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GRAVE MATTERS IN OCEANIA

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INTRODUCTION

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The idea for this collection of articles on burial practices in Pacific Island cultures first came to us in 2013 when we were invited to Sweden to give a lecture on “an aspect of materiality in Samoa” to the Archaeology Department of the University of Gotland (now the Gotland Campus of Uppsala University). The invitation came from Helene Martinsson-Wallin, Associate Professor of Archaeology there, who had been working with the National University of Samoa for some years to establish the teaching of Archaeology and associated research. As neither of us are archaeologists, our thoughts turned to digging holes in the ground in search of history, and from there to the increasing visibility and variety of graves in Samoa. Thus inspired, we set off with our camera, took pictures of many graves and put together a commentary on what the photographs told us about changing burial practices in Samoa.

Having become very interested in the transformative historical influences on burial and the way in which graves were marked or constructed, we proposed an informal session on “Grave Matters” at the 2014 meeting of the Association of Anthropologists of Oceania (ASAO) in Hawai‘i, and on this occasion we had a fine conversation about burial practices and the whys and wherefores of changing styles of graves in Hawai‘i, Aotearoa New Zealand, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Rotuma. The following year we convened a formal session at the ASAO meeting in Santa Fe, which in turn led to a symposium at the ASAO meeting in San Diego in 2016, and to the five selected papers in this volume on “grave matters” in Rotuma (Fiji), Enga province in Papua New Guinea and Samoa.

Despite the cultural and historical differences between these sites, and what may seem to some to be an odd juxtaposition, a number of overlapping themes have emerged. The first is the historical transformation of belief systems following conversion to Christianity and new notions about the destination and thus the assumed behaviour of spirits of the dead. In Rotuma and Samoa we must rely on historical accounts of pre-Christian beliefs and practices, which are richly detailed for Rotuma by Rensel and Howard. For Samoa, where the eschatological revolution began in 1830, we know considerably less. However, in Enga province as described in the articles by Gibbs and by Jacka, such changes have occurred in living memory. This offers many resonances of practices, such as that between pre-Christian Rotuma where

great slabs of rock were once moved astonishing distances to press the spirit of the departed into the grave that we can compare with fears in contemporary New Guinea Highlands societies about the intrusion of witches, motivating some mourners to seal graves under layers of steel and concrete. Similarly, among the people of Enga, as with Samoans and Rotumans, old fears about the desires of the dead, the loneliness of their separation and the potentiality of their wish to take those still alive along with them, have been at least somewhat allayed by the certainties about the ultimate destination of souls that is offered by Christianity. These aspects are considered in detail by Gibbs who examines the way that traditional beliefs have been modified by new beliefs in the ways of Sangguma sorcery and new concepts about the malign presence of witches, as well as by Christianity.

Jacka refers to Henri Lefebvre's attempts (*The Production of Space*, 1991) to wed Marx's ideas of historical materialism to social spaces; that "each mode of production has its own particular space, the shift from one mode to another must entail the production of a new space" (p. 46). This proposition, as Jacka puts it, provides fertile ground for examining the implications of capitalist intrusion into pre-capitalist settings around the world. In Enga not only has traditional eschatology been transformed by Christianity over the past 50 years, but so too has the presence of a large gold mine changed the economy: ideas about the value of land, perceptions of kinship rights, and the means of making claims to land and money. In Jacka's case, the study of a blood feud between close relatives over these issues, the style of a grave becomes an emblem of revenge, adorned with menacing representations of axes and machine guns, and establishing a new trend in the design and location of tombs. This trend has resonance with the modern Samoan practices we describe in our article of not only using graves to assert high status, but also to assert ownership of customary land in an environment of deep uncertainty about customary inheritance rights.

Thinking of capitalist forces: whereas once graves in Enga were simple, even unmarked, now those of important persons are increasingly ostentatious, located beside main roads, colourful and richly decorated, and contained within elaborate fences or within edifices featuring flashing lights or flag poles. In Samoa most graves were once anonymous heaps of stones; moderately elaborate drystone graves were constructed only for high chiefs (and even these appear to have been dismantled in time of civil war to avoid their desecration by the enemy). In the colonial period a new mode of interment in mausoleums was reserved for paramount chiefs. Now, to the extent that their resources and pride dictate, families can construct tombs or family mausoleums as elaborately as they wish, facing them with marble, topping them with fancy

head stones, building them into their dwelling houses, or even putting them in little separate houses complete with windows and curtains.

Another link between these papers is the reference to intervention of the colonial state in burial practices in Rotuma and in Samoa. These took effect in Rotuma in 1885 when burials within social spaces was forbidden (no more burials under or beside houses). The edict was in keeping with anxieties about pollution in Europe in the previous decade, as documented by Lacquer (2015), when modern cemeteries were first established, with a view to the replacement of church graveyards which were perceived to be insanitary and productive of infection. In Samoa (as far as we were able to find out) this intervention did not occur until the 1920s under New Zealand administration, when village cemeteries were established. But, within a few years of independence in 1962, Samoans returned to locating burials beside—and even below—dwelling houses.

A further dimension of the social transformation of burial practices is provided by Lilomaiava-Doktor in her account of burial site and the issues of *fa'asinomaga*, a term for the spaces of ancestral heritage invoked by the Samoan diaspora in relation to their homeland. Not only do old categories of rank and new ideas about social status determine the way graves are fashioned, as we describe in our paper, but also the remittance-driven elaboration of funerals and the problem of where and how to inter Samoan-born family members: in their land in Samoa where their spirits are thought to belong or in cemeteries in Australia, New Zealand or the United States where their graves can be tended and visited by their descendants and other relatives? A new resolution to this problem is offered by the possibility of cremation and of transportable and divisible ashes. As Lilomaiava-Doktor explains, the idea still shocks many in Samoa, but it likely to be incorporated into *fa'aSamoa* as have been so many other new funerary and burial practices.

These articles are arranged so that the article by Rensel and Howard comes first, offering a complete history of burial practices from pre-contact times to the present. The following articles are paired, the first two on Enga province in which Gibbs emphasises how modifications of the belief system are displayed in the transition from simple or hidden graves to expensive status symbols. Jacka's paper, also on Enga province, examines the impact of the Porgera mine in creating new forms of conflict and inequality that have been expressed in the design and location of tombs. The last two articles are on Samoa. Our article traces changes in burial practices and burial monuments in relation to political transformation since the late 19th century eventually becoming modern expressions of land ownership and social status. Lilomaiava-Doktor's article follows with an overview of the increasing elaboration and cost of

funerals as a result of mass emigration, and the consequent dilemmas of memorialising the dead. In putting this volume together we want particularly to thank Judith Huntsman, whose name really deserves to be on the front cover with ours as she has done far more than we have in sorting out and polishing the products of our ASAO symposium earlier this year.

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