Why We Die: The Metaphysics of Death in French West Africa

Author : Binyamin Blum

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Ruth Ginio, When Dead Bodies Talk: Colonial and Ritual Autopsies in French-Ruled Africa (1918–1945) __ **Social History of Medicine** __ (2020).

As the parent of a very curious four-year-old, I am accustomed to being asked the question "why?" about every statement I make. Specifically, I have recently been asked to explain why people die, and what happens to them once they do. In her article *When Dead Bodies Talk: Colonial and Ritual Autopsies in French-Ruled Africa (1918–1945)* Ruth Ginio explores the cultural underpinnings of how we approach such questions and the kinds of answers we find satisfying. Ginio begins the article with a revealing exchange in Nii Ayikwei Parkes's 2009 novel, *Tail of the Blue Bird*. Parkes, a Ghanaian author, tells the story of Kayo, a young Westernized Ghanaian forensic pathologist, who is sent to a secluded village to examine an unidentified body to determine whether a murder had taken place. A local hunter by the name of Opanyin interrogates the visitor about his peculiar profession:

'You explain deaths?'
'Yes.' Kayo's tone was defiant.
'Then, tell me, why do people die?'
'Because they are old, or sick, or someone attacked them. I don't know.'
'Then you can't explain deaths.'
'Opanyin, that is my job. It is part of what I do.'
'I am a hunter. I kill beasts so I can eat, but I know they don't die because I shoot them or trap them; that is how they die but is not *why* they die.'

According to Ginio, this story epitomizes the difference between French and African death inquests in the early twentieth century. In both societies, examination of the dead body lent clarity and closure. But in each society the autopsy sought to answer a different question: whereas French medicine in both the metropole and the colonies remained occupied only with the who and how, West African autopsies were preoccupied with the metaphysical *why*. Each society employed different procedures to answer such questions, yet upon closer scrutiny each seemed equally ill-suited for the task at hand. Ginio identifies three objectives of French death investigation in West Africa: to establish whether the victim was raped before being slayed; to prove intent to kill in cases of domestic violence; and the autopsy as a scientific means to prove the truth, since local accounts were mostly distrusted. Yet French autopsies were ill-suited for the tasks for which they were designed. The bodies were often examined several days or even weeks after the death, which rendered an autopsy utterly useless beyond its performative aspects.

More importantly, the French autopsy failed to answer the *why* question, which from a local vantage point was far more crucial. The *why* could only be addressed through a ritualistic autopsy, conducted in the presence of elders and family representatives. Dissecting various parts of the dead body, these local autopsies were designed to answer the question of whether witchcraft—on the victim's part or on that of their rivals—was involved in the death. Ginio's account helps explain some tensions over what Ian Burney has termed the "jurisdiction" over the dead body.[1] Local outrage over French autopsies did not merely stem from the desecration of the corpse; it was perceived as spoliation of evidence and obstruction of justice. With the destruction of the body by the seemingly scientific French autopsy, the corpse was no longer accessible to the family, and no closure concerning the reason for death could be achieved.

Ginio's findings are especially illuminating in light of other accounts regarding the utility and necessity for forensic science in the colonies.[2] Native mendacity was a common trope in both the British and French empires, which made

scientific evidence far more appealing to colonizers than eye-witness accounts. But the necessity for forensic evidence in the colonies went beyond that: Sir Sydney Smith, Principal Medico-Legal Expert to the Egyptian Government, explained that forensic sciences were particularly crucial in Egypt, because Europeans found it so difficult to discern the *motives* of local criminals. "Motive, which plays so prominent a part in connection with Western crime, is often difficult to understand in the East, for murders of an extremely revolting nature may have what appears to be a most insignificant motive."[3] This inability to discern motives was a central driver of forensic science. To some extent, in the process, forensic scientists stopped exploring the *why* question both on its more superficial level (why *this* individual murdered *this* particular victim) but also on the more profound level (why did this person die?). As many of us, not only four-year-olds, are preoccupied with death and its underlying causes, Ginio's article provides us with a useful prism for examining where and how we seek our reasons.

1. Ian Burney, **Bodies of Evidence: Medicine and the Politics of the English Inquest, 1830-1926** at 106 (2000).
2. *See generally* Christopher Hamlin, *Forensic cultures in historical perspective: Technologies of witness, testimony, judgment (and justice)?*, 44 **Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences** 4 (2013).
3. Sydney Smith, **Forensic Medicine** 471 (1925).

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