

ETHNOLOGHIA ON-LINE

Ετήσιο Επιστημονικό Ηλεκτρονικό Περιοδικό
Εκδοτική Επιμέλεια: Ελληνική Εταιρεία Εθνολογίας
An Annual Scholarly Electronic Journal
Published by the Greek Society for Ethnology



Book Review

Grave monuments and the dead: the imaginary of death in modern Greece

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Πηγή - Source: Ethnoghia on-line, Vol.: 2, Αύγουστος 2011 (σσ.: 1-4) - August 2011 (pp.: 1-4)

Εκδοτική Επιμέλεια: Ελληνική Εταιρεία Εθνολογίας - Published by: The Greek Society for Ethnology
www.societyforethnology.gr

Επικοινωνία - Contact: societyforethnology@yahoo.com

Stable URL:

http://www.societyforethnology.gr/site/pdf/Review_grave_monuments_and_the_dead.pdf

Δευτέρα 8 Αυγούστου 2011 - Monday 8 August 2011

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ISSN: 1792-9628



ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑ ΕΘΝΟΛΟΓΙΑΣ

Eugenia Roussou, 08/2011

BOOK REVIEW: «Grave Monuments and the Dead: the imaginary of death in modern Greece»

Book Review

Grave monuments and the dead: the imaginary of death in modern Greece

author: Maria Koumarianou, edited by: Dodoni, Athens (in Greek text) 2008, price: 18.99 €, 255 pp., paperback. ISBN: 960-385-520-0

Eugenia Roussou [Social Anthropologist BA, MA, PhD]

Key words: Urban cemeteries of Greece, grave monument, death, embodiment/somatization, visual anthropology, performative theory

Based on the author's doctoral dissertation, this book touches on the imaginary of death through the ethnographic and visual study of performativities in the space of urban (Orthodox Christian) cemeteries in Greece and around the world. It is a fact that the concept of death in the Greek context has already been studied successfully by anthropologists (e.g. Papagaroufali, Seremetakis, Panourgia among others). The originality of Koumarianou's approach, however, lies in the fact that the mortuary behaviour, the semiotics and the symbolism of the grave monument in relation to the imagined concept of death are examined for the first time in the Greek space. And this is a theoretical and ethnographic subject that, according to my knowledge at least, has not been studied thoroughly and in such a multi-dimensional and multi-spatial level before.

The aim of the book is to investigate the imaginary of death through an anthropological and semiotic approach to the above-ground part of grave monuments. As the author clarifies, the basic tools of her research come from the discipline of social anthropology and include mainly fieldwork, participant observation and interview analysis. Her fieldwork is multi-sited and open, as it was conducted both in Greece and in other countries where urban cemeteries of the Greek Orthodox Christian world can be found (e.g. Cyprus, Egypt, Syria, Turkey). Moreover, Koumarianou places her work within the



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‘anthropology of space’ and ‘visual anthropology’ theoretical frameworks. She follows an approach that moves between the general and the specific, the particular and the abstract, between phenomenology and deconstructuralism, while her interpretation is constructed through both thin and thick description (Geertz 1973).

The book under review is divided into four main parts. *Part One* includes general thoughts on the cemetery topography and offers a historical review of cemetery development in terms of regional planning and of social practice. *Part Two* examines the imagined concept of Death and its historical and psycho-sociological meaning. The grave monument is approached here not only as a topographical “signpost”, that is, as an indicator of a particular place of burial, but also as a narrative representation of the dead. The monument invokes the dead person as an embodied presence; its purpose is first and foremost to conceal the biological decomposition, to denote pretence of life – the image of an eternal body that remains perpetually inside the monument – and to insufflate a kind of life into this imagined body, so as to create the illusion of “presence”.

Part Three concentrates on interpreting the funerary texts, including dedications in the form of biblical excerpts or stereotype expressions, poems and so on, and their historical development. Following a linguistic analysis, the author’s approach places *a priori* the particular textuality in the actual circumstances of its use, taking into account an *evolving* script, in a dynamic process of communication and exchange of messages. Lastly, *part Four*, which is based largely on the analysis of interviews, interprets the role of the “imagined” in the lived construction of “reality”. Adopting the theoretical paradigm of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu in her analysis, Koumariou argues that this subjective “reality” of her interviewees is related to the concept of “embodiment” or “somatization” – rather than just the “body” – and the eternal presence of the dead in a particular space-locus. Interestingly, she also examines the meaning of “embodiment” from a theological perspective, pointing to the fact that what the Church envisions is not the abolition of the body, but its imperishability, in the same way as the body of Christ instead of following the natural laws and being decomposed, remained absolutely intact.

Generally speaking, Koumariou indicates that, through her research, she observed a denial of consciousness of death as the final end of life, on the side of the living; the denial of acceptance of biological decay; the desire to preserve for as long as possible the sense and the image of the deceased; and the imagined preservation of an unaltered body in a familiar and personal space which is defined by



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the particular grave monument. What is important in this case, she clarifies, is the mental construct of another world equivalent to ours, so that the continuity of Existence, the transmutation of Non-existence into Something or Someone can be imposed at an imagined level. Furthermore, through the continuous examination and re-examination of the above-ground constructions of the grave monuments, she observed formal and thematic repetitions that underpinned and corroborated this imagined desire for perpetual preservation of corporeality (that is, for the imperishability of the body) of the dead as someone who has not died (finally), but “lies”, “rests”, “sleeps” continually *here*, inside the monument which represents an intermediate and undefined space between the dreadful and repellent Other World and the *here* of our own life.

Overall, Koumarianou’s book is a well-read, clearly written work, which offers a broad perspective of the imaginary of death in our society today and, additionally, of the semiotics and the rhetoric of space that determine our proximity to the space of the dead. Using a range of methodological pathways, with that of visual anthropology as perhaps the most significant one, the author manages to capture ethnographically the various ways in which people in contemporary Greece and abroad ‘imagine’ death. This book offers an account of how Greeks handle the materiality of death, how they construct different imaginary spatialities within and without the space of the living, how they perceive their body and self, and, finally, how they deal with their religious (Orthodox Christian) beliefs. At the end, the author provides an eloquent answer to the question of whether one collective imagined concept of death actually exists, or we are dealing instead with subjective attitudes depending on the personal beliefs, the social events and the trends of the time.