What It Takes To Die.

Intercultural Intuitions and Ideas on Life's Endings

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Introduction: Different people, different dying processes

- Dying is not a biological constant but a *cultural process*
- Culture, socioeconomic background, gender, status, etc etc defines *how*, *when*, and *what it means* to die
- Horizons of cultural models shape what kinds of dying are even imaginable
- Ethnographic comparisons reveal the moral and social textures of dying

Fieldwork with dying persons

•Participant observation with dying persons in Germany
(highly populated & more rural areas of North-Rhine Westphalia)

•Comparative contrast study with dying persons in South China
(highly populated & more rural areas of the Pearl River Delta)

•Follow-up research in Finland (Turku, Helsinki)

•Key analytical tools:

Pre-exital / Post-exital dying (Menzfeld 2018)

Cultural models (Shore 1996)

Liminality (Turner 1967)

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Pre-exital vs. Post-exital Dying

•*Pre-exital dying*: begins **before** physical death
(Germany, Finland)

•*Post-exital dying*: begins **after** physical death, continuated process in ritual or for spirit
(China, Madagascar, Japan)

((*Punctual death*: No processual aspect – in the Global North, e.g.,
sudden death by a fatal car crash))

→ Depending on cultural concepts, physical exitus can be the starting point,
the end, or even only a quite irrelevant episode of dying.

When Does Dying Begin? Examples

- **Germany:** dying starts with medical diagnosis; focus on awareness and preparation

- **China:** diagnosis may not define dying; families maintain hope;
  moral rather than medical emphasis

- **Madagascar (Merina):** dying ends when bones are clean of flesh;
  finalised decomposition defines completion of dying

- **Nepal (Yolmo):** personal existence continues beyond body;
  physical death ≠ personal death

- **India (Kashi pilgrims):** people travel to die in holy city to end rebirth cycles

- **Japan:** *seizenso,* “pre-funerals” allow living persons to attend their own funerals

The Social Texture of Dying

- Dying often involves community (it can take a village to die!)
- Some cultures fear the dying…: Tanzania's Luo cleansing rituals
- …others envy them: Buddhist *good death*, Jain fasting to death
- Social timing matters:

→ right time,

→ right place,

→ right company

Dying “Well” vs. “Poorly”

- A *good death* = culturally defined success
- Ghana: dying properly after a fulfilled life
- Thailand: dying at home ensures soul’s peace
- Mexico: dying on religious holidays = ideal
- Switzerland, Germany, Finland: ideals of “dignity,” “autonomy,” “serenity”

Germany: Cultural Models of Dying

- **Umbrella model:** *Dying in dignity*
- **Key model 1:** *Autonomy* — control, decision-making, self-determination
- **Key model 2:** *Serenity* — acceptance, calmness, balance
- Together they define what is considered “dying well” in Germany

Liminality and Guidance

- Dying = a *liminal phase* (Turner): between life and death
- In many „Western“ contexts: currently no fully responsible, initiated guide role for this liminal state
- In other contexts, guided transitions are more common for dying persons
- Right now: dying = liminality in the making

Implications

- Cultural models frame, among other things,…

…what counts as “acceptable suffering”

…with/against which concepts of dying people shape their own dying processes

…the presence or absence of specialised liminal guides

- Cultural models of dying influence imaginable and factual medical practice, ethics, end-of-life law

→ Understanding intercultural variation is essential for, e.g., palliative care professions

Conclusion

- Dying = culturally patterned, morally charged, socially shared
- No universal “good dying“
- Long-term anthropological fieldwork helps to see how people…

…want to die,

…evaluate their dying, and

…(learn to) die according to their cultural horizons of imaginable dying

Thank you!

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