

# Supporting African thought with Migrant Indigenous Knowledge on dead human bodies research

The bioethical issue of moral status especially ascribed to dead bodies to be used for research is complicated. In a recent article, African perspectives can be analyzed in support of the “use of unclaimed cadavers in training and research in clinical institutions.”<sup>1</sup> The dead, ontologically speaking, seem to lose meaning and consequently the obligation that we have to them. Western moral theories of utilitarianism and deontology seem to make a case for pleasure and suffering or black and white ethics respectively.

But a gray area or spectral position such as Albert Camus' idea of generosity in living with the dead<sup>2</sup> because it lacks any obligation<sup>3</sup> is a matter that needs a more robust application to the moral status of dead bodies. Other Western theories of spectral persuasion that do not fully subscribe to an entirely rational deliberation of moral status<sup>4</sup> or human rights<sup>5</sup> will also find it hard to offer a clear protocol.

Here, I extend the claim that “indigenous practices can pave way for adaptation in dealing with the dead”<sup>6</sup> to dead human bodies research. I base this extension on prior conversations with Basey's Mamanwa, a migrant indigenous group in the Philippines. It can be argued that since they believe that death is a natural process and so leaving their dead during migration struggles,<sup>7</sup> instantiating new forms of ontologies<sup>8</sup> and compact forms of living,<sup>9</sup> they contribute to an ecological knowledge of oneness.<sup>10</sup>

Both Thaddeus Metz's Ubuntu, which thinks of moral status as the relationship of entering friendly relations with others, and Munamoto Chemhuru's personhood theory, which thinks of moral status as the plural telic capacities to participate and contribute to

ahierarchical nature, can benefit from the Mamanwa's way of dealing with death and the dead as a general proclivity for oneness with nature. By emphasizing the natural course of life, migrant indigenous knowledge can complement dead human bodies research for contributing to a one health perspective. Rather than dismissing or invalidating the moral status of the dead directly, one can view the Mamanwan perspective on death as a form of reintegration to nature where participation in situ can potentially suggest and yield developments. It is not just a psychosocial support mechanism to aid indigenous communities in moving on but an ontological – neutrally amoral – way in which the dead incites natural moving on and development. As such, I claim that this idea can back human dead bodies research as long as it contributes to a one health perspective.

One vital idea of indigeneity, however, creates a crucial caveat: because migrant indigenous knowledge is not about a stationary insight due to migrancy, researchers must accommodate and check extant communitarian and religious affiliations or acculturated beliefs. For example, the increasing prevalence of cremation and Christian burials among indigenous communities in the Philippines may be attributed to the influence of mainstream religion and society. The complexity of adaptation and cultural change processes must inform the development of effective dynamic consent protocols that consider cultural and ethical considerations.

Hence, given the sensitive nature of the issue, an important implication for dead human bodies research, in general, is that the notion of dynamic consent must come in. Akin to the legal, ethical, and practical considerations of the dynamic consent approach to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections of genetic heritage,<sup>11</sup> the Mamanwa migrant indigenous perspectives of the dead support ‘dynamic–flexible, re-evaluating–consent’<sup>12</sup> that respects the family, community, and society of the dead. While this can be viewed as a paradox of heritage identity reuse, the dynamic consent approach ensures that relatives of the dead bodies have the agency to renegotiate and withdraw from the study at any time and that their wishes regarding the use of the remains are honored. This strategy can help ease or mitigate any potential ethical concerns surrounding the utilization of indigenous knowledge in dead human bodies research.

<sup>1</sup>Matisson, H., & Muade, N. E. (2023). Research on dead human bodies: African perspectives on moral status. *Developing World Bioethics*, 23(1), 67–75.

<sup>2</sup>Kahambing, J. G. (2020). The specter of narration and hypocrisy in Albert Camus' *The Fall*. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 28(1): 207–220. 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Kahambing, J. G. S. (2021). Final and Larval Spectrality in Albert Camus' *The Fall*. *Neophilologus*, 105(1), 19–26.

<sup>4</sup>Kahambing, J. G. S. (2020). Butler avec Agamben on the Spectrality of Love in a Post-Theoretical Culture. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(1), 1–11.

<sup>5</sup>Kahambing, J. G. (2019). Derrida and/to Žižek on the spectral victim of human rights in Anil's Ghost. *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, 13(3), 1–16.

<sup>6</sup>Kahambing, J. G. (2020). Learning to Bury the Dead during COVID-19 – Barbarism or Indigeneity? *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 35(6), 702–703. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>7</sup>Molabola, A. J., Abiera, A., & Kahambing, J. G. (2020). “In the mountains, we are like prisoners”: Kalinggawasan as Indigenous Freedom of the Mamanwa of Basey, Samar. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 12(5), 1–9.

<sup>8</sup>Kahambing, J. G. (2022). Migration and indigenous health during COVID-19. *Journal of Public Health*, 44(3), e455–e456.

<sup>9</sup>Kahambing, J. G. (2021). Learning from indigenous solidarities: Rural healthcare ethics, Pintakasi, and COVID-19. *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health*, 19, 100713.

<sup>10</sup>Kahambing, J. G. (2021). Natural disasters, ecological knowledge, and COVID-19 in the Philippines. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 36(5), 657–658.

<sup>11</sup>Pricor, M., Huebner, S., Teare, H. J., Burchill, L., & Kaye, J. (2020). Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections of genetic heritage: the legal, ethical and practical considerations of a dynamic consent approach to decision making. *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, 48(1), 205–217.

<sup>12</sup>Kahambing, J.G. (2021). COVID-19, weddings and dynamic consent. *Journal of Public Health*, 43(2), e411–e412. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab111>

**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

None to declare.

**DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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