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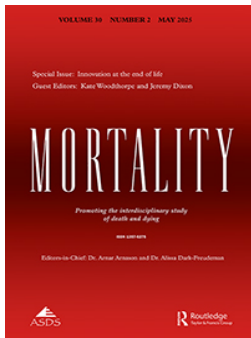
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Contemporary responses in Africa to the aftermath of death: developments and decolonising challenges

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ABSTRACT

Despite death and bereavement studies being dominated by scholars and empirical material from Europe and North America, death and bereavement studies have often assumed the universality of their knowledge. This limits the epistemic and ontological potential of the field and can result in a misunderstanding of death and bereavement, including in Europe and North America. However, more than this, because of the political power of these centres for the study of death, it has also resulted in the imposition of knowledges and practices about death on populations around the world through colonial rule, aid and development initiatives, neo-colonial practices and global health policies. We advocate for the decolonisation of death studies by which we do not mean a return to a precolonial past, but instead the embracing of a plurality of ontologies about death and bereavement, and a recognition of the power embedded in all claims about the meaning and processes of death and its aftermath. We explore these themes through a focus on three case studies in Africa in Senegal, South Sudan and Uganda.

Introduction

Death and bereavement studies have often claimed universality for the knowledge produced (Klimczuk et al., 2017). Yet most empirical research and theoretical development in death and bereavement studies have been undertaken by and about (particular sectors of) people in Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Encouragingly, there is a growing body of research on death in India and China, but research in Africa remains largely excluded. While a significant amount of research has been done by scholars from Africa and by anthropologists, this has

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received little attention from the work which dominates the field. Such exclusions and associated dominance of 'Western' models of 'bereavement' and understandings of 'death' have limited understandings of death, resulting in these ideas being exported, and sometimes imposed, on the rest of the world (Klass & Chow, 2011). For instance, in Western models, death has been defined as a state of the total, irreversible disappearance of life and a process of decay (Klimczuk et al., 2017, p. 1), but this is not universally considered to be the case. Therefore, this ignoring of experiences and contexts from 'elsewhere' undermine such universalising claims and needs to change. The question arises whether death and bereavement studies need to be 'decolonised' (Hamilton et al., 2022).

Paying attention to understandings of death elsewhere also invites us to notice the assumptions made about 'bereavement' in Western societies (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019). It shows us that death is not necessarily only/primarily emotional but also deeply entangled with the communal, spiritual, social, material and cultural experiences of 'the bereaved', with implications for the material, spiritual and relational lives of people and communities. Yet in death and bereavement studies, these aspects are heavily side-lined, which produces a 'knowledge' of 'bereavement' based on 'grief' as an individualised, psychologised, intra-psychic – and increasingly medicalised – process (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2023).

In our discussions for this article, Dennis Klass explained as follows, writing from his long experience of death and bereavement studies in the USA:

> The contemporary Anglophone cultural grief narrative is a psychological theory project that began with Erich Lindemann's (1994) article describing grief as a psychiatric syndrome. Scholars and clinicians, following Lindemann, medicalised grief. Medicalisation of grief was officially recognised in a new diagnosis, prolonged grief disorder, in the revised fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Existentialist Robert D. Stolorow (2016) says that creating new diagnostic entities in DSM-5 is scientifically unsubstantiated for vulnerable populations.

Alongside these universalising tendencies, the process of colonialism resulted in imperial powers explicitly and implicitly asserting epistemic authority about death. These epistemologies and ontologies were never simply passively accepted – they were co-opted, contested and creatively reinterpreted. Yet, the inequitable power relations involved meant that non-Western perspectives were less protected and valued. In the current global order of coloniality/modernity (de Oliveira, 2021), which retains neo-colonial political and economic structures, and in which pandemics, communications, development initiatives, humanitarian responses, and governance systems are globalised, these epistemologies also shape how death, post-death care and bereavement take place.

The medically defined categorisation of 'complicated grief' developed by Anglo-American clinicians provides one such example, as identified by Klass (above). Its application includes both generic and clinical social work in South Africa (e.g. Drenth et al., 2013), and traumatic grief amongst children in sub-Saharan Africa more broadly (e.g. Greatrex-White & Taggart, 2015). Colonial and neo-colonial worldviews and practices are shaping understandings and experiences of death and 'grief' around the world. As Klass pointed out, in discussions for this article:

Ethan Watters ([2010](#)) has recently continued an argument that Thomas Szasz ([1961](#)) and Michel Foucault et al. ([2006](#)) began. Szasz and Foucault argued that definitions of mental illness (since Lindemann includes grief) are cultural artefacts that reinforce the arrangements of political and economic power. Watters shows Western psychiatric definitions of aberrant behaviour have been adopted and adapted by cultures worldwide. That is, a repertoire of symptoms ranging from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder to anorexia, are now found in cultures that previously had different definitions and symptoms that expressed inner and interpersonal disharmony. Indeed, many languages had no word to translate the English 'grief' before they were absorbed into the international culture. (Klass & Chow, [2011](#))

Here, we seek innovation through challenging rarely contested epistemologies and ontologies within death and 'bereavement' studies, entailing a broader call for the decolonisation of knowledge. Rooted in the observation that the political and economic structures of the colonial era had epistemological and psychological underpinnings and effects (Abrahamsen, [2003](#), p. 209), the call for such innovation is given urgency by those who see colonialism as an ongoing global power structure (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, [2021](#)). We argue that ongoing forms of imperialism not only affect the *lives* of people in diverse societies in Africa but also deeply affect their *deaths* and its aftermath.

Decolonising the dead

Decolonisation is a multi-dimensional and vast concept (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, [2021](#)), an 'increasingly overused, ever more flimsy and obscure' phrase (Fontein, [2024](#), p. 442), such that its usefulness depends on its meaning. In relation to Africa, as Fontein argues, there is a strong demand to 'decolonize the dead' if this is taken to mean overturning the 'grotesque structural inequalities of life and death apparent in our time' and during colonial and neo-colonial times (Fontein, [2024](#), p. 443). These are seen through violence, disappearances, genocides and the mistreatment of human remains during imperial conquest and since, including the continued inequitable treatment of the dead based on race and origin. Our case studies in this article, in South Sudan, Senegal and Uganda, all demonstrate the contemporary mistreatment of the dead imposed by external actors.

Decolonising knowledge and ontologies

At the same time, 'decolonising' is often used to refer to knowledge, meanings, practices and ontologies/cosmologies. In this sense, decolonisation of death studies is not (only) about the dead themselves, and their corporeal and spiritual remains, but about how death is understood and practised, including for those living in the aftermath of death. What is it to decolonise ways of knowing and being, in specific geo-political-historic-economic locations? First, it is unclear if decolonisation of knowledge is even possible in the ongoing context of global inequalities in knowledge production (Evans, [2019](#), p. 6; UNESCO and ISSC, [2010](#)). Further, for some, decolonising has been presented as a means to deconstruct colonialism with a nostalgic desire for the pre-colonial social, political and cultural practices which colonialism distorted (Nayar, [2015](#), p. 46). Decolonising knowledge can be about overturning the cognitive or cosmological empire (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, [2021](#)). For others it can be about seeking epistemic freedom (Biko, [2002](#)) and correcting the asymmetrical power configurations in knowledge production (Hountondji, [1997](#)). It

can be about undoing ontological and epistemic injustices that have refused to recognise 'other' people's epistemic virtue, or the value of their ontologies and cosmologies and, therefore, also their humanity. Decolonising, as a process in its full potential, seeks an epistemic and ontological epiphany, journeying beyond the Eurocentric worldview to recognise the possibilities of pluriversality (Savransky, 2017).

African demands for African knowledge to be valued date back to the 19th century (Blyden, 1882), while the 1930s saw the emergence of the 'négritude' movement with writers such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Later, key developments included the work of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961](2004), Ake's *Social Science as Imperialism* (1979), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong's *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), and Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Building on this work, the demand to 'decolonise' knowledge saw a growing scholarly and policy consensus for its significance in universities since the mid-2000s, with student movements supporting the 'Rhodes Must Fall' protests in South Africa, and spreading across the continent.

Nevertheless, a focus on decolonising knowledge and ways of being has met with some assertive scepticism and opposition, raising concerns of a denial of African agency and even humanity (Fontein, 2024), limited to 'a symbolic gesture of compliance' (Ndhlovu, 2022), and repeating the patterns of colonial-era anthropologists. Moosavi raises concerns of an uncritical, Western-led 'bandwagon' that constructs 'the Global South as if it has an innate essence that can be known and captured' (Moosavi, 2020, p. 343). Further, it is such static, monolithic understandings of 'culture' that may be associated with suggestions that it is only the outward public customs of 'mourning' rather than 'grief' that is subject to 'culture' (Zech & Stroebe, 2010). Terms such as 'precolonial', 'traditional', 'indigenous', 'post-colonial' are subject to active debate (Fontein, 2024), alongside authors in Africa continuing to use terms such as 'indigenous' (e.g. Canham, 2023).

The risk is perhaps that their uncritical use may de-historicise Africa before European imperial colonialism, potentially hiding violent and racialised assumptions about the way people think (Sinamai et al., 2024). Assuming that contemporary understandings, including about death, are just colonial products, ignores local agency and the complex hybridity of ideas that have been included, excluded and reinterpreted in local practice (Fontein, 2024). In reality, the vast diversity of death practices across Africa has changed and continues to change (e.g. see Lamont, 2011; Langewiesche, 2011). However, death studies has often ignored this literature, perhaps because individual, intricate case stories that reveal these dynamics are often hard to aggregate to provide the broader insights (generalisations?) that death studies seeks (Walter, 2008).

Despite strongly sympathising with arguments against 'decolonisation', here we still advocate for decolonising knowledge and ontologies about death, with a key starting point being to contest the universalising tendencies of Western claims to 'knowledge'. We recognise that our call to pay attention to understandings of death in Africa, towards a better understanding of the ontological and existential challenges of mortality for all, may risk 'Westerners' appropriating and exploiting 'native' wisdom to better understand themselves. However, it can also be a humble exercise that reveals the limitations of Western assumptions (Greatrex-White & Taggart, 2015, pp. 6–7; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019; Hamilton et al., 2025; Stedmon et al., this issue). In this way, a call to humility and radical openness is at the heart of decolonising.

As Henry Okidi Okoth articulated in our discussions around this article:

> I would not think of a binary between Western and other parts of the world. How I understand decolonisation is more about sharing knowledge. I situate myself in Uganda, and I view the world from Uganda. That is the perspective that I try to bring in. How do the communities in Uganda understand the world? How do they understand death and bereavement? I believe in different knowledge from different parts of the world. None of this knowledge stands independently'.

Such a position resonates strongly with a pluriversality of 'knowledge' (Savransky, 2017). As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) argues, decolonisation in an African context may not necessarily seek to oust all European-generated knowledge, but rather to 'de-Europeanise the world' and 'deprovincialise Africa' while also recognising that neither African nor European knowledges were ever discrete. The endeavour is to challenge and deconstruct the authoritative superiority of Eurocentric and Anglophone 'knowl-edge', and its ontological underpinnings, that has been sedimented and institutiona-lised through the power of coloniality/modernity (de Oliveira, 2021). Furthermore, 'Africa' also needs to be understood as a plurality of peoples and experiences of colonialism and neo-colonialism, cultural practices and meanings, in constant flux and change.

Within the death and bereavement studies literatures, US scholars like D. Klass (1999) and Rosenblatt et al. (1976) have pioneered work on cross-cultural diversities. Also based in the USA, the *Collective for Radical Death Studies* has more explicitly challenged the hierarchical power of the classic canon, while our companion decolonising articles (Hamilton et al., 2025; Stedmon et al., under review) seek to break open some of the silences surrounding how racially minoritised people in the UK experience death and its aftermath. Such work is gaining momentum, with further work and debates in progress, along with contemporary anthropological scholars such as Lipton (2017) and Cormack (2023) researching post-death practices in Africa. Yet, decolonising requires radical shifts in understandings and framings, not yet apparent in the 'mainstream' of death and 'bereavement' studies.

In what follows we consider how people in contemporary African locations may continue to experience and resist, the imposition of Eurocentric ideas of death and its aftermath. And we explore what innovative insights we can gain about death and its aftermath from contemporary research in African contexts – South Sudan, Senegal, and Uganda – with diverse histories of colonialism and contemporary experiences of margin-alisation, as well as activism against political, economic and epistemic injustices. Riak and Pendle illustrate how the process of decolonising death and knowledge about death has long, historical roots for people in Unity State, Sudan, that can be traced back to acts of resistance during the colonial period. Evans and Ribbens McCarthy question and disrupt dominant post/neo-colonial development discourses in urban Senegal that focus solely on the material impact of death as a 'household shock' and instead offer relationally focused accounts of the material, social, emotional and spiritual consequences of family deaths. Okoth examines the resistance to biomedical burial and death guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic that conflicted with the cultural and spiritual model of death and its aftermath in Arua, northern Uganda. The case studies illustrate that models and theories of death and how the living respond are in constant flux. These epistemic and

cosmological contestations often entangle in local political, economic and cultural struggles.

Methodology

Our research case studies vary from the aftermath of 'everyday' deaths to deaths occurring at particular socio-historical times of 'crisis'. We combine these contrasting case studies together here to provide evidence of a plurality of ontologies about death and bereavement that challenge dominant Anglophone models of 'grief', and reveal the power embedded in all claims about the meaning and processes of death and its aftermath.

Riak and Pendle draw upon research in 2018 in Unity State, South Sudan, including interviews for an oral history of the Nuer prophet Kolang Ket (Riek & Pendle, 2019). The interviews were largely carried out in the United Nations Protection of Civilians (UNPC) sites in Bentiu (the Unity State capital) where hundreds of thousands of people fled for protection and food (N. Pendle et al., 2023) after armed conflict escalated from December 2013 (N. R. Pendle, 2020), with war-induced famine making survival in rural areas impossible. From 2015, people in Unity State experienced famine levels of hunger and hunger-related deaths, but famine was only eventually declared in 2017 (UN, 2017). Riak was from the local area and interviewed many of his family members and extended network. Pendle has conducted significant qualitative and ethnographic work in the area since 2012.

For the urban Senegal case study, Evans and Ribbens McCarthy adopt a reflexive approach to discuss their engagements with existing epistemologies and participants' experiences of the 'everyday' aftermath of family deaths, drawing on the research project, *Death in the Family in Urban Senegal: bereavement, care and family relations* (2014–2016). Adopting a qualitative methodology, informed by an ethic of care, a diverse sample of 30 families was recruited in two cities (15 in Dakar, the capital and 15 in Kaolack, a regional centre). In-depth interviews were conducted with family members, including children and youth, middle and older generation adults, and focus groups were also conducted with women and youth. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with local and religious leaders and representatives of non-governmental organisations and local and national government. Audio-recorded interviews and focus groups were translated from Wolof into French or transcribed directly into French (if interviews were conducted in French) and then into English. Individual and generationally interlinked life history analyses were developed using an analytic family template. Participatory dissemination workshops were held with family participants and government and non-governmental representatives and religious and local leaders. Rights to informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, safety and security of the participants and researchers, data protection and dissemination, were of paramount importance throughout the research process.

To obtain insights into specific Ugandan communities, Okoth used a qualitative approach combining secondary sources, such as media stories and scholarly publications, with ethnographic observations in specific Ugandan communities. The observations provide rich context, demonstrating various forms of opposition to biomedical burial practices as well as alternative tactics used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Okoth also incorporated multidisciplinary perspectives from anthropology,

sociology, and public health to provide a thorough examination of the conflict between biomedical models and cultural norms. His approach critically evaluates the socio-political context, namely the influence of militarisation on public health initiatives and community resistance.

Case study: death, colonial rule and decolonisation in South Sudan

Unity State, northern South Sudan, has experienced over a century and a half of violent, extractive colonial political economies. From the mid-19th Century, foreign traders raided this area for slaves and ivory to sell to North Africa, Europe and the Middle East (Johnson, 1997; N. Pendle, 2023). From 1899, the Sudanese were governed by the UK and Egypt, and experienced various episodes of deadly violence including British-organised 'pacification campaigns'. The Sudan gained independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule in 1956, but extractive global political economies resulted in continued neo-colonial influence. In the 1970s, oil was discovered in Unity State. In the 1990s and 2000s, the Sudan government, with European oil company support, used deadly militias to clear people from the land to enable oil drilling (European Coalition on Oil in Sudan, 2010). In the wars in South Sudan since 2013, areas around these oilfields have again experienced armed conflict, with further extremely deadly consequences (N. Pendle, 2023). Wars have involved foreign-backed violence but have also prompted large-scale humanitarian aid operations.

At the same time, colonialism in Unity State has never been only about spectacular, devasting physical and military violence. Colonial and colonial-like authorities have also shaped social and political norms, ways of knowing and regimes of truth, as part of their governance techniques. Maintaining and creatively renegotiating the social and spiritual significance of death and local understandings and knowledge about deaths and post-death social obligations, has been one way in which people have tried to resist and evade this physical and epistemic violence.

Maintaining the power to know about death

In 2018, during the ongoing war, we listened to popular oral histories that were circulating, with the history of Kolang Ket being one of the most popular and well known. Kolang Ket was one of the first *guan kuoth* – Nuer prophets – in the late 19th Century in what is now Koch County (Unity State, South Sudan). As new foreign traders and governments invaded with guns in the 19th Century, the Nuer prophets emerged as a powerful new religious idiom, contesting the secular and morally unrestrained logic of the gun (Johnson, 1997; N. Pendle, 2023; Riek & Pendle, 2019). The divinity of *MAANI* seized Kolang Ket, making him a prophet and a powerful local leader. In the 1920s Kolang Ket initially had amicable relations with the newly established Anglo-Egyptian government, but in 1923, his son was killed during a raid (Johnson, 1997). Kolang Ket attacked the community of his son's killers, which the colonial government interpreted as an act of rebellion against the colonial 'peace', sending a Nuer official to arrest Kolang Ket. However, the official ended up killing Kolang Ket by burying him alive. In challenging the idea that the colonial government could kill with impunity, *MAANI* is remembered locally as coming back in the form of an elephant, killing the colonial official in revenge (Riek & Pendle, 2019).

An important aspect of the story is that the news of Kolang Ket's death was not spread by the colonial government but by a pied crow flying from roof to roof, telling the news of his death. The pied crow is known as a messenger offering protection from physical and spiritual dangers, a connotation resulting from the call pied crows make warning other birds of an approaching hawk. Additionally, their saliva has special curative powers amongst the Nuer against pollution by *nueer* (a form of spiritual pollution associated with death). This spiritual capacity led to the crow being seen as priest-like (Hutchinson, 1992, p. 492). The crux of the story of Kolang Ket was how people heard the story of his death from the pied crow before the colonial authorities shared the news.

These local oral histories provide a form of creative resistance. Kolang Ket had been killed through colonial power and brutality, but the emphasis in the story about the non-colonial ownership of the knowledge of his death asserted that such knowledge was not fully dominated by the colonial government. Everyone agreed that Kolang Ket had died, but local histories placed authority on the local actor (the pied crow) to share the news through his superior, earlier knowledge. Importantly, this wraps up knowledge about death not in the power of government and guns but in the power of the divine and the spiritual and in the non-human as well as human. With his powers to bring spiritual healing after death, the pied crow still knew more.

A puzzle is that the story of Kolang Ket and the pied crow still had such popular appeal nearly a hundred years later. People in Unity State still experience violence in extractive global political economies, especially because of their proximity to oil fields. When we were researching, in 2018, people had just experienced another five years of brutal armed conflict with excess mortality in Unity State of at least 70,000 people between December 2013 and April 2018 alone (Checchi et al., 2018, p. 20). In the years before our interviews, a key question concerned authoritative knowledge of famine and associated famine deaths, since a famine declaration would increase humanitarian aid, making the difference between life and death for many. People in Unity State had seen people die in hunger-related situations and experienced the fainting, exhausted feeling associated with hunger-related collapse and death. Yet, in 2015 and 2016, these levels of hunger were not internationally recognised.

The international identification of famines has been the subject of considerable debate, with famine is easier to establish and declare, according to internationally set criteria, if there is excess mortality from famine (Maxwell et al., 2020), with crude death rates as part of the suggested criteria (Young & Jaspars, 2006). In hindsight, we now know that by mid-2015, excess monthly mortality was almost as high as it would be throughout the 2015–2017 period (Checchi et al., 2018; Maxwell et al., 2020). However, famine was not declared until 2017 because of the South Sudan government's reluctance to make a famine declaration and the UN humanitarians' inability to access the area to collect detailed data. Politics, and life and death, were again wrapped up in knowledge about death and whose knowledge mattered.

In Unity State, the story is told that famine was only eventually declared in 2017 through the intervention of a senior United Nations official – Diane de Guzman – who used her in-country networks to fly to Unity State without approval from the UN leadership. She saw, first hand, the extreme food insecurity in Unity State, making the famine and likely famine deaths no longer possible to deny. In the months after her visit, famine was declared.

Whether or not this account is correct, in the stories of southern Unity State, in the context of the immense power of aid organisations and the United Nations, foreign confirmation of death mattered more than local knowledge of death. In this scenario, the story of the news of Kolang Ket's death countered this assumed epistemic authority of the foreigner over the people of Unity State. The UN in South Sudan, especially in its management of the UN Protection of Civilian sites, has to deal with death and practices through collaboration with resident communities (Cormack, 2023). Yet, epistemic authority over whether deaths had occurred, as demonstrated by the famine, sat with the foreigner.

Missing the social meaning of death

At the same time, during these years of war, the dilemmas for people living in Unity State, were not only how to count famine deaths but additionally about the appropriate social and spiritual response to death. Norms around death and mourning highlighted people's ongoing social obligations to the dead, including the expectation that Nuer men who died got a second chance at life through their children and the continuity of their lineage through future generations (Hutchinson, 1992). People's obligations to their male kin thus increased after death as they now had to look after their families to ensure their dead brother's family's prosperity into the future. At the same time, the large-scale death tolls of the armed conflicts and famines from the 1980s led to contestations over such obligations given the unprecedented numbers of deaths, particularly of young people (N. Pendle, 2023), even while burial practices were changing (Cormack, 2023). Military leaders in recent years have mobilised forces on the promise that they would provide a way for people to uphold their social obligations to the dead (N. R. Pendle, 2020).

Colonial knowledge during the Anglo-Egyptian period not only focused on who died and when but also the social meaning of death. Evans-Pritchard (1949) offered important anthropological insight into death among the Nuer, bringing awareness of post-death practices elsewhere in the world into UK scholarship. However, Evans-Pritchard's focus was restrained by his UK-informed understanding of what matters after death. While noticing the significance of children for the dead, he overlooked what was pivotal for Nuer in maintaining the dignity and a positive relationship with the dead. Instead, his attention and writing remained focused on the more familiar rites of burial and funerals, which occur in their own form in the UK.

In summary, in Unity State, epistemic authority to declare who has died has a long history of being appropriated by foreign powers, with significant material consequences in a time of famine. Colonial histories during this time and as we researched were used locally to provide a counter discourse about whose knowledge about death and its aftermath mattered.

Case study: responses to family deaths in urban Senegal

This case study explores how both 'knowledge' and policies regarding death and its aftermath in contemporary urban Senegal may be understood to be subject to forms of neo-colonialism in both subtle and practical ways. Here, we focus on the importance of

religion and spirituality, along with the assumptions and power dynamics of 'development'.

The island of Gorée, Senegal was colonised by the Portuguese Empire in the mid-15th Century, becoming subject to French control in 1677, by which time it had become a departure point in the Atlantic slave trade. From the 1850s, the French expanded into mainland Senegal, incorporating it into the Federation of French West Africa from 1895 to 1958 (Wikipedia, 2024). Senegal gained full political independence in 1960 and its first president and poet, Léopold Sédar Senghor, was a strong defender of African culture and leader of the 'négritude' movement

Islam has been present in Senegal since the 11th Century and the great majority of the population (94%) practice Islam (particularly Sufi Islam), while a minority are Christian (4%) and animists and other religions (2%) (ANSD, 2013). Nevertheless, there is a 'triple heritage' of African, Islamic and colonial influences which underpins collective and relational lives (Bass & Sow, 2006). Islamic and Christian practices regarding marriage as well as death (burial, funeral, mourning and inheritance) have thus mingled with indigenous cultural practices that differ according to ethnic group. Although Senegal is a secular state, Sufi brotherhoods expanded during the French colonial period, often as a form of resistance to French rule. When research is conducted in such Muslim-majority societies, Mills and Gőkariksel (2014) argue that such investigations can destabilise normative and homogenising understandings of Islam and of Muslims. The implications of these major epistemic disjunctures became more apparent to us as our own research progressed (Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Bowlby, et al., 2017).

Further considerations arise when researching in post-colonial contexts suffused with dominant development discourses and interventions which are rooted in the colonial past and imperial legacy. As McEwan (2001, p. 95) notes, 'the *idea* of development has enabled the West to appropriate and control the past, present and future of the non-West'. Indeed, postcolonial scholars argue that development itself can be seen as a neo-colonial project that reproduces global inequalities and points to the power of 'whiteness' in development organisations and practices (Kothari, 2006). Dominant Minority world medical and charitable models of childhood, orphanhood, disability, and social welfare, for example, have been exported globally through development interventions; racialised representations of the Third World/Global South as 'Other' were used to legitimise development interventions and to justify failures of projects (Kothari, 2006; McEwan & Butler, 2007).

In studying death in urban Senegalese families, we have sought to question and disrupt dominant post/neo-colonial development discourses that focus solely on the material impact of death as a 'household shock'. Such approaches raise concern about the economic consequences of the loss of the (male) head of household and emphasise the vulnerability of widows and orphaned children as recipients of aid (Dornan, 2010). Orphanhood needs to be understood, however, within the context of widespread child fosterage and informal kinship care practices in sub-Saharan Africa; an estimated 15.8% of children in West and Central Africa do not live with their biological parents (Feinstein and O'Kane, 2013). Indeed, the terms 'child' and 'family' frame relational and generational lives through particular Minority world assumptions (Ribbens McCarthy & Evans, 2020).

Such a Minority world nuclear family and head of household model dominates in development approaches, leading to a focus on orphaned children and widows. Instead,

our research in Senegal explored both adults' and young people's responses to the death of a range of significant adult relatives who may or may not be co-resident within the household. Thirty families were selected to reflect diverse kinship relations and socio-economic backgrounds in differing neighbourhoods in two cities in Senegal (Dakar and Kaolack), enabling us to explore varying levels of vulnerability to poverty. Based on interviews with two family members, in most cases, of different generations, we sought to characterise households as 'lower', 'middling' or 'wealthy' and conduct relationally focused accounts of the material, social and emotional consequences of a family death.

We nevertheless sought to engage with international, national and local development policymakers and practitioners and existing development interventions such as cash transfer programmes. A key priority identified by families, policymakers and practitioners was the need to consider the death of a relative as a potential criterion for vulnerability when targeting cash transfers and other social protection services to poor families.

Development discourses which emphasise the material dimensions of death stand in sharp contrast to dominant Anglophone discourses within death, dying and bereavement studies that emphasise the emotional/psychological dimensions of death (Rosenblatt & Bowman, 2013). Indeed, Valentine (2006) highlights the need to move beyond the 'conceptual and disciplinary split in which the grief of modern Westerners has been psychologised and medicalised, while the mourning or ritual behaviour of pre-modern and non-Western others has been exoticised and romanticised' (p. 57).

The scarce literature that is available on death in Senegal highlights the socio-cultural importance of funeral and widowhood ritual and practices (Olasinde, 2012), particularly among the largest ethnic groups, the Wolof (Ndiaye, 2012), the Serer (Faye, 1997) and the Diola (Thomas, 1968/2013). Despite their restrictive and potentially coercive nature, Ndiaye (2012) suggests that widowhood practices among the Muslim Wolof can be regarded as an individual and collective form of healing that renders harmless the negative forces attached to death. (And indeed, we found the collective response to death and its aftermath to be a further striking aspect of how the Senegalese interviewees narrated their experiences.) Some authors thus regard these widowhood practices as helpful in promoting healing and coping, and indeed, draw on dominant Anglophone and Eurocentric psychological models of grief to develop this argument (Elegbeleye & Oyedeji, 2003; Nwoye, 2005). Others adopt a gendered human rights perspective and point to the hardships of purification rituals and the discrimination women face (Ewelukwa, 2002). We sought to explore women's gendered narratives of their experiences of widowhood practices in our research without imposing psychologised, medicalised models of grief or exoticising or romanticising such rituals.

Our research initially set out to explore the mutually entangled material, social and emotional dimensions of loss, including across different generations in urban Senegal. Rather than seeking to impose dominant Anglophone interpretations of 'grief' as an individual, psychological experience, we sought to listen to participants' relational narratives of a family death, which often included very brief emotional expressions of the loss. We found that participants often used terms such as 'it's hard' which captured both the emotional, social and material dimensions (Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Kébé, et al., 2017; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019). This led us to reconsider the assumption that emotions and materiality can be categorised as separate domains of experience and that, rather, emotions are fully imbricated in accounts of the material aftermath of death. Furthermore,

we found that dominant psychological models of the individual 'grieving' process as a journey were largely absent from people's narratives. Indeed, such models appeared largely irrelevant to people's lives, since the vast majority had not had any interaction with counselling or psychological interventions following the death of a close relative. Such psychological/medical models were also largely absent from localised and public rhetoric, although there was an acknowledgement by some participants of the dominance of psychological approaches to death in 'the West'. As one interviewee commented: '*We don't have psychologists like you do but we have the family entourage and everything, so there's a whole system around the affected family'.*

The interwoven nature of emotional and material dimensions of death was particularly highlighted when we examined the cultural nuances of the word for 'loss' in Wolof. While we were cautious in introducing this term, participants in Senegal commonly referred to the death of a relative and the effects of the death on those left behind using the words, *niak* (Wolof) or *perte* (French) [loss]. When the Wolof word, *niak* [loss] is used as an adjective, it can mean 'lacking', 'nothing to lose' or 'poor'. Our research revealed that the material, social and emotional dimensions of death are intrinsically interwoven, with family deaths potentially causing a myriad of multi-dimensional disruptions to the every-day lives of children and adults, particularly among poorer families. The multiple meanings of the Wolof word *niak* here are particularly important in understanding how the death of a relative may affect family members, with interlinked emotional and material consequences, which is not conveyed through the French or English words. Without probing further into the cultural nuances of the Wolof word, we would not have gained this insight (Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Bowlby, et al., 2017, p. 9). From this perspective, the dominant Anglophone accounts which individualise and privatise the emotional response of 'grief' in isolation from everyday relational and material lives, might be considered aberrant. Given this experience of loss, the immediate aftermath of a death is regarded as a crucial period of coming together of kin and community to reaffirm social ties and collective wellbeing (Bowlby et al., 2022).

Our research findings sought to highlight not only how the material and emotional dimensions of death are bound up together but also how the spiritual dimensions of a family death were interwoven with the material, emotional and social dimensions (Evans et al., 2019). Indeed, as the research progressed, we realised that we had not adequately considered how to interpret the religious and spiritual meanings of death, which are not only missing from Anglophone models of bereavement but are also often missing from development discourses and interventions.

Through conversations and explorations with the Senegalese researcher in the team (see Evans, Ribbens McCarthy, Kébé, et al., 2017), we came to understand that the frequent use of 'God's will' and other religious refrains, which invested the moment of death and its aftermath with religious significance, appeared to provide solace and help in accepting the death but could also lead to religious and moral imperatives 'not to exaggerate' the tears. At the same time, the co-presence of family and community members was crucial in helping to share their pain and provide practical and material support that enabled family members to 'keep going' and 'get by' in poor urban neigh-bourhoods (Bowlby et al., 2022), making death in urban Senegal not just an emotional upheaval but an economic, social and cultural struggle to survive and 'succeed' in life as a collective 'family' project. Alongside the often welcome sense of presence of the

deceased, prayers, offerings and religious ceremonies on the anniversary of the death were an important means of remembrance and the expression of collective continuing bonds that provided consolation.

Case study: from 'angels' to resistance – a clash between cultural norms and imported biomedical models during COVID-19 death in Uganda

When COVID-19 began to spread over the world, the World Health Organisation (WHO) imposed rigorous burial restrictions in an attempt to contain the virus's transmission. The government health department in Uganda took over the burial of COVID-19 victims, without following customary indigenous cultural and religious traditions. The health teams were the only ones who handled the deceased corpse, sealing it in waterproof plastic bags before handing it over for burial, keeping the public from seeing it and limiting it to only members of the 'affected homestead' (Ajari et al., 2020, p. 2). In addition to prepping the body, the burial team, clothed in white wellington boots, full plastic protective suits, goggles, face shields, and gloves, secured the burial sites, dug the graves, and conducted the burials. They were dubbed 'Angels' because they appeared mystical to the locals (Okoth, 2022). These undignified clinical burials caused psychosocial suffering for bereaved families. To counteract this, communities strongly resisted biomedical burial and death guidelines.

The biomedical model

According to Persson et al. (2003), how patients view health is multifaceted, socially rooted, and frequently contradicts medical models. They question the validity of biomedical classifications of health or illness. Because communal mourning is crucial for assisting the bereaved and paying final respects to the departed, the biomedical protocols issued by health authorities for burials became complicated.

In Uganda, the formal health care system is not the only or most widely used treatment provider; traditional and religious healers are frequently consulted. Because '98%' of Ugandan populations profess to be religious, religion provides relief to those impacted by the virus (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2016, in Isiko, 2020, p. 78). Isiko cites Ugandan President Museveni's threats to arrest the traditional leader of the Acholi tribe, who had staged an 'exorcism of bad spirit' ceremony known as 'ryemo gemo' against COVID-19. Museveni was perplexed as to why a leader would 'contest science' (Isiko, 2020, p. 82). The approach advocated by Museveni that encouraged a complete reliance on a biomedical approach could not allow for the healing and peace that people would have received in religious environments.

Arukwe (2022, p. 405) contends that Africa's 'copy and paste' practices, as well as the biomedical hegemony of COVID-19 cure, are 'scenes for the enactment of cultural racism and biomedical imperialism'. How can a continent that accounts for one-fifth of global COVID-19 cases be forced to adopt seemingly alien practices, as if it does not have some alternative model to offer in terms of fighting a pandemic? Despite government support, several communities resisted the biomedical models and instead affirmed alternate systems of knowledge for dealing with death.

Communities in Arua (north-western Uganda) had begun to manage COVID-19 at home. This was reinforced when President Museveni permitted the distribution of Covidex as a supportive treatment – a herbal home-based management medication, as well as eucalyptus, guava, and mango tree leaves – despite the fact that they were not included in WHO treatment criteria (Candia & Kamurari, 2022, p. 7). What if a home-based community management system was extended during burial and bereavement? This is why Raymond and Ward (2021, p. 21) suggest that 'local context and community engagement' are critical factors when implementing effective public health interventions to address the pandemic's issues.

Resistance to the biomedical model

Communities in Arua protested the installation of a biomedical quarantine centre by using 'bows and arrows' and avoiding admission, saying that such a centre would spread COVID-19 in their area (Aluma et al., 2022, p. 9). This was combined with the fear of the unknown brought on by a 'new' illness and mistrust in state authorities (Aluma et al., 2022, p. 9). They preferred 'remedies from herbalists', and in Bidi Bidi, many reportedly escaped quarantine despite a local COVID-19 rate of 8.9%, above the national average of 6.2% (Elema, 2021, in Aluma et al., 2022). Local communities headed by elders devised alternatives to biomedical institutions. Quarantined homes were 'sealed to the wider population' while other community members (including family members) were not prohibited from visiting the sick. To warn anyone unknowingly visiting the patient's home, ash was sprayed along the route. A herbalist/medicine man was granted exclusive access. Relatives would provide food but would be required to leave it at the gate to avoid contact with the sick person. All of these measures were devised by local communities and implemented by elders (Aluma et al., 2022, p.16).

The global emphasis on health security legitimised Uganda's militarisation of disease control (Mutono & Zotto, 2020). Adherence to clinical burial relied on coercion to enforce burial guidelines (Nkuubi, 2020). Khisa and Rwengabo (2023) agree that including military engagement in COVID-19 responses sustains authoritarian rule. As a result, people developed new ways to resist the restrictions. While the military response had a greater impact than the sickness, the clinical response to death had serious psychological consequences in the communities.

Local initiatives also contested the mismanagement of the dead. Clinical burials resulted in political dissatisfaction in addition to human suffering. This is due to the biopolitical demarcation that authority had established, resulting in the frantic need to defend society. The burial teams were heckled, and some were attacked for not following burial customs. In some places, they were chased away and instead accused of killing people's relatives (Aluma et al., 2022).

The management of the body by seeming aliens was deemed to show insufficient respect. 'How could the spirit of the dead be reached and engaged when it is so trapped? Can the spirit be able to escape its "plastic prison" and join the ancestors, or remain locked in captivity?' asked Brian Mukalazi in the Daily Monitor newspaper. Mukalazi (2021) described how the 'scientific' burial of COVID-19 victims enraged communities, leading them to defy burial guidelines by secretly exhuming the bodies at night to conduct decent burials. Communities in eastern Uganda such as the Budaka, the Buikwe and the

Palissa did this because they needed to ensure proper burials for their departed relatives since their spirits were troubling their surviving relatives and some community members. Burial teams stopped providing community burials after funding was limited and case-loads became too large (Candia & Kamurari, 2022).

This mystery and criticism stemmed from widespread scepticism of the government throughout the pandemic, resulting in allegations, such as the government burying coffins without bodies and speculation that COVID-19 fatalities included victims of human trafficking. The communities suspected that the clinical burial teams utilised the dead for rituals and magic, which increased antagonism to the teams (Frimpong & Paintsil, 2023). In this case, community leaders would lead the charge in involving community members in funeral arrangements in order to lessen the likelihood of community rejection of clinical burials.

Implications of the case studies for death and 'bereavement' studies

The findings from South Sudan highlight the political importance of having authority to know when death has occurred. International actors, from colonial officials to contemporary aid agencies, have claimed an authority to declare death or declare situations that rely on certain types of death, such as famine declarations. This has resulted in powerful, international actors disregarding local knowledge of when death has occurred. Yet, the importance of having epistemic authority over death is highlighted through the prominent message of popular oral histories; when a major Nuer prophet died, it mattered that news was spread by the pied crow and not colonial authorities. Furthermore, death studies would benefit from paying more attention to what matters to people after death in different socio-historic-political locations. Some older ethnographies, while studying death in Africa, prioritised searching for practices akin to Western understandings and practices after death, with early social anthropologists still struggling to notice practices that were not confirmed as important by their own experience of English post-death practices. An openness to new ontological and epistemic insights was too easily restrained.

The findings from Senegal challenge Western nuclear family, economic and charitable models of death as a 'household shock' that dominate neo-colonial development interventions and the tendency to exoticize 'Other' 'cultures' within death and bereavement studies. Instead, the research reveals the often taken-for-granted ways that religious beliefs, indigenous practices and extensive family and community ties shape cultural, collective narratives of death and its aftermath. For the living, death was experienced as a 'loss' with material, emotional and spiritual consequences that cannot be disentangled and that affected family members' collective wellbeing. Such narratives contrast sharply with the individualised, psychologised expression of 'grief' as this is understood in dominant Anglophone and Eurocentric perspectives. The research thus contributes to the project of de-centring dominant models of 'grief' and revealing their limitations and at times, irrelevance, not only in African contexts but with implications for responses to death in the 'West'. It also demonstrates how Western worldviews about 'the Rest' (Hall, 2002) become exported and globalised through neocolonial 'development' practices.

The Uganda case study highlights how, despite their global prominence, biomedical discourses surrounding death conflicted with local understandings of appropriate care

of dead bodies and were contested by local communities who developed alternative approaches. The clinical burials that were imposed caused distress for grieving families, impeding the healing process and leading to political and community tensions. Such tensions were exacerbated when funding for the clinical health burial teams was reduced or discontinued, and yet the population did not experience widespread mortality, raising critical questions about the rationale behind the rigid insistence on clinical burials, as opposed to allowing traditional cultural burial practices to proceed. A successful public health intervention during a pandemic requires a more culturally sensitive and community-engaged approach. Further, the militarisation of pandemic control occurred at a time of pressing political issues, such as preparations for the 2021 general elections in Uganda. This heavy-handed strategy not only fuelled political discontent but also sparked community opposition to clinical burials, emphasising the counterproductive nature of such measures in managing public health crises.

Conclusion

Decolonising is not about returning to a timeless past or about exaggerating difference by assuming a rarefied view of 'the other'. Instead, amongst other things, it is about recognising the epistemic and ontological/cosmological validity of a plurality of perspectives. Death and bereavement studies, based on 'evidence' and ontological assumptions formed in the coloniality/modernity of affluent European and Anglophone countries, have been founded in perspectives claiming an authority based in assumptions of universality. So, while death and the aftermath of death are experienced very differently in different locations, 'bereavement studies' have tended to ignore or reject the profound nature of this diversity, rendering it invisible by the frameworks imposed by Minority world assumptions. This is all the more problematic because of histories of colonial violence and extraction, and ongoing global political economies, that have reshaped contexts, and the multiple realities and ontologies/cosmologies of death and its continuing aftermath. While global political economies have brought new, often horrific, experiences of death, the universal claims of death studies have further silenced this diversity of worldviews of being-ness, experience and understanding.

   In this article, we have drawn on research examples from South Sudan, Senegal and Uganda to explore the different ways that death and its aftermath are understood by community members in contrasting African contexts with different histories, seeking to avoid imposing Western framings. We have also explored the dilemmas that can arise when Anglo-European bio-medical understandings of death are universalised and imposed elsewhere, through global health measures in pandemics, through aid and development policy and practice or through colonial powers themselves.

   Persuading death studies to take seriously a variety of ontologies and epistemologies is no easy task. Globally recognised academic knowledge production remains dominantly based in academic institutions in Minority world countries, and assumptions that underpin much of this scholarship are often invisible and hard to challenge, silencing ways of being, cosmologies and epistemologies from 'elsewhere'. For example, a hegemony of language and practice, framing 'grief' as a mental health issue, is increasing and not on the decline. However, this work

is crucial if death and bereavement studies scholars want to become aware of the colonial assumptions upon which the dominant knowledge rests, based in the narratives and institutions of modernity while avoiding recreating epistemic hierarchies, simplified categorisations and normative expectations about which forms of knowledge should be produced, where, and by whom.

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Ethical statement

The research was approved by the ethics committees at our various universities: The research in Senegal conformed to the ethical protocols of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth and the British Sociological Association. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Reading Research Ethics Committee in 2014. The research in South Sudan gained ethical approval from LSE's Research Ethics Committee.

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