



Death and the Afterlife

Workshop in Göttingen on 17 June

What does one do with the dead? Burial, entombment, mummification, or cremation hint at creative ritual possibilities that tell us how we care for the dead. In several contexts, the dead form an unquestionable social good that encompasses a number of tropes, such as designating ancestors for a family, configuring the nation-state on memorials and mortal remains, meditating on death as part of ethical self-formation, and so on. Added to this, is the whole range of beliefs in souls, spirits, ghosts, zombies, saints, and shamans that anthropologists routinely encounter, which testifies to the idea of a vibrant afterlife and puts into serious doubt any conceptualization of death as finitude or cessation. Conversely, the dead and especially mortal remains also entail vital registers of forgetting, of ostracism and of obliteration. To touch upon these registers, whether in our personal or communal lives, is impossible without touching simultaneously on politico-religious issues of the most perplexing kind. Also, there is much that remains enigmatic in the capacity of new technologies of burial, cremation or preservation of corpses. The professionalization of mortuary specialists, once considered ritual and traditional, has taken on industrial and commercial connotations. Moreover, scarcity of space has made cemeteries an important element of city planning.

This workshop invites you to reflect on the meanings, forms and effects of practices of disposal of the body and handling of mortal remains. It aims to bring together a fascinating diversity of perspectives on the body and its disposal alongside the lingering presence of ancestors, ghosts, shamans, and the like, which tell the story of a persistent afterlife. Through ethnographically situated studies the workshop will critically engage with current theory, comparative ethnography and historical inquiry to explore what analytical convergence can be there in the relations between the living and the dead.



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The discussions in the workshop may focus around three conceptual areas:

(1) Who deals with the dead body? Who makes the transition possible from death to the afterlife? This concerns the domain of ritual specialists and death in everyday life. It opens up the question of how different religious traditions cope with the dead and with mortal remains. Practices of disposal of the body and handling of mortal remains are widely variable and reveal intricate cosmologies, religious ideologies, status hierarchies, and political economies. Notwithstanding the great diversity, there are some key points for reflection cross-culturally. For instance, distinctions of “good” death and “bad” death, the preoccupation with afterlife, individual deaths as events of cosmic renewal, shamanistic connections with the world of spirits through trance are some of these comparative issues.

(2) The role of violence, memory and state control in the contestation over mortal remains and the world of the spirits. Locating mortal remains is one of the sources of conflict after warfare, especially after civil wars. The control over the bones and over their potential to reignite violence is part of the politics of memory and official history. Another part is the use of embalmed bodies as well as the monumental celebration of the remains of the Unknown Soldier to create state cults of commemoration

(3) Everywhere in the world people try to communicate with the deceased. These practices have local histories, but are increasingly tied up with globalized traditions of spirituality. The interaction of the local and the global as well as the role of science in these interactions create different historical pathways of dealing with death and the afterlife that ask for reflection.

The goal of the workshop is to expand the arc of our conversations from the canonic to the contemporary, from the West to the Rest. In this respect, one of the key motivations is to revisit classical themes such as contexts of purity and pollution in mortuary rites (Durkheim and Hertz), interpretations of death and symbolic renewal from structural anthropology (Bloch and Parry) or perspectives from Marxist anthropology on how the dead animate critiques of capitalism (Comaroffs, Taussig), and assess how these relate to more reflexive and phenomenological perspectives on death, the dead body, and the spirit.





Friday 17 June

9.00 Arrival and Welcome

9.15-11.15 JEAN M. LANGFORD (University of Minnesota): *Ghostly poetics*

PAUL SORRENTINO (MPI-MMG): *Ghosts in the shell. Photography and other technological mediations between the living and the dead in Vietnamese spiritual sciences*

TAM NGO (MPI-MMG): *Bones of contention: placing the dead of the 1979 Sino-Vietnam Border War*

11.15-11.30 Coffee

11.30-13.30 ANA MARIELLA BACIGALUPO (MPI-MMG): *State violence and the traumatic memory politics of the Mapuche Undead in Chile*

KEITH MCNEAL (University of Houston): *Death and the problem of orthopraxy in Caribbean Hinduism: reconsidering the politics and poetics of Indo-Trinidadian mortuary ritual*

ARPITA ROY (MPI-MMG): *Carrying the skull: a study in radical Soteriology*

13.30-14.30 Lunch

14.30-16.30 FABIAN GRAHAM (MPI-MMG): *Competing cosmologies of post-mortal existence in Chinese vernacular religion: societal influences and diametric oppositions within an evolving religious tradition*

MIREILLE MAZARD (MPI-MMG): *Ghosts of ritual: human remains and ideological contestations in Southwest China*

ERIC MUEGLER (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor): *Songs for dead parents*

19.00 Dinner

