

anthropos

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Good Deaths/Bad Deaths: Dilemmas of Death in Comparative Perspective



To the title: "Good Deaths/Bad Deaths: Dilemmas of Death in Comparative Perspective". Crosses were built up in many parts of Central Europe during the pest epidemics, when the challenge passed away, here Mount Witthoh by Emmingen near the Lake of Constance, today a point to start excursions into the nature. // **Zum Titelbild:** „Guter Tod/Schlimmer Tod: Dilemmas des Sterbens aus vergleichender Perspektive“. Pestkreuze wurden früher in weiten Teilen Mitteleuropas aufgestellt, wenn die Bedrohungen durch die Pestepidemie überstanden wurden, hier auf dem Berg Witthoh bei Emmingen in der Nähe des Bodensees, heute Ausgangspunkt für Wanderungen in die Natur. // **Foto** © E. SCHRÖDER, 1990

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Introduction

SUZETTE HEALD

Many of the papers included in this special issue were first presented at a special session of the European Association of Social Anthropologists 2002 in Copenhagen on the theme 'good deaths/bad deaths'. The session was prompted by the observation that subject of death has received little attention in the anthropology of recent decades. Indeed, the standard comparative texts remain MALINOWSKI (1948), HERTZ (1960), BLOCH AND PARRY (1982) and METCALF & HUNTINGTON (1992). This approach to death is overwhelmingly concerned with the symbolism and meaning of mortuary rituals, with their theme, as Block and Parry maintain, of social and cosmic renewal in the face of death. There was little on subjective reactions to death. A turning point, one might say, came with Rosaldo's (ROSALDO 1984; 1989) reflections on his wife's death and how this gave him new insight into the emotional responses of Illongot, of how intense grief might prompt the passion of headhunting. Indeed, following the discussions of method and interpretation that characterised the 1980s under the influence of postmodernism, we now find ourselves in a very different intellectual climate, removed from the scientific detachment that marked early twentieth century approaches to the subject. Now, to engage personally and emotionally can be advocated as a major source of insight and knowledge. Anthropologists in taking up the topic of death now are more capable of confronting these dimensions in their analyses and focus on the process of dying as well as the inevitable fact of death.

'In the last analysis', Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his diaries, 'it is our conception of death which decides our answers to all the questions that life puts to us'.¹ This is a view which runs through all the contributions to this issue. The theme of good deaths versus bad deaths relates most clearly to the ways different kinds of death are judged in societies across the world. As such, it relates to the cultural values surrounding life and death. Yet, it is ambiguous for, at its simplest, a 'good death' might be judged according to the manner in which a life has been led. The question then is one of virtue, of how far the person has been a good citizen, and fulfilled

their life course. In Africa, to die in old age, leaving many children and grandchildren, becomes the paradigmatic 'good death' since it ensures the status of ancestor, with the person renamed, ensuring the perpetuation of life itself. Yet, even such a 'good death' can be compromised by the actual circumstances of dying. A person might die violently, in an unknown place, unable to be buried by kin and thus without the rituals to lay the ghost to rest, or other contingencies occur which render the death unpropitious or polluting. Intertwined with both valuations are beliefs in the fate of the spirit and the cosmic order which relates this world with the hereafter. The articles in this volume tackle all these themes in examining the values which come into play in judging death in terms of both the life and the manner of dying. They are written from a variety of perspectives but a broad thematic divide is followed in the ordering of articles in terms of, firstly, the treatment of the dying and, secondly, judgements of a life after death.

Dying as a Process

In the West, new medical technologies have, as ANNE HAMBRO ALNÆS writes, transformed the moral landscape of death. No longer, as Victorian pictorial imagery, do people die in their own bed surrounded by a grieving family. It is much more likely they die in hospital or care home or hospice in the hands of professional strangers. Current statistics for Britain are that 58% die in hospital, 16% in a care home and only 18% at home.² The medicalisation of death in modern societies, with its isolation from normal social routines, has over the course of the last century removed dying from conceptions of living itself (ARIES 1981; ELIAS 1985; HOCKEY 1986, 1990). As Ivan Illich writes, 'the medicalisation of society has brought the epoch of natural death to an end' (ILLICH 1975: 149). This is an issue which Hambro Alnæs takes up in presenting her pioneering research on the responses to requests for post-mortem organ donation in a Norwegian setting. The debateable borderline between death and life of a 'brain dead' patient kept alive on a respirator creates dilemmas for

medical personnel, and more for families who are charged with making the decision about termination and organ donation. With one 'body' representing up to five possible organ donations, the interests of medics and kin easily diverge.

Hambro Alnæs argues that in the situation of donation there is evident tension between ingrained beliefs and received traditions and those which new medical technologies have opened up. It makes the situation of death emotionally complex for the relatives who must determine the unknown wishes of the deceased and cope with the potential guilt resulting from both acceptance and rejection of the possibility of donation. As she makes clear, very quick decisions are required of the next of kin who not only may disagree among themselves but who also often feel coerced in a situation of grief. Yet, they are also confronted with existential questions, such as: Is such a death 'natural'? Does the social altruism implied in the 'gift' make a death, perhaps untimely and thus bad, good? What is one to make of this new form of life after death?

The liminality and alienation of death and dying in such a hospital setting might be contrasted with that of a modern hospice, with its emphasis on dignity in dying, acceptance of death as natural, though ideally, pain free (HOCKEY 1986, 1990). Yet, this too may run uneasily with other embedded ideas as well as with individual wishes. The difficulties of dying and care-giving in the situation of death is a theme which runs through the next three articles. The articles by IKUMI OKAMOTO about a death in a Japanese hospice and MAUREEN BLOOM, set in Israel, are both 'experience near' and contrast the subjectivity of the dying with the ideologies of professional carers who have their own definite ideas as to what should matter to the terminally ill.

The difficulties of dying whether put in the terms of a Japanese hospice, as being 'oneself until the end' or the need to preserve 'dignity' in a home-setting in Israel are constructions of the care team. Both highlight, from the perspective of the dying, the issue of autonomy. Okamoto in her study of a hospice in Japan compares its philosophy with other Japanese philosophic traditions of dying a good death. For the hospice, it implies the ability to live life to the end, maintaining one's essential identity and being responsive to others. The personality should remain unchanged despite the disintegration of the body. This can prove a hard requirement.

Okamoto describes a case of a somewhat defiant death in a hospice, with the dying woman unable to move freely, the capacity she valued above all others, refusing the succour of the hospice, and effectively giving up to death. This, what we would call in Britain, as turning one's face to the wall, is judged negatively by care staff.

The patient in Okamoto's study maintains an autonomy, a wishing for death, at odds with hospice philosophy. In Bloom's brave and sensitive study, seen from the perspective of a relative, it is not the 'dignity' stressed in media discussions and by care staff which is the issue for the dying but the need to preserve the last vestiges of self-determination in the face of progressive incapacity. Even in a home setting, the intrusion of medicalised care staff looms large and, to an extent, jeopardises the attempts of the ill to maintain a life where they may exercise their will, and recognise themselves as autonomous persons (cf. BATTIN 1994).

FREDERICK KLAITS' takes the issue further in reflecting on the impact of HIV/AIDS and how it has inflected modes of caring for the dying in Botswana. In Africa, the devastations of the pandemic mean that in many places the old have become the main carers as AIDS takes its toll on the young, reversing the regular flow of life, and leading often to apocalyptic visions of the future. Klaits' focus, however, is on the care given to the dying in a small Christian spirit church in Botswana, where the AIDS crisis has imposed increasingly heavy burdens of care on women and the churches in which many seek refuge. Klaits compares secular western views of death and its association with loneliness and alienation with that of this small Batswanan congregation where 'love' is the over-riding idiom of care and relationship. Love is endorsed not only as a moral imperative but as the necessary counter to suspicions of witchcraft among the living and fear of the possible vengeance of the dead. 'Giving up' here takes on a range of connotations: one must not 'give up' on the dying but the congregation is encouraged to 'give up' once a person is dead. In both cases, it is to demonstrate that they bear no ill-will, helping the sick to accept their fate by forestalling any resentment they might feel. Following death, church members are admonished to eschew a search for causation in the witchcraft of others in the church and outside. This moral making of death, as Klaits, makes clear, with its emphasis succour and love in the face of death and

heeding the wishes of the dying, is part of a general discourse around death in modern Botswana. Yet, it plays a particular role in the church, reworked according to its leader's interpretation of Biblical texts, with an emphasis on forgiveness, even when difficult, and thereby sustaining love among the members of her congregation. Blame and recrimination must be avoided, and the emotional turmoil of death not allowed to jeopardise relationships in the future through the suspicion it creates.

The repute of the dead.

Judgements of death in terms of the social persona are the main theme of SANTIAGO ALVAREZ and GABRIELE ALEX. Reputation is the issue but they illustrate different modalities of the cultural arc. Alvarez's paper looks at the mortuary rituals in the Colombian Andes, not so much as to explicate their cultural symbolism, but in terms of how participation reflects the status of the dead. In these communities menaced, as he writes, by the chaos and discontinuity of violent death this relates most strongly to the value placed on aggressive masculinity. Funerals, he argues, here operate to recreate hierarchy and gender difference in the communal solidarity of suffering. The violent deaths of young men killed in fighting are classed as 'good deaths' *par excellence*; heroic, altruistic offerings to the community. Yet those men killed by guerrillas fall into a shameful category, since the ostensible reason is the villainous character of the deceased. Few will attend their burials. Suicide deaths of young women are likewise rejected and condemned.

GABRIELE ALEX takes up the evaluation of suicides in Tamil Nadu, giving a nuanced account of how both life and manner of death contribute to the communities judgement of the event. While, suicide is here linked to the fate of the soul, far from being unremitting evil, it may well be interpreted if not exactly as an honourable act, at least as a comprehensible one. Indeed, it may be the last resort for those whose behaviour has put them outside normative expectations, a chance if not to recover their reputation, at least to a certain extent to exonerate themselves in death by freeing others of a burden. All the cases which she came across during fieldwork involved the suicides of men but they do not relate directly to the dominant interpretation of male

suicide in India. Very high suicide rates of young men have been attributed to increasingly adverse economic conditions for Indian farmers for whom suicide has been used as an overtly political act. While economic hardship is there, none of her cases falls easily into this category. As she says, knowledge of the cultural milieu and ascribed motivations behind the deed by the local community are here essential to understanding them. She argues that suicide can act to reconstitute a kind of virtuous citizenship.

A redemptive quality might also be discerned in ERNST HALBMAYER's detailed exploration of suicide among Amerindian groups but is over-ridden by other overtones in these violent societies. With particular reference to the Yukpa, Halbmayr sets out to explain the extremely high suicide rates that are found in this area in terms of the local cosmologies, concepts of the person and indigenous notions of death. These warring Indian groups maintain an absolute distinction between solidary kin and hostile outsiders. Conflict and violence is enjoined with the enemy, but cannot be tolerated internally. Serious internal discord threatens the group and ruptures relationships by transforming a close relative into a hostile other. This is the context, he argues, we need to understand Yukpa suicides, in which it appears as a way of resolving an intolerable situation. The kinship group here is factionalised and fragile with few ways of healing relationships when conflict emerges within the group. By committing suicide, the suicide puts himself outside the group and, in that sense, 'solves' the immediate situation. But since he may then take spiritual vengeance on the living, the event is likely to reverberate to affect future relationships within the group. Yet this is only part of the pattern, for suicide takes different forms in other groups. In some, suicide is attributed to enemy witchcraft, converting it into a form of spiritual murder; in another, it is enjoined as a way of reaching the highest level of heaven, an heroic act, which Halbmayr contextualises again as prompted by otherwise insoluble in-group conflicts.

Concerned with meaning and social context, these two papers on suicide highlight the problems involved in cross-cultural definitions of action. Suicide is no simple 'social fact', as Durkheim (DURKHEIM 1951) once had it, but takes on such different hues that 'self-killing' fails to inform on the nature of the act in question. When we shift from 'social

fact' to meaning, a much more complex picture emerges. Edgar's research into dream visions of Jihadist suicides is here most revealing. 'Suicide bombers' have posed particular dilemmas to a western world unable to align them with conventional moral understandings. More, with suicide outlawed in orthodox Islamic thought, the justifications of Jihadist bombers raises a particularly interesting set of questions. Edgar's insightful account sheds new light on the motivation and justification of these Jihadists. With a long term interest in research into dreams, Edgar now turns to the interpretation of dreams in the Islamic tradition, setting them in the context of Islamic metaphysical thought, with life seen as a step to the afterworld. Drawing on published accounts as well as web sources and interviews, he illustrates the kinds of dream which are taken to have revelatory potential. Just as the Prophet once dreamed, to see the Prophet in a dream is regarded as a sign of true divine revelation. As he says, it introduces the glorious past into the present and gives martyrdom a death-giving future in the hereafter. Edgar's account informs on many levels, especially of the significance of this rebirth of the visionary and revelatory world of Muhammad's Islamic inspiration.

The articles in this volume in dealing with the dilemmas of death have traversed a territory from deaths and dying in secular settings to those in societies where religious and metaphysical concepts still dominate. Life and death are not only differentially valued but create very different dilemmas in the confusion caused by a death. Away from medical science, the implications of any one death are evaluated in complex ways, which take the possible reverberations of the death in both this world and the next into account. As seen by the contributors, the task of survivors is often that of trying to convert an unpropitious death into some kind of social 'good'. Whether dying of AIDS in Botswana, a suicide in Tamil Nadu, or Yukpa, the mourners attempt to understand and come to terms with it in a way that least threatens on-going relationships. Exculpation of the deceased thus is a theme which runs through much of the discussion, though, as is apparent in the discussions of Alvarez, Halbmayer and Edgar, in contexts where male violence is valorised, this is accompanied by strong heroic elements.

Different issues arise in the discussions of dying in secular settings in the developed world where the

medicalisation of death has produced new institutional ways of 'managing' death and a new lexicon to go with it. The 'time of our passing' is no longer seen as God-given but as subject to human intervention and the exercise of individual will. As longevity has increased, quality versus quantity of life has become an issue, with the problems of care provision and the value placed on individual autonomy rising to the surface. Hambro Alnæs, Bloom and Okamoto all touch on the topic of euthanasia and, with suicide decriminalised, the 'right to die'. But, when death comes, its abrupt discontinuity is unmediated by a vision of a future presence, except, as Hambro Alnæs discusses, in the materiality of bodily substance in an organ transplant. Here relatives must agonise over the duties of the citizen to donate for the good of unknown others – a new form of therapeutic citizenship³ – versus the traditional respect for the intact corpse and the wishes of the dead themselves. Here discussion is not so much concerned with the fate of the spirit (and any ill-will that may emanate from it) but with the fate of the body, for this new form of the continuation and regeneration of life has a sinister side in the commodification of body parts and tissues. Scandals involving hospital practice as well as criminal gangs involved in worldwide distribution of body products here severely challenge the 'trust' in expert systems which Giddens has argued is implicit in the conditions of modern life (GIDDENS 1991). It raise the question of whether death might come to be judged not only as 'good' or 'bad' in terms of the manner of living, or of dying, but in terms of the use of the body after death.

Notes

- 1 www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/d/dag_hammarskjöld.html
- 2 Department of Health, Great Britain, reported in *The Guardian*, 17 Oct 2007.
- 3 Cf. NGUYEN, 2005

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