

## **Roads, Risk and the Changing Moral Economy of Death in South Africa**

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The paper focuses on the development, within the Xhosa-speaking population of South Africa, of intricate cultural practices enacted around fatal road accident sites and en route to funerals. African funeral directors, whose informal enterprises are premised on the lucrative transport of dead bodies and mourners across long distances, attest to the potentially fatal hazards brought on by poor drivers, inebriated mourners and the stresses of overnight travel. Furthermore, apocryphal stories abound—of road accidents involving the corpse in transit, and of road accidents caused by the spirits of those improperly buried—which inscribe a type of malevolent agency onto the dead body, and imbue the sites of fatal accidents with particular significance. This research informs a larger study that charts the evolution of perceptions and practices around death as a window into the lives and anxieties of ordinary South Africans. It is part of an ongoing collaboration with Professor Megan Vaughan (History, Cambridge) entitled ‘Death in Africa: A history, c.1800 to present day’, funded by the Arts Humanities Research Council of the United Kingdom. The paper begins by considering African responses to road deaths within a broader historical and theoretical literature on accidental death. It also reflects on the trajectory of change with respect to motor vehicle usage in South Africa, mapped against existing data on road accident and death rates. The paper then explores how both mourners and funeral entrepreneurs have responded to the particular problems presented by death ‘on the road’. I describe mourners’ emergent language of ‘talking to’ the dead, a banal type of conversing occurring in mortuaries, at road accident sites and en route to interments, which both expresses and helps contain the spiritual risks embodied in engaging with this more mobile world. I end by considering whether this form of communication represents a distinct departure from, or a continuation of, older forms of mediating with the dead. The data is derived from fieldwork in 2006 and 2008, and includes interviews with funeral entrepreneurs, their employees, municipal cemetery workers, and Xhosa-speaking families in both rural and urban areas. In addition, archival material from missionary and early anthropological sources, from the 19th and early 20th centuries, provide useful historical and comparative frameworks.