

About Sophie Hooe Seebach

Sophie Hooe Seebach is an anthropologist. She produced her PhD dissertation at the School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. Her research focus is on death and dying in Acholi, Northern Uganda, and on the many fascinating issues, which arise when people have to deal with the inescapable fact of death.

Facts about the field of study

Facts about the current situation in Acholi

- The fieldwork was carried out in Gulu Town, which lies in Acholi, Northern Uganda.
- The area is still marked by civil war (1986-2008); a war which was characterised by the use of abducted child soldiers, lengthy internment in IDP camps, and the brutal treatment of both the rebel armies and of the Ugandan Government.
- The war is still to this day affecting the relationship between the living and the dead, as there are many unsettled spirits roaming around, and many dead who are buried in the wrong places.



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PhD dissertation by Sophie Hooe Seebach



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THE DEAD ARE NOT DEAD: INTIMATE GOVERNANCE OF TRANSITIONS IN ACHOLI

Summary of the main points of PhD dissertation 'The Dead are not Dead: Intimate Governance of Transitions in Acholi' by Sophie Hooge Seebach, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University.

The dissertation focuses on death and dying in Acholi, Northern Uganda, and on how death becomes a site for the negotiation of authority, of generational conflicts, and for the creation of desired futures.

The intimate governance of death

The main argument of the thesis is that performances of death rites in Acholi constitute acts of 'intimate governance'. The concept allows an exploration of the negotiations of authority happening in the transitional spaces between life and death, be it among living actors, or between the living and the dead. Times of death constitute opportunities to exert authority as well as to create authority, at least for some people. In this thesis, the focus lies on elders, chiefs (rwodi), and diviners (ajwaka), who each in their own way gain authority through death and the dead.

The powerful dead

By studying the intimate governance of death in Acholi, it becomes apparent that much power to govern intimate social relations stems directly from the dead. At the death of the physical

body, the spirit lives on, and continues to take part in social life: in rituals, in conflicts, and in the planning of the future. The dead are, at the title suggest, not dead, and are indeed quite powerful. Thus, they must be taken into account in most aspects of life, and the relationship between the living and the dead must be nurtured.

The politics of death

Death rites in Acholi are inherently political: Death creates existential chaos and is in turn shaped by the chaos of the ongoing small-scale political negotiations and conflicts among the living, and between the living and the dead. The chaotic creation of authority is therefore not accidental but integral to the death rites themselves. Official death rites in Acholi are not so much concerned with the management of grief, but rather with intimate politics, and with the political orchestration of desired futures. To tame death, therefore, is in an important sense about the taming of life.

Generational conflicts and the struggle to define 'Acholi culture'

Today, life in Northern Uganda is shaped by the recent civil war (1986–2008), fought between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan Government. The internment in IDP camps prevented many elders in keeping the level of power over younger generations, which they have enjoyed in the past. At present, negotiations about how to execute the death rites is also a negotiation of power between generations and ultimately about the right to define what 'Acholi culture' should be in the future.

The intimate governance of death

The dead are a vital part of social life in Acholi; from them people of authority derive their power to govern the intimate relations of social life. Intimate governing of the transition from life to death is significant as a means to tame death as well as a taming of the living. Thus, those in power attempt to not only define Acholi culture and traditions, but to create a specific future. Therefore, death becomes a space for the negotiation of the relationship between generations, of conflicting spheres of authority, and of the very structure of society.

The empirical basis of the dissertation

This dissertation is written on the basis of twelve months of fieldwork, between 2011 and 2015, in and around Gulu; the largest town in Acholi. It offers an elaborate study of death and burials in Acholi, death in a post-war society, and death and intimate power.