

FOREWORD

Birgit Meyer



Death is the great analyst that shows the connections by unfolding them, and bursts open the wonders of the genesis in the rigour of decomposition.

—Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*

Death being an intrinsic and unavoidable part of our human condition, the care for the dead is an urgent matter in all societies. The ‘anthropology of death’ explores how the specific ways in which the living deal with death and bury their dead shape social relations. While death remains ultimately mysterious and unfathomable, a focus on the practices of the living in burying and commemorating their dead leads to the core of how societies work. Hence the study of death is a looking glass into modalities of societal reproduction. Isabel Bredenbröker’s sound and sensitive ethnography about the death-related practices of their interlocutors in Peki, Ghana, offers a fascinating intervention into this longstanding scholarship. With this Foreword, through which I warmly invite you to delve into the book, I would like to highlight three particularly salient points.

One, Bredenbröker’s descriptions are blunt and vivid, based on the insights they gained by assisting a female undertaker in preparing the dead to be laid in state, attending about forty funerals and continually discussing matters of death and burials with people in Peki. What I find particularly compelling is their ability to combine writing in a matter-of-factly cool and yet compassionate manner. In so doing, they eschew the danger of voyeurism that may easily accompany accounts of how culturally Others deal with death (and, for that matter, sexuality). Exploring how the living try to safeguard a good transition of a deceased person to becoming an ancestor, they never aim to reduce death to a mere social affair that can be mastered in full by mourners and scholars. Death, they write, ‘possesses an excess quality of never being fully understood’, causing emotional distress on a personal

and societal level. As they point out, this also pertains to themselves. Their exposure to death practices in Peki also made them think and feel about the loss of their own grandparents and assume a lead role in preparing their grandmother's burial in hitherto unanticipated ways, as they share in their Preface. Clearly, their research experiences in Peki have shaken their personal attitudes towards death and burial that developed through being socialized in German society. Turning the anthropological 'eye' also upon themselves, they discovered certain unexpected resonances with what they encountered in Peki. Stressing that the position of the anthropologist is by no means neutral, they take this research also as an occasion to, as it were, decolonize their perspective. Their book prompts its readers to engage in a deep reflection of previously held ideas about how death is dealt with in their own social environments. This draws the specific death-related practices of people in Peki close, without slipping into a facile idea of humans being all the same because we all will die and have to deal with death. The ways in which humans do so are always situated historically and societally, leaving many pressing questions to be asked.

Second, Bredenbröker situates the death-related practices they encountered in Peki in the period between 2016 and 2019 as shaped through colonialism and the influence of Christian missions. In this sense, these practices are inflected with ideas that can be traced to Western colonial power. Both the British colonial administration and the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* (active in the area since 1847) intervened in indigenous ways of burying the dead – under the floor of the house in the case of males dying a 'good' death, and at the outskirts of the town in the case of persons dying a 'bad' death caused by an accident, a snake-bite or in childbirth. The use of coffins and cemeteries became obligatory, and after independence the Ghanaian state retained such rules and added new ones, as death is a social affair and hence subject to governance. Bredenbröker describes a complex negotiation process, through which such new rules and regulations were accommodated, while certain ideas about 'good' and 'bad' deaths and the ways in which the spirits of the deceased intervene in the world of the living were retained and mitigated with new means. They convey how the performance of funerals and the treatment of the dead are subject to state power as well as to rules set by chiefs and family elders. This turns funerals into a space for negotiating the use of new materials at hand so as to hold a befitting ceremony that has, echoing Robert Hertz, the ultimate goal of achieving control over the corpse to serve the intentions of the living. Here it is illuminating that they compare the accommodation of Christianity, entailing, as I explained in my own work on the history of Protestantism in Peki, an Africanization from below, to the accommodation of state requirements into death-related practices. Looked at from this angle, these practices bear clear traces of colonial and Christian interventions and of exposure to global capitalism. During my fieldwork in Peki in the period between 1989 and 1992, I also attended many funerals,

even though this was not my research focus. While I, too, noticed some of the features spotlighted by Bredenbröker, there were differences regarding the time a dead body was kept in the morgue (now apparently much longer than thirty years ago) and the use of synthetic materials (now much more marked). Funerals in Peki are thoroughly dynamic, transforming through ongoing negotiations of rules and adopting new possibilities for re-shaping death-related practices.

Third, Bredenbröker makes a strong case for analysing death-related practices from a material angle. As the somewhat provocative title 'Rest in Plastic' suggests, there is a remarkable use of lasting, synthetic materials in all stages of the funerals held, from the keeping of a deceased person in a frozen state in the morgue, to washing and dressing them with synthetic materials, to the laying in state in a non-perishable coffin, to the (preferred) burial in a cemented grave, adorned with wreaths made from plastic. Bredenbröker's sensitivity towards local understandings of these materials in the context of death-related practices allows them to point out the specific 'semiotic ideologies' (Webb Keane) through which these materials are valued and understood. They show convincingly that the durability associated with these materials plays into mourners' attempts to produce durability for the dead. In a local perspective, synthetics are morally good: '[b]y seemingly making things last, they have an agency of their own, literally taking the workload of effecting this intended state from people's shoulders'. Bredenbröker cautions against a view of synthetic materials as mere foreign imports. Instead, these materials should be seen as embedded in a local way of dealing with death and commemorating the dead. In a world in which plastics spread on an unprecedented scale and are rightly targeted as fueling ecological disaster, it is all the more important to understand the values attributed to them in local settings, as in Peki.

In sum, with its focus on the appraisal of synthetic materials in death-related practices in Peki, this book offers a most welcome addition to the study of funerals in Ghana (where most attention is paid to the Akan) and a lucid, material intervention into the anthropology of death. And most importantly, it shows the strength of an anthropological perspective that does not eschew observation and participation in the actual work done with a corpse, through which a dead person is transformed into an ancestor, and biological death into social death. Doing so, Bredenbröker certainly tracks death as 'the great analyst', in the sense of the statement by Foucault with which I opened this Foreword.

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