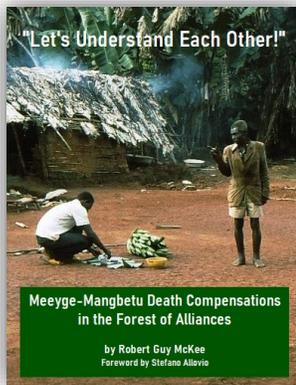


## BOOK REVIEW

# "Let's Understand Each Other!" Meegye-Mangbetu Death Compensations in the Forest of Alliances

By Robert Guy McKee

Reviewed by Joyce Mlenga



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This book, titled, *Let's Understand Each Other!: Meegye-Mangbetu Death Compensations in the Forest of Alliances*, by Robert Guy McKee, is a modern anthropological study that examines the practice of death compensations among the Meegye-Mangbetu that lasted up to May 2001 when the practice formally ceased. McKee delves into the structural, cultural, and linguistic components of these compensations based on his 1995 dissertation. Although the book has been shortened, it has been updated with current information to reflect the present situation. Using Van Gennep's (1960) elements of a rite of passage as a model, McKee analyzes the process by which intermarried groups negotiated and assessed their alliances through compensations over time.

McKee gives an interesting account of the Mangbetu community of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who, until recently, would pay compensation for death. They believed that when

someone died, they had passed away "in the hands of" their father's family group. This meant that the father's family group was responsible for compensating the mother's group, regardless of the circumstances of the death. When someone died, the father's side would gather to mourn the deceased in their house. In the mourning process, the culture allowed the uncles from the female side to "attack" the fathers' place in a sort of "war." The father's side would then flee to the forest, a neighbouring village, or any other location where they could seek refuge. They could return after reconciliation, which occurred only after paying death compensation. The war in which the deceased's maternal uncles came to the death place was viewed as a legitimate response to the deceased's death in the hands of the deceased's own paternal descent group kin. It was understood that a valuable possession of the mother's group had been ruined in the father's group's custody and required redress.

McKee's perception and interpretation of this Meegye-Mangbetu practice contradicts the findings of other authors who previously studied the group. While the earlier studies suggested that the death compensation war was violent and aimed at harming people and damaging property, McKee views it as more metaphoric than literal, primarily involving harmless symbolic rituals. According to him, the perceived war was peaceful and aimed at reconciliation, renewed understanding, and alliance, rather than revenge or hostility. Furthermore, McKee suggests that the isolated cases in which violence occurred were exceptions to the rule. The rule was that the war was expected to be more metaphoric than literal.

McKee has successfully analyzed the death compensations, paying attention to the most essential

details of the ritual. The study argues for a Meegye-Mangbetu ethos of intergroup understanding (or alliance) rather than for one of defiant outsiders. Death compensations are intergroup rites of what was, ideally, a positive engagement that played an important role in area intergroup politics. McKee has ably utilized Van Gennep's (1960) concepts of separation, transition, and incorporation to explain what goes on in the ritual. Ideally, the overall process follows the pattern of an intergroup rite of passage, from its "war" (separation) through a cooling off period (transition), to reestablished understanding (incorporation).

This book is unique in the sense that it provides a paradigm shift from previous authors who have done studies of death compensation in the Meegye-Mangbetu area. The book demonstrates a thorough and solid ethnographic study, immersed in local culture, conducted over a long period of time, using a hybrid of methods by a person who was fluent in the Meegye language. The study also confirms the importance of fieldwork and emphasizes its power in research.

McKee has demonstrated his integrity by not only carefully handling his methods and sources but also acknowledging that some aspects of the 1995 study may be outdated. Being the first English-language anthropological monograph of the Meegye-Mangbetu people, the study has provided additional insights into the Meegye-Mangbetu death compensations, particularly in terms of the sociocultural richness of men's and women's dialogues.

McKee has succeeded in presenting his major arguments on the death compensation ritual as reconciliatory and for alliance purposes, and he has provided enough evidence for his arguments. His arguments are consistent, balanced, concise, and substantiated with well-analyzed data. The author has succeeded in fusing the old study carried out in 1995 with new data collected when he returned to the field in 2001 when the ritual was undergoing change.

McKee's study stands out because it focuses on the role and status of women in death compensations. The study sees significant complementarity between women's and men's roles in death compensation. The sociocultural complementarity of women's and men's value and power has shown that men's power to restore intergroup "understanding" ultimately depends on women's power to pave the way for it. Women are recognized as the peacemakers of society, while men are its warriors. Hence, women's involvement played a

crucial role in ending the death compensation war and renewing understanding between the groups involved.

A strong literature review and careful treatment of sources characterize McKee's work. The study compares the existing literature while identifying the gaps to be filled, which include the lack of contemporary sources that use contemporary anthropological methods, the absence of monographs, and insufficient available literature in English. He suggests that the limited available literature may have caused failure to distinguish clearly between the Mangbetu and the neighbouring Azande.

The fact that the book has one prelude and two brief interludes makes the reading more enjoyable and illustrates relevant social structures and cultures. Additionally, the inclusion of photographs provides additional documentation that reinforces the testimonials and stories in the book. The diagrammatic presentations throughout the book add clarity to the content presented.

The book provides an anthropological perspective on its subject from a Christian faith standpoint. Of interest is chapter eight, where McKee delves into a detailed analysis of a decision made by the church to end death compensations. As a missionary-anthropologist, he raises important issues regarding faith and practice that are directly related to the mission of *On Knowing Humanity Journal*, particularly concerning the decision to stop the death compensation ritual without carefully assessing its impact on the Meegye-Mangbetu people.

However, a few shortfalls are worth noting. First, McKee does not adequately discuss Meegye-Mangbetu's understanding of death and its causation. If death is something that one cannot control, readers need to know why compensation was sought when the custodians were not the ones who caused it. Second, while the author has referred to his ethical responsibilities, he should have made a statement regarding the photos of deceased adults and children who are either lying on the mat for viewing or in their mother's arms. Although McKee may have included a statement in his 1995 dissertation, he should have done the same in the preface, where he discusses the use of the photos, given the sensitivity of the pictures.

Despite the shortfalls, the book is written by someone who is well-versed in the subject and provides information that is often missing in most studies of the Meegye-Mangbetu. McKee has successfully provided a contemporary source using modern anthropological methods about the Meegye-Mangbetu in the English

language, making it relevant to both general readers and academicians who appreciate African culture and its socio-cultural traditions. This is a very scholarly piece of work, with non-scholarly touches, that must be read by everyone interested in socio-cultural issues. In my opinion, the book is an excellent primer to the Mangbetu death ritual of death compensations.

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