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Leisurly enjoying Death

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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Leisurely enjoying death

Review by Mariske Westendorp

Leisure and Death: An Anthropological Tour of Risk, Death, and Dying

Edited by Adam Kaul and Jonathan Skinner

Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2018

Key words: (Anthropology of) death, leisure, (dark) tourism, after-life, risk

Death has been a subject of study for anthropologists from the very start of the discipline. Being both universal (we all die one day, and almost all of us are confronted with the death of loved ones during our lives) and particular (the meanings we ascribe to death are cultural and therefore different across the world), death is one of those subjects that lends itself well for cross-cultural comparison. The book 'Leisure and death: An anthropological tour of risk, death, and dying' therefore stands in a long tradition of anthropological enquiry into the topic of death, dying and bereavement. At the same time, however, it takes a different approach than many of the 'anthropology of death' publications, as the book does not put death center stage, but takes death as a lens to delve into another topic, namely leisure.

The chapters in the book are all ethnographically strong, and full of beautiful details and sometimes lively pictures. The editors have done well to create consistency amongst the chapters, and – aided by a prologue, introduction and epilogue – the book forms a coherent whole. The chapters are divided into four parts, enhancing the book's structure and clarity. The first part concerns leisure and death on the move. Chapters are about what happens when a tourist dies while on holidays in Indonesia, pilgrims facing their own mortality en route to Santiago de Compostela, and looking death in the eye by free climbing or 'tombstoning.' In the second part, chapters on tourist encounters with the dead are gathered. Authors describe tourists travelling to Indonesia to make selfies with the (un)dead, to the Cliffs of Moher, known as suicide destination, and to the Island of Palau, where victims of World War II are remembered. In the third section, on sensual and authentic experiences of death, chapters deal with narratives of authentic ways of dealing with the dead, heritage and violence. Here, the concept of 'leisure' shows its full potential in contrast to merely being about tourism and travel. Contributors focus on present-day European ossuaries (sites where skeletal remains are put to final rest), traditional Irish music, and the enjoyments of eating endangered species. The final chapters are united in a section on the after-life and after-leisure, primarily dealing with social relations that extend beyond death. Chapters are on memorial sites on Facebook, gossiping about the dead in traditional Greek settings, and hanging out amongst the dead in English woodland cemeteries.

As most of the chapters to the book attest, death and leisure at first seem contradictory, if not exclusive terms. Leisure is often positively associated: it is a care-free activity, voluntary, often planned ahead, associated with fun, happiness, relaxation and recreation.¹ It holds in itself the promise of play and activity. Death, on the other hand, is ‘serious business’ and characterized mostly with laying to rest. It is often negatively portrayed: it overcomes all of us, whether we want it or not, it often comes unexpected, and it is associated with sadness, grief, mourning and fear. The book therefore seems to bring together two concepts that are paradoxical to each other.

However, as each chapter in the book shows, death and leisure are not as far apart as initially thought – especially not in the postmodern societies in which we live, characterized by a vast industry of death characterized by institutionalization and sanitation. Both leisure and death are a ‘time-out’ from our everyday lives. They are both universal features of human living, and, as the authors argue “what we are certain of in this volume is that leisure and death are the times when self and sociality are remade, reproduced, remarked upon” (2018, 30).

Naturally, statements such as these stand or fall with the definition of ‘leisure’ being applied. The types of leisure described in the chapters roughly fall into two categories. First, there is leisure associated with remembrance or an active engagement with the dead, such as people travelling to European ossuaries or to sites where war victims are commemorated. Second, there are leisure activities which remind us of the immanence of our own death and the value of embracing and celebrating life, as for example expressed by visitors to suicide cliffs in Ireland. But, leisure is more than merely travel. Death and its immanence are not only experienced in moments of ‘dark tourism,’ but also in other activities, for example involving food, sport, bird-watching, engaging in social media, and enjoying heritage sites.

By discussing these different activities, the book tries to find an answer to the question of what we mean by ‘leisure’? By analysing death-related activities, the editors aim to rethink the concept. When is something ‘leisure,’ and when it is not? At the same time, reading through the book makes one wonder about the question and nature of death and dying. What exactly is ‘death’? Is it different than ‘dying’? When is somebody dead? And how do we deal with and give meaning to death, both collectively and individually?

Throughout the chapters of the book, the entanglements between death and leisure become increasingly clear – or, rather, the concepts become more and more entangled, making it difficult to understand where one ends and the other begins. Moreover, what binds the chapters together is the strong focus on embodiment and emplacement. Leisure is seen as

an activity that always takes place somewhere and is done by somebody, even if it is in the digital realm, such as on Facebook. As the editors seem to argue, central in leisurely encounters with death are the deeply embodied experiences of life and death.

The validity of this emphasis on the embodiment and emplacement of death can perhaps be questioned, as it could very well ‘just’ be a result of the traditional anthropological focus on affect, lived experience, and meaning-making. Whether other disciplines place similar emphasis on embodiment and emplacement might be an interesting query for future exploration.

Two other minor points of critique can be given. First, the book deals with a wide variety of topics, making it at times hard to understand the underlying argument or train of thoughts. As Jane Desmond remarks in the prologue to the book: “What this range of practices has in common is that somewhere in each experience is an encounter with the dead or with the notion of dying” (2018, x) – obviously a rather broad categorization. Second, while the book attempts to give a universal or global overview, it mostly deals with death-related leisure activities in European contexts. Of the twelve ethnographic chapters, at least seven are from European contexts. Another three chapters deal with the Pacific. The introductory chapter also primarily deals with the subject matter from a Western perspective. Narratives from contexts in which death is not seen as endpoint (such as Chinese contexts) or in which the dead are very much celebrated as part of life (such as in the Mexican Día de los Muertos) are left behind, but could offer an interesting additional perspective on the subject matter.

Attempting to understand the concept of leisure better by researching death is an interesting and very valuable approach. What we learn from the book is that ‘leisure’ is a fluid category. As it stands, the book primarily reads as an initial exploration in the crossing fields of death and leisure – and perhaps as invitation for other scholars to engage with the crossing of these topics. For example, researching, reading and writing about death are in these Corona-times different than usual for death scholars like myself. Reading ‘Leisure and death’ in these weeks made me wonder about my own ‘leisure’ activities related to death. Could catching up on the news every day and keeping track on the death-ratings, thereby being daily confronted with the immanence of death, be regarded a leisure activity, and if so, what does this tell us about the position of death in our societies which seems to be more ‘in our faces’ than it has been for a long time? Could strolling around cemeteries (something that I normally do out of personal interest and as leisure activity) nowadays still be regarded as ‘leisure activity,’ especially when it is to witness the impact of Covid-19 on the materiality and

emplacement of death? Or does the increased immanence and visibility of death impact so much on these activities that they can no longer be considered ‘leisure’? Thinking along these lines made me realize the potential of ‘Leisure and death’ for more and more extensive discussions on the topics.

Mariske Westendorp is an anthropologist and religious studies scholar. At present, she is a postdoc researcher in an international HERA-funded project on cemeteries and crematoria as public spaces of belonging in Northwest Europe, researching the inclusion and exclusion of minorities at European cemeteries and crematoria gardens.

i Notice here the possible double word play of ‘recreation’. Related to leisure, it means to perform an activity when one is not working. Associated with death, it can also be read as ‘re-creation’: the re-creation of life after death, such as in religious ideas on reincarnation, or the re-creation (as in: re-scripting) of life after an encounter with death.



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