festival: Funeral Rites and Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Brazil* (trans. Chapel Hill, 2007).

⁶⁸ On road accidents in Nigeria, see James Gibbs's 'The writer and the road: Wole Soyinka and those who cause death by dangerous driving', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33 (1995), 469–98; on road accidents and the law in Botswana, see Charles Manga Fombad, 'Compensation of victims of motor vehicle accidents in Botswana: an appraisal of the MVA Fund Act', *Journal of African Law*, 43 (1999), 151–83. On minibus operators in Kenya, see Kenda Mutongi, 'Thugs or entrepreneurs: perceptions of *matatu* operators in Nairobi, 1970 to present', *Africa*, 76 (2006), 549–68.

⁶⁹ Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, 17, 64, 231.

drew on similar cannibalistic imagery to cast South African mines as a giant belly which swallowed African bodies suggests that forces of global capitalism influenced not only economies of death but African imaginaries as well.⁷⁰

In the postcolonial period, the growth of regional and international networks, increased mobility (within Africa and globally) and the speed of telecommunications have contributed to a re-mapping of the ways in which people understand and exercise daily a sense of 'belonging'.⁷¹ Some analyses have argued that, in the context of escalating violence and political instability in many post-independence African countries, this re-mapping has been marked by a profound 'un-mooring' of social ties. Particularly in the fluid and often marginalized and violent spaces of African metropolises, a dynamics of disconnection – from socioeconomic, legal and moral structures – has operated. In this space of disconnectedness, the division between life and death has become easily ruptured, and the world of the dead freely intrudes on the living.⁷² The use of apocalyptic time-scales in Kinois music, the circulation of witchcraft rumours and the re-emergence of the Okija shrine in Nigeria can all be understood as African attempts to re-orientate themselves to this different, spectral topography.⁷³ Narratives of liminality have also emerged out of the continuing HIV/AIDS epidemic. In rural Mpumalanga (South Africa), those with HIV/AIDS are considered the 'walking dead', while in Kampala, the cyclical nature of AIDS-related illnesses has meant that AIDS sufferers live in a state of moving back and forth from the brink of death to life.⁷⁴

If the problems of modernity have brokered a different relation to the spectral, the products of modernity have themselves mediated shifts in the meaning and management of death. The commoditization of funeral rites in recent decades in many parts of Africa has, at least materially, transformed burial and mourning practices. 'Fantasy' coffins from Ga carpenters in Accra are now marketed and sold via the internet, with one website robustly proclaiming their coffins are free-trade 'antiques of the future'. Purchasing (and being buried in) a coffin modelled exactly on a popular Nokia cellphone can, claims the website, 'keep your line to heaven open'.⁷⁵ In South Africa, township-based funeral homes offer families a range of products and services, including in-house embalming, refrigerated transport of the deceased, and the use of double-decker buses and portable green 'lawns' to transform

⁷⁰ Maloka, 'Basotho and the experience of death, dying and mourning', 21–3.

⁷¹ Geschiere, 'Funerals and belonging'.

⁷² Abdou Maliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham NC, 2004). However, Simone cautions against an over-simplified reading of failure or dysfunction in the fluid character of African cityscapes.

⁷³ De Boeck, 'The apocalyptic interlude'; Ashford, *Madumo*; Shaw, *Memories of the Slave Trade*, ch. 7; Ellis, 'The Okija shrine'.

⁷⁴ Isak Niehaus, 'Death before dying: conception of AIDS in the South African Lowveld' (paper delivered at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference'). Andrew Irving charts how this liminality has altered Kampalan AIDS sufferers' spatial relation to death and the city. Andrew Irving, 'Ethnography, art and death', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13 (2008), 185–208.

⁷⁵ www.eshopafrika.com/acatalog/Ga_Coffins.html.

dusty cemeteries into areas of comfortable reflection.⁷⁶ Fuelling this consumption is an equally vibrant and competitive funeral insurance industry, with both commercial and informal sector schemes offering financial security for those seeking a 'dignified' funeral for themselves and their dependants. In west and southern Africa, where the commoditization process seems most apparent, social pressures to participate in increasingly elaborate and expensive funerals have sparked a lively and contentious debate about the burdensome 'price' of respectability.⁷⁷

Although it would be tempting to argue that commoditization has emptied the spiritual content of death rituals and marked a 'great transformation' in African death cultures, there is reason to suggest this is an oversimplification.⁷⁸ Firstly, colonial anthropological and missionary accounts remind us that the elaboration of funerals is not a 'new' African invention. A focus on the commercialization of contemporary funerals would thus obscure older, historical dynamics at work. Furthermore, as Jane Guyer and others have stressed, monetary transactions in Africa cannot be understood in isolation from locally derived systems of belief, sociality and exchange.⁷⁹ Commodities, therefore, need to be seen as potentially malleable mediators of local cultural values, and not simply as markers of Western capitalist consumption.⁸⁰ For example, African incorporation of new technologies and communications networks, which implicitly link greater and more disparate geographical areas, has arguably increased the possibilities of spiritual engagement with the dead and the community of the deceased. For example, refrigerated transport of the corpse has allowed a type of reverse migration, where the dead in urban areas can be transported back to their natal homes for burial and subsequent commemoration ceremonies.⁸¹ Internet chat rooms have become, for the Congolese diaspora in the West, an important medium through which to debate 'death' and shape mourning culture.⁸²

⁷⁶ However, a sense of solemnity at a burial may be marred by aggressive marketing campaigns on the funeral site itself – participants in a funeral ceremony can expect to see phone numbers of that funeral's service provider emblazoned prominently across the backs of seats and on marquee tents. Rebekah Lee, 'The new "gold mine"?: buying and burying in contemporary South Africa' (paper delivered at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference').

⁷⁷ These trends are satirized in Mda's *Ways of Dying*; Lee, 'The new "gold mine"?:'. The rising cost of funerals in Africa was the subject of a recent radio phone-in programme, *Africa: Have your Say*, BBC World Service, 26 July 2007.

⁷⁸ For a version of the 'transformation' thesis, see Kwame Arhin, 'The economic implications of transformations in Akan funeral rites', *Africa*, 64 (1994), 307–22

⁷⁹ De Witte, *Long Live the Dead*, 105; Jane Guyer, *Marginal Gains: Monetary Transactions in Atlantic Africa* (Chicago, 2004).

⁸⁰ Suzuki examines the professionalization of the funeral industry in Japan. Interestingly, she argues that in Japan the commercialization of 'community funerals' and the commodification of certain burial practices have produced social cohesion, and not alienation or anonymity. Hikaru Suzuki, *The Price of Death: The Funeral Industry in Contemporary Japan* (Palo Alto, 2000).

⁸¹ Lee, 'The new "gold mine"?:' On the impact of technological change in Benin, see Joël Noret, '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').

⁸² White, 'The political undead'; see Charles Tshimanga, *Jeunesse, formation et société au Congo-Kinshasa 1890–1960* (Paris, 2001).

Even the consumption of prescription drugs, in the face of certain death from AIDS, has been imbued with a particularly spiritual significance.⁸³ Evidently, then, the forces of globalization and technological change have helped fashion alternative cultural landscapes within which Africans could re-invent their relations to death and the dying process. That these dynamics could be simultaneously 'modern' and deeply 'historical' attests to Africans' extensive and multi-faceted engagement with death over the course of the last two centuries. The challenge remains for historians of Africa to explore the development of this complex, and compelling, relationship.

⁸³ Robins, 'From "rights" to "ritual"'; Hayley MacGregor, 'Negotiating health as a right: accounts from South Africa' (paper delivered at 'Death in African History: An Interdisciplinary Conference'). See also Robins, "'Long live Zackie, long live'"; Posel, 'Democracy in a time of AIDS'.