

Extensions of Transnational Death

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Samira Saramo, Hanna Snellman, and Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto (eds). 2019. *Transnational Death*. Studia Fennica Ethnologica 17. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. ISBN 978-858-134-8.

Death is traditionally perceived as a “rooting” phenomenon, connecting dying with communities and creating continuities in time and place. What happens when connections with places, communities, and histories marked by “roots” are affected by migration, conflict, revolution, war, and border shifts – all developments that are increasingly common in today’s world? *Transnational Death* meritoriously delves into death-related processes in this era of mobilities and transnational connections. Although several of this collection’s articles are written on death-related themes in other trans/national environments, it opens a fresh and under-researched field of ethnological studies in the Finnish context.

“We have come here to live, not to die,” said one person involved in a migrant’s funeral I attended at the beginning of the 2000s (see Davydova 2005). In societal discussion and research, migration is understood as a future-oriented project, but death inevitably comes in everyone’s life, posing existential and practical challenges for the dying, their family members, and communities and societal institutions. The transnational perspective sheds light on negotiations of identities, obligations, rituals, practicalities, and memories that aim to reconcile more than one affiliation with home/land(s) and communities.

The introductory essay by Samira Saramo aims to make “transnational death familiar,” providing the reader with a survey of the previous research on the topic. She refers to the special issue of the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, edited by Alistair Hunter and Eva Soom Ammann (2016), who state that “the end of life is a critical juncture in migration and settlement processes, precipitating novel intercultural negotiations.” The author lists some avenues of research on the entanglement of death with migration: migration as a process that increases the risk of death; transnational community building in confronting death; the emotional weight of transnational death; death in transnational communication; and the commemoration of transnational death. The book focuses on three main themes: the effects of transnational death on families, communities, and commemorations.

The first thematic part focuses on *families* and consists of three articles. Hanna Snellman's "Negotiating belonging through death among Finnish immigrants in Sweden" is based on recorded interview material generated from Finnish immigrant families by the Nordic Museum in Stockholm in the mid-1970s. When immigrants were asked where they would like to be buried, they referred to considerations that seem common in different transnational contexts: practical reasons; family ties; connections with place; and religious motives. The study shows that the question about a "final home" brought to the fore migrants' different positionings towards places, as well as their visions of their and their families' pasts, presents, and futures, and eventually their identifications.

In her article, "Doing death kin work in Polish transnational families," Anna Matyska develops an analytical concept of "death kin work," which is based on the understanding of death as a phased transition, combining the notions of "death work" and "kin work." Death kin work is "enacted through mutual agency and effort by the dying and the survivors, who as transnational family members simultaneously do transnational kinship by doing death" (p. 49). The "successful death kin work" in the Finnish-Polish transnational context focuses on mitigating the (medical) cause of death and prolonging life. Migrants must deal with a culturally embedded reluctance to use stigmatized institutional care and to count on other family members staying in Poland, engaging in death kin work at a distance. This is often accompanied by a sense of failing to fulfill their caregivers' roles. Matyska concludes that more research is needed on transnational families living in the shadow of death to investigate "how contemporary processes of death institutionalization and sequestration resonate with contemporary transnationalism" (p.63).

Josiane Le Gall and Lilyane Rachédi explore "The emotional costs of being unable to attend the funeral of a relative in one's county of origin." The article is based on interviews with immigrants of different ethnic backgrounds living in Quebec, and presents the (dis)advantages contemporary communication technologies bring to transnational dying. Although it enables virtual co-presence with a dying person and in funerals, digital communication is felt to be insufficient. Dying requires physical presence. The article shows that family responsibilities towards a dying person and the emotions caused by the impossibility of being with dying family members are quite universal in both "ordinary" and transnational families. Transnational death may become a symbol for all the losses connected with migration for migrants.

The second part of the book discusses how death affects transnational *communities*. The article "Expressing communality: Zapotec death and mourning across transnational frontier," by Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera and Ana D. Alonso

Ortiz, analyses the formation of membership in transnational communities of the Yalalteco Indigenous people, whose homeland is in the Mexican Oaxaca mountains. There is a diaspora community with thousands of members in Los Angeles, California. Funerals and other family rituals form an arena for performing communality by being present, both in person and through social media. Although social media communication allows expressions of mourning and empathy and aids in the reproduction of collective identities, the authors state that the continuity of communal bonds being extended to future generations through funeral practices remains unclear.

Chipamong Chowdhury's article, "The spirit of the gift: Burmese Buddhist death rituals in North America," examines the role of Buddhist monks and monasteries in the pre-death, funeral, and post-mortem practices of the Burmese diaspora. Buddhist monks perform a pastoral role in the immigrant community, guiding dying persons and their families through a "good death," including cremation and post-cremation events. Mortuary practices, although persisting in the diaspora, must be adapted because of the pressures of the North American funeral industry, medical institutions, and mortuary economy. The author concludes that despite a strong sense of religiosity, preservation, and adaptation, Burmese Buddhism will encounter serious challenges in the future.

Jordi Morreras and Ariadna Solé Arreràs's article, "Genealogies of death: Repatriation among Moroccan and Senegalese in Catalonia," analyses the post-mortem repatriation of migrants' bodies. The researchers see in the repatriation of bodies an expression of a desire for genealogical reconstruction and identity. Through the repatriation of bodies to the places of origin, migrants are reconciled with their family histories, even at the expense of the rules for Islamic funerals. The analysis of funeral rituals shows that they become transnational – divided between "new" and "old" homelands – which suggests the emergence of transnational communities based on a common religion and origin.

The final part of the collection, *Commemoration*, discusses the meanings of deaths in memory politics. Katarzyna Herd's article, "Our foreign hero: A Croatian goalkeeper and his Swedish death," analyses how the unexpected death of a foreign football player was appropriated as a symbol by a Swedish football club. In the context of globalized fan culture, he was "nationalized" as a "fallen hero," a societally coded pattern. Cordula Weisskoeppel's multi-sited ethnographic study of transnational reactions to the violent deaths of twenty-three Coptic Orthodox Christians in a terrorist attack in Egypt also explores the hero-making potential of death and its meaning in the formation of transnational communities. Weisskoeppel approaches transnational digital spaces

as deathscapes, which enable survivors to make sense of the violent deaths of others, and in which socio-culturally embedded “technologies of immortality” are creatively employed.

The transformation of long-forgotten Red Army soldiers who fell in the Winter War on Finnish territory into bunglingly commemorated ambiguous heroes is analyzed in Oula Seitsonen’s article, “Transnationally forgotten and re-remembered. Second World War Soviet mass graves at Mäntyvaara in Eastern Finnish Lapland.” The study explores post-Cold War changes in the commemoration of the wars between the Soviet Union and Finland. The mass grave of fallen Soviet soldiers was officially forgotten in the post-war years and maintained by local Finns. In the post-Soviet era, with the neo-patriotic shift in Russian memory politics, the graves became an object of interest to Russian officials and the descendants of fallen soldiers. In her article, “Transnational heritage work and commemorative rituals across the Finnish-Russian border in the old Salla region,” Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto examines the transnational remembrance of former Finnish territories in the same area. The opening of the Finnish–Russian border has enabled commemorative activities by Finns on the Russian side of the border. These activities focus on the old Salla cemetery and churchyard, where commemorative ceremonies are held partly with the Russian authorities. In the 1990s, the Russian authorities expressed collective condolences to the Finns, and the tone of the festivities aimed at reconciliation and collective mourning. These rituals became a form of sensory connection with ancestors and emotions of loss and longing for the Finns participating in the commemorative activities and visiting places that had formerly been Finnish. Koskinen-Koivisto interprets the studied transnational heritage and commemorative work as following a European tendency to blur questions of victimhood and victory, seeing war as a universal human experience instead of in terms of national triumph.

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REFERENCE

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