

**Review of "Mortuary Dialogues: Death Ritual and the
Reproduction of Moral Community in Pacific
Modernities", edited by David Lipset and Eric K.
Silverman, Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books,
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Mortuary Dialogues: Death Ritual and the Reproduction of Moral Community in Pacific Modernities, edited by David Lipset and Eric K. Silverman. ASAO Studies in Pacific Anthropology series, Volume 7. New York and Oxford, Berghahn, 2016, xviii+244pp, figures, tables, foreword, map, afterword, index, (hardback). ISBN: 978-1-78533-171-8.

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Mortuary Dialogues is the outcome of an ASAO (Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania) session organised by David Lipset and Eric Silverman in 2009. The aim of the book is to understand mortuary rituals historically, and to push back against the still-prominent view, inherited from the *Année Sociologique* school, that these rituals are ‘a mechanism in the maintenance of collective order’ (1). For the editors, funerals as they are held today in the Pacific are polyphonic, composed of different, sometimes contrary, voices, and in which capitalism, Christianity, the State and development have a place.

The book has nine chapters, seven of which deal with groups in Papua New Guinea, one with Marshall Islanders and one with the Māori of New Zealand, plus a foreword by Shirley Lindenbaum, and an introduction and an afterword written by Eric Venbrux, a specialist of death rituals analyses, together with the two editors. The chapters are grouped into two parts, depending on the extent to which local cosmologies continue to be the dominant voice in response to modernity.

In tune with the aim of the volume, the analyses provided here view mortuary rituals in their historical contexts: how they were performed in the past and when the anthropologist arrived for the first time (that is between the 1970s and the 2000s), and how they are conducted now that changes of multiple kinds have affected the lives of Pacific people. These changes involve: the advent of Christianity with its effects on representations of personhood and in particular on how people think about the fate of the spiritual part of the person at death, among the Māori (Wilson and Sinclair), the Rawa (Douglas), the Murik (Lipset), and the

Kayan (von Poser); the arrival of mining or logging companies and the subsequent introduction of cash, which impact on relationships between people and between clans, in Lihir and Misima islands (Bainton and Macintyre) and among the I'ai of the Purari Delta (Bell); the displacement of entire populations due to environmental disasters, in Manam Island (Lutkehaus) or to nuclear testing by the United States, in the Marshall Islands (Carucci); and access to school and to some to jobs in towns which enable people to afford Western-like funerary practices, among the Eastern Iatmul (Silverman). Note that attributing the analyses of one or the other of these changes to particular papers does not mean that the authors restrict their arguments to it.

All the chapters present detailed ethnographic accounts of mortuary rituals, which are moreover well grounded in history, since the common theme of all the chapters that constitute the volume is the apprehension of the dialogues with different aspects of modernity that people of the Pacific engage in when facing the death of a loved one and having to carry out the proper rituals. The most pregnant change appearing in all the chapters is the increased number of homestead burials. While in the past the spirits of the deceased were feared, and an effort was made to keep them away from villages until the end-of-mourning ceremonies allowed them to reach the place of the dead for good, today the deceased are kept near the houses and their graves made visible and permanent. Not only does such a new practice modify the relations people have with their dead and probably affect remembrance, but it also attests to a changing vision of the person and of time. As von Poser writes, 'the cemented grave fixes the person in a temporal continuum' (172), while in the past the dead were perceived in a cyclical conception of time in which their bodily constituents were left to decay and fertilise the ground while their spirit(s) were sent to a land of their own.

Silverman even gives an example of a widow from Tambunum now living in Wewak who keeps the painted wooden effigy of her deceased husband, 'carved and decorated by hereditary ritual partners' (178), in her living room amid modern goods like a television set and an iron. In the past such effigies were burned by the women and the ashes swept into the river to finally reach the sea and the place of the dead. Together with personalising a grave by indicating details about the deceased (name, dates of birth and death), this is another illustration of the process whereby, as this author writes, Iatmul people today 'do not die solely as kin. They die, and are memorialized, as individuals, embedded in the nuclear family' (203).

If these changes are pervasive and affect both social and psychological mechanisms for dealing with death, several chapters in this volume testify in some way or another to a continuity of practices. The role of women is the best example, as they remain the principal actors when a death occurs: except perhaps in the Misima Islands, where ‘women’s contribution to mortuary feasts has been usurped by men with access to cash’ (121), they still are the main mourners, those who keep watch over the corpse, respect the taboos, don mourning garments, and wail and sing funeral songs. As Wilson and Sinclair recall for the Māori, ‘the transformation from the living to the dead still resides with women’ (57). In Māori mythology, womanhood has an ambivalent, ambiguous duality. ‘Women are positioned on the margins and their power derives from their liminal position (...) it is precisely their interstitial position that makes women guardians of the dead and equips them to cope with the movement between the distinct realms’ (57). Lipset’s chapter also illustrates the necessity of the women’s presence when a person dies: here, these are the women of the Female Cult who, in 2010, stayed all night with the coffin of a middle-aged woman killed by her husband to keep her spirit company. Thus, despite the many changes that modernity brings to mortuary rituals, some features seem to be less subject to potential change and so are more stable than others.

Mortuary Dialogues shows that mortuary practices in the Pacific are a window through which the impact of the different facets of modernity on people’s lives, practices and beliefs can be observed. It reveals that these rituals are not always restorative of a moral order, as Hertz and Durkheim put it, but can also be inconclusive and ‘not necessarily move forward to synthesis or resolution’ (7). But there is a risk of anachronism here, since the contexts in which the first theoreticians of the rituals that mark the end of life and those that anthropologists encounter today are far from being similar. The criticism of earlier analyses made in the Introduction may thus well appear too strong.

The chapters of the present volume describe and analyse situations involving death and mortuary rituals that nonetheless offer clues to what is liable to change and what is more prone to stability when the State, the Church, and foreign interests enter the picture. In that sense, the book contributes to our understanding of what it is like to live in the contemporary Pacific. Doing this through the lens of mortuary rituals is both original and relevant.