



John Parker. *In My Time of Dying: A History of Death and the Dead in West Africa.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. Illustrations, maps. 416 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-19315-1.

Reviewed by Paul G. Grant (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

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Commissioned by David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

From the outset of this magnificent study on death in Ghana, John Parker recognizes the challenge of his self-appointed task: “Writing a cultural history of death, I have found, is a bit like writing a history of ‘life’: like the dead, it is everywhere but nowhere—the invisible, looming anti-matter of human existence” (p. 6). Which is to say that the historian’s tool kit can never be commensurate with the task of grasping what cannot be grasped. And yet, as Parker continually reminds his readers, the subject is too historical—too subject to reinvention and intercultural cross-pollination and too capricious—to be abandoned to theory unburdened by concrete fact.

The result is a great achievement: spanning a half millennium’s worth of change and drawing on a corresponding variety of archival, ethnographic, and artistic sources in several European and African languages, *In My Time of Dying* argues “that death and the dead stood at the very heart” of human culture in the Gold Coast and Asante and that they “materialized in myriad ways as historical action” (p. 327). More specifically, since a similar argument may be made about many other times and places, a continuously evolving mortuary culture “points to the ongoing importance of the dominion of the dead” in

Ghana, whose “social presence continues to be profound, outliving the existence of the body” (p. 329). Parker concedes that this conclusion, at least when stated so broadly, will strike many readers as unsurprising, but that is neither where the real power of this book lies nor its importance for the field. As a work of meticulous historical sleuthing, *In My Time of Dying* takes care never to read permanence into the centuries before historical records: even long ago, people were applying their creativity and their caprice to the problem of death, changing their ideas and practices along the way.

Over nineteen chapters, every one of which seems necessary, the author proceeds from a discussion of indigenous worldviews on the nature of the human soul and its social constitution and its survival (if in altered form) beyond death, through stages of grief and mourning (including historically evolving etiquette on how to speak of the dead), to funerals themselves, with all the attendant conflicts. Along the way, he addresses problematic cases: “transgressive” deaths of people who had been poisoned, had been cursed, or had died without having reproduced, as well as questions of Christian (both foreign and homegrown) and colonial interventions, the most important of

which were cemeteries, intended to supplant intramural burials (addressed in chapter 12).

Parker's treatment of the cemeteries affair is particularly insightful. The conflict's parameters are well known: in banning burials in (under) the homes of the living in the name of public health, the British ran afoul of indigenous religious values. Parker convincingly demonstrates, however, the profoundly historical quality to this cross-cultural encounter: everyone was changing all at once. Cemeteries as now understood did not exist on the precolonial Gold Coast, at least in the non-Muslim districts, and were introduced by Europeans. However, the nature of cemeteries was also changing back in Europe, especially during the nineteenth century, as industrial urbanization, in combination with passing fancies on the nature of hygiene, made churchyards undesirable as burial grounds. Intense cultural conflict in Britain gradually subsided with government cemeteries winning out.

Within a few short years, the cemetery dispute arrived on the Gold Coast as a bizarre invention, completely at odds with indigenous sensibilities that the venerated should be buried under houses and vile bodies relegated to wastelands on the edges of town. Thus, Europeans on the Gold Coast (who, after all, also hailed from many different countries and sects) imported their own evolving mortuary customs and controversies to Africa. In language that sounds strikingly similar to recent European and American obsessions with African domestic life (from child labor to sexual norms), the colonial government of the third quarter of the nineteenth century began forcefully insisting on cemeteries, nominally in the interest of hygiene, only a few short years after heated homeland disputes had divided communities and congregations back home. And precisely because the issues of death ritual and necro-geography stubbornly entangle things Europeans prefer to keep separate (including church and state, medicine and magic, money and love, and so on), these

debates could never be simply telegraphed to Ghana from London.

At the same time, however, Ghanaians never have been of one mind. Even in the absence of European imposition, there never was a moment in which West Africans were not applying intellectual energy to the problems of death and the dead. From the second half of the nineteenth century forward, participants in Western-educated indigenous subcultures, sympathetic to many European ideas, but at times prepared to insist on the dignity and value of indigenous ways, pushed the conversation in new directions.

For that reason, the history of death in Ghana—understood as changes in the ways people have thought about death, and have acted on those thoughts—has always been irreducibly cross-cultural and cross-religious. This is one of Parker's most salient insights, and it is of a piece with another important recent study: Kwasi Konadu's *Our Own Way in This Part of the World: Biography of an African Community, Culture, and Nation* (2019), which traverses much of these same religious and political problems through the scale of one individual's life. Taken together, Konadu's and Parker's contributions convincingly demonstrate that social and cultural life on the Gold Coast and Asante has been profoundly diverse for many centuries and that much mortuary culture has arisen not despite encounters but because of them. The meaning of death, the emotions of death, the continued dominion of the dead over the living, and constant conflict over all the above are highly unstable underneath a veneer of ageless conservatism.

One strength of this book is the author's sensitivity to emotion and the way the powerful feelings unleashed by death open the door for innovation. Nevertheless, this sensitivity to lived experience is incomplete with respect to indigenous Christianity, which Parker tends mechanically to reduce to doctrines. The reality, of course, is that precisely because death (coming as tropical dis-

eases) was a frequent visitor among missionaries, whose intention to “challenge the very idea of mortality itself” by offering to potential converts “a new vision of everlasting life after death” would unlikely have succeeded unless the native Christians had taken matters into their own hands in their singing, preaching, and Bible teaching (p. 172). And yet this fertile territory is largely bypassed in favor of newspapers (chapter 14).

Newspapers, of course, were the domain of a class of Ghanaians who were most exposed to European attitudes and who were being progressively wronged by the same as the century wore on. Editors and correspondents both vociferously criticized traditional customs and defended them against European condescension. An especially moving 1903 editorial in the *Gold Coast Leader*, quoted at length on page 313, makes no apology for the emotional intensity of indigenous funerals, insisting instead that White emotional stoicism, rather than embodying maturity, constituted imbecility: “To find fault with us, to impose fines, inflict blows, and use dirty and abusive language to us, because, we do not, cannot, put our dead in one room of the house, and go about if nothing extraordinary has happened to us, till it is coffined and taken to be buried, is we say, *not civilization among the blacks*.”[1] Placed near the end of the book, this small piece of protest, written at the height of colonialism, neatly encapsulates the author’s touch: always sensitive not only to historical change in the cross-cultural crucible but also to the intimately human emotions surrounding that most human of experiences—our struggles to face our mortality and that of our loved ones.

Note

[1]. From “A ‘Carousing’ or Custom,” *Gold Coast Leader*, September 19, 1903, 3. This was too delicious a quote to take on its own, obligating me to look up the original, where I discovered that Parker, perhaps in the interest of economy, had omitted the editorial inversion that follows: “‘Noisy!’ What about the real carousing by edu-

cated (?) whites in the colony, who make themselves a nuisance to themselves, and to the community nearly every other day, in all the important towns on the sea board. Dirty, filthy, music hall ditties, being sung till the small hours of the morning when bottles of whisky and soda keep going round, till even natives from bush call the white-man a bore.”

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