

ANNE ALLISON. *BEING DEAD OTHERWISE.* DURHAM: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2023. 256 P. ISBN: 978147801984-8

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Being dead otherwise is a seminal ethnographic work on death, and a refreshing counter to the crisis narratives commonly used to describe modern Japan. Anne Allison draws on an impressive range of fieldsites, granting access to spaces from a high-tech graveyard to a futuristic death exposition, and from an unclaimed remains storage room to the disturbing aftermaths of a lonely death. The book attends to creative activities of charities, businesses, and religious organisations in response to changing demands. It also illuminates the surprising pleasure afforded from arranging one's own mortuary affairs. Allison reconceptualises what it means to be human before and after death in the context of a rapidly changing Japan.

The book focuses on three themes: managing the disconnected dead, planning for one's own death, and the role of non-intimate others in handling mortuary affairs. The first section opens with a philosophical discussion of death as both a material and abstract matter. Allison then undertakes an ambitious history of death in Japan from pre-history to the present. The subsequent chapter focuses on a convention exhibiting an array of coffins, memorials, and gravestones. Describing amusing displays of bone-shaped urns for dogs, humanoid robot priests, and stylish morticians, Allison notes how 'playfulness...need not be at odds with the subject of death' (66). From this, Allison introduces the monograph's central theoretical contribution of 'necro-animism'; the lively rituals and preparations surrounding death (108). The second section discusses the many ways that people curate their ideal 'self-death'. Without someone to care for your grave you risk becoming a 'disconnected soul', an alarming prospect for many Japanese people. In response, temples, companies, and municipalities are offering alternative 'ending plans'. Allison describes a non-profit organisation offering communal burial to customers wishing to avoid loneliness and the burdening of family with grave care. What is viewed as a crisis for some has also provided fuel for creative replacements to traditional structures. However, Iza Kavedžija's (2019) complimentary ethnography concerning elderly welfare is not mentioned. Reference to this monograph, grounded in long-term fieldwork, would enhance Allison's arguments about how people navigate happiness and responsibility in old age in Japan.

The third section, 'Departures', discusses the work of dealing with the material remains of the dead. Notably, Allison attends to the difficulties of managing 'lonely deaths', accompanying workers clearing houses where these deaths have occurred and visiting the storage room of a city hall where unclaimed remains sit on shelves (156). Whilst lonely deaths are commonly discussed on the news and in public imagination, this is a rare ethnographic insight. The final section considers the potential for technologisation and digitalisation of death

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practices. As people move further from their hometowns and ancestral graves, Allison proposes that futuristic graveyards or even digitally uploaded ancestors may close the physical and social distance between the dead and the living. This offers an interesting avenue to return to and develop with robust connections to the digital anthropology literature.

The concept of necro-animism is an adaptation of 'techno-animism' from Allison's *Millennial monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination* (2006), referring to the healing capacities of techno-toys in a disconnected society. In the first chapter of *Being dead otherwise*, Tamagotchis are compared to the dolls given to soldiers during WW2 (43). The subsequent chapter, 'From Godzilla to the Ending Business', discusses the recent history of Japan alongside this pop-culture icon. Thus, Allison stitches her monographs together in a way that feels forced. As these toys don't appear to play a role in participants' lives or deaths (outside of novelty exposition displays), these references trivialise the topic of mortuary practices and present Japanese people as unconsciously animistic. Perhaps something other than the loaded term of 'animism' should have been chosen to describe the positivity and determination of people preparing for death.

The highlight of this monograph is in the breadth of its ethnography, giving the reader access to fascinating spaces and people relevant to death in Japan today. Allison contributes to the exciting body of literature concerning hope and creative counter-responses to loneliness, anxiety, and decline. This is an important work on modern Japan but also for the studies of end-of-life and death more generally, presenting not only other ways of being dead but also other ways of living in anticipation of death.

Bibliography

Allison, Anne 2006. *Millennial monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kavedžija, Iza 2019. *Making meaningful lives: tales from an aging Japan*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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