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Rest in Plastic

Death, Time and Synthetic Materials in a Ghanaian Ewe Community

Isabel Bredenbröker

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This book is dedicated to the wellbeing and respectful memory of the dead whose last stories it tells, wherever they may be now, to the wellbeing and good lives of their relatives and to a peaceful and harmonious existence with our ancestors. It is more personally dedicated to the memory of my late grandmother, my Omi Ingrid Wilde, whom I love dearly and miss a lot.

Aunt,
I thank you for
being alive today, alert, crisp.
  Since we don't know tomorrow,
see me touching wood,
clutching at timbers, hugging forests
  So I can enter young,
age, infirmities
defied.
  Hear my offspring chirping:
'Mummy, touch plastic,
it lasts longer!'
  O, she knows her mama well.
The queen of plastics a tropical Bedouin,
she must travel light.

—Excerpt from the poem 'For My Mother in Her Mid-90s' by Ama Ata Aidoo.

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Birgit Meyer

> Death is the great analyst that shows the connections by unfolding them, and bursts open the wonders of the genesis in the rigour of decomposition.
>
> —Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*

Death being an intrinsic and unavoidable part of our human condition, the care for the dead is an urgent matter in all societies. The 'anthropology of death' explores how the specific ways in which the living deal with death and bury their dead shape social relations. While death remains ultimately mysterious and unfathomable, a focus on the practices of the living in burying and commemorating their dead leads to the core of how societies work. Hence the study of death is a looking glass into modalities of societal reproduction. Isabel Bredenbröker's sound and sensitive ethnography about the death-related practices of their interlocutors in Peki, Ghana, offers a fascinating intervention into this longstanding scholarship. With this Foreword, through which I warmly invite you to delve into the book, I would like to highlight three particularly salient points.

One, Bredenbröker's descriptions are blunt and vivid, based on the insights they gained by assisting a female undertaker in preparing the dead to be laid in state, attending about forty funerals and continually discussing matters of death and burials with people in Peki. What I find particularly compelling is their ability to combine writing in a matter-of-factly cool and yet compassionate manner. In so doing, they eschew the danger of voyeurism that may easily accompany accounts of how culturally Others deal with death (and, for that matter, sexuality). Exploring how the living try to safeguard a good transition of a deceased person to becoming an ancestor, they never aim to reduce death to a mere social affair that can be mastered in full by mourners and scholars. Death, they write, 'possesses an excess quality of never being fully understood', causing emotional distress on a personal

and societal level. As they point out, this also pertains to themselves. Their exposure to death practices in Peki also made them think and feel about the loss of their own grandparents and assume a lead role in preparing their grandmother's burial in hitherto unanticipated ways, as they share in their Preface. Clearly, their research experiences in Peki have shaken their personal attitudes towards death and burial that developed through being socialized in German society. Turning the anthropological 'eye' also upon themselves, they discovered certain unexpected resonances with what they encountered in Peki. Stressing that the position of the anthropologist is by no means neutral, they take this research also as an occasion to, as it were, decolonize their perspective. Their book prompts its readers to engage in a deep reflection of previously held ideas about how death is dealt with in their own social environments. This draws the specific death-related practices of people in Peki close, without slipping into a facile idea of humans being all the same because we all will die and have to deal with death. The ways in which humans do so are always situated historically and societally, leaving many pressing questions to be asked.

Second, Bredenbröker situates the death-related practices they encountered in Peki in the period between 2016 and 2019 as shaped through colonialism and the influence of Christian missions. In this sense, these practices are inflected with ideas that can be traced to Western colonial power. Both the British colonial administration and the *Norddeutsche Missionsgesellschaft* (active in the area since 1847) intervened in indigenous ways of burying the dead – under the floor of the house in the case of males dying a 'good' death, and at the outskirts of the town in the case of persons dying a 'bad' death caused by an accident, a snake-bite or in childbirth. The use of coffins and cemeteries became obligatory, and after independence the Ghanaian state retained such rules and added new ones, as death is a social affair and hence subject to governance. Bredenbröker describes a complex negotiation process, through which such new rules and regulations were accommodated, while certain ideas about 'good' and 'bad' deaths and the ways in which the spirits of the deceased intervene in the world of the living were retained and mitigated with new means. They convey how the performance of funerals and the treatment of the dead are subject to state power as well as to rules set by chiefs and family elders. This turns funerals into a space for negotiating the use of new materials at hand so as to hold a befitting ceremony that has, echoing Robert Hertz, the ultimate goal of achieving control over the corpse to serve the intentions of the living. Here it is illuminating that they compare the accommodation of Christianity, entailing, as I explained in my own work on the history of Protestantism in Peki, an Africanization from below, to the accommodation of state requirements into death-related practices. Looked at from this angle, these practices bear clear traces of colonial and Christian interventions and of exposure to global capitalism. During my fieldwork in Peki in the period between 1989 and 1992, I also attended many funerals,

even though this was not my research focus. While I, too, noticed some of the features spotlighted by Bredenbröker, there were differences regarding the time a dead body was kept in the morgue (now apparently much longer than thirty years ago) and the use of synthetic materials (now much more marked). Funerals in Peki are thoroughly dynamic, transforming through ongoing negotiations of rules and adopting new possibilities for re-shaping death-related practices.

Third, Bredenbröker makes a strong case for analysing death-related practices from a material angle. As the somewhat provocative title 'Rest in Plastic' suggests, there is a remarkable use of lasting, synthetic materials in all stages of the funerals held, from the keeping of a deceased person in a frozen state in the morgue, to washing and dressing them with synthetic materials, to the laying in state in a non-perishable coffin, to the (preferred) burial in a cemented grave, adorned with wreaths made from plastic. Bredenbröker's sensitivity towards local understandings of these materials in the context of death-related practices allows them to point out the specific 'semiotic ideologies' (Webb Keane) through which these materials are valued and understood. They show convincingly that the durability associated with these materials plays into mourners' attempts to produce durability for the dead. In a local perspective, synthetics are morally good: '[b]y seemingly making things last, they have an agency of their own, literally taking the workload of effecting this intended state from people's shoulders'. Bredenbröker cautions against a view of synthetic materials as mere foreign imports. Instead, these materials should be seen as embedded in a local way of dealing with death and commemorating the dead. In a world in which plastics spread on an unprecedented scale and are rightly targeted as fueling ecological disaster, it is all the more important to understand the values attributed to them in local settings, as in Peki.

In sum, with its focus on the appraisal of synthetic materials in death-related practices in Peki, this book offers a most welcome addition to the study of funerals in Ghana (where most attention is paid to the Akan) and a lucid, material intervention into the anthropology of death. And most importantly, it shows the strength of an anthropological perspective that does not eschew observation and participation in the actual work done with a corpse, through which a dead person is transformed into an ancestor, and biological death into social death. Doing so, Bredenbröker certainly tracks death as 'the great analyst', in the sense of the statement by Foucault with which I opened this Foreword.

Birgit Meyer is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, she studies religion from a material and postcolonial angle. With Maruška Svašek, she co-edits the series *Material Mediations: People and Things in a World of Movement*. Recent book publications include *Figuration and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism,*

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Preface
The Anthropology of Death and Anthropological Ancestors, or, What Dreams about My Grandmother Taught Me

How can one, in writing and thinking, pay justice to the incomprehensible event which is death? And how can one pay justice to the life and experience not just of cultures other than one's own but also of other people in general? The first question is one that I, as someone writing about death here, have had to ask myself repeatedly in the process of researching and writing this book. The latter question is one that anthropologists, as those professionally studying the lives of fellow humans, be they close or distant, alike or dissimilar to the researcher, must ask themselves throughout their work. However, it is not only anthropologists who have to productively muse about the distance between individual experience and the world, but rather any human being reflecting on themselves in relation to their understanding of the world. Of course, one can turn this around and put the world first and the individual that is thinking and reflecting second. But in the end, that is not the most relevant point here. The point is that both must be considered as equally important and constitutive of any resulting thought, whether voiced in writing, conversation, film, image, sound or simply by means of engaging directly with others.

Methodologically, this book takes on a critical perspective towards my own role, partially resorting to what can be termed autoethnographic reflection. Aiming to contribute to decolonial thought within anthropology, it engages with my perspective, my role and moral obligations as an anthropologist, and the history of the place and people where I conducted my fieldwork. It also recounts the surprising moments of unexpected quality that result from inter-personal encounters, defying all expectations and fearful anticipations. Such reflections are not the central mode of narrating, but instead are woven into the text where I find them to be necessary. My effort to show the perspective of narration as a contextual frame is also reflected in the ways that the book engages with theory and with how it describes individuals and social situations, ideally leaving room for considering different

perspectives within these contexts. With this approach, I hope to be able to give a more multifaceted insight into social contexts while striving to avoid ascribing limiting roles and categories to people, institutions and groups.

My writing considers and critically questions my ethnographic material, illuminating how a Ghanaian town processes death against the background of Ghanaian postcolonial history and the neo-colonial present while engaging with anthropology's theoretical foundations. Many of the discipline's foundational texts cannot pass as 'baggage-free' theories that are merely a blueprint for analysis. Instead, recent efforts at 'decolonizing anthropology' have pointed out that critical engagement with the discipline's history and our use of its products is the order of the day. I feel the need to respond to this call and to actively contribute to such a reconfigured kind of anthropology with my work. Consequently, this means that I also feel the need to critically engage with my own role and methodology as they present themselves in this book. My perspective as a German ethnographer is an important factor to discuss in that respect, as Peki has a long-standing history of being a German-Swiss missionary station and former German colonial administrative territory. However, other intersectional aspects concerning myself and people that I met in the field should equally be considered to represent aspects of human life that augment a focus on colonialism's historical-structural narrative, which extends itself into our present. In what respect are texts produced by my 'disciplinary ancestors' nevertheless a good basis for anti-colonial engagement with ethnographic material that looks at the role of death in a Ghanaian town community – seen from the eyes of a German, white, female socialized and queer/non-binary identifying researcher with a chronic illness from a middle-class family?

In the history of anthropological research, ethnographic writing and theory production, descriptions of how cultures cope with death and how they frame it in a meaningful way – socially, economically and spiritually – play a significant role. As an integral element of ethnographic description, early ethnographic works such as by Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, James G. Frazer or E.E. Evans-Pritchard included accounts of funerals and of beliefs related to death as a part of striving to describe a culture or community in its totality. Malinowski was the first anthropologist to devote an ethnographic text exclusively to the study of death (Malinowski 1916). Like his work, many classic ethnographic accounts from the Global South of the nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth century – colonial, missionary and academic – framed death and dead bodies in non-Western societies as culturally Other or savage, positing this otherness in comparison to Western deathways: 'Those who have witnessed death and its sequel among savages and who can compare these events with their counterpart among other uncivilized peoples must be struck by the fundamental similarity of the proceedings' (Malinowski 2018: 20). Carrying this comparative perspective and its obvious problems of evaluation into the present, contemporary decolonizing anthropology still needs to make a point of critically framing

problematic thought from the past while considering the point of view from which it can and does speak. Yet, ideas that were formulated by the 'founding fathers' as our anthropological ancestors are the basis of what has become contemporary anthropological discourse, with their problematic as well as their valuable aspects. Therefore, while basing my analytic framework on classic work such as by Robert Hertz, and newer classics such as by Alfred Gell, I will do so with equal measures of critical engagement and respect. This ties in with an open discussion of my ethnographic methodology and the viewpoint that I can take within it.

At this point, it seems necessary to make some brief comments on research ethics and the context in which the research took place. My research was carried out while in a (pre-doctoral) research position with some funding for research and living expenses over the course of three years. I entered the position and the research project without any prior research experience on the African continent. My landing in a Ghanaian town community was entirely due to chance. Based on primarily formal and theoretical qualifications for the research training group in which my project was incorporated, I was offered a position that was dedicated to research in Africa. Given this opportunity and the difficulties I had previously encountered when attempting to secure research funding (and an income), I had to give up on other research plans that I had already begun to pursue, which would have been situated in Germany, much closer to home. As is very often the case in academic contexts, and perhaps especially so when a researcher is still formally under regulations that are tied to processes of qualification, it was the availability of funding and the requirements attached to attaining it that shaped this research and led me to Ghana. I am quite certain that, if I had had different options, it would never have crossed my mind to do research on death in Peki. Yet, this is what happened, and I am grateful for the experience and what I learned from it. Still, as a young researcher in a completely new 'field' with little time to prepare for what I would encounter there, in the beginning even without a fixed research topic at all, the process marked a steep and challenging learning curve for me. I was mindful to balance my own health and safety with giving maximum awareness to other people's needs. As I gradually understood, in most situations the power of an interpersonal encounter and exchange yields unexpected results, which are often hard to predict but open up new ways of understanding people's lives and one's own role within them. I address this insight in more detail in my reflection on working with video in Ghana (2020a). What was most important to me when aiming to comply with good ethical conduct was to follow local advice in situations where I was unable to fully rely on my own frame of reference. I was extremely fortunate to have worked and established a relationship of mutual trust with my friend and assistant Collins Jamson, without whose help I would certainly have had a very different kind of access to life in Peki. My funding allowed me to employ Collins as a research assistant for the entire project and I give full credit

to his contribution on the ground. Generally, my time spent in the Peki community was facilitated and supported by many people who showed good will, kindness and an interest in helping me with my research, while often also learning something new about their own community. I had a network of neighbours, temporary family members and friends, and friends of friends who supported me and kept me company throughout this time. In the book, I comment on things that require additional explanations (often but not always in endnotes), such as the use of full names or pseudonyms for interlocutors. As the field of death is also an ethically sensitive area, I am equally indebted to the advice of local people, where many norms and practices in relation to the dead are quite different than in Germany. Yet, I am aware that these norms do in many instances apply first and foremost to community members. This is a reason why, given that this is a book for an international audience, I am not sharing images of individuals, neither alive nor dead. In Ghana, as I have learned, it is common practice to post images of a dead relative or friend during their lying in state as a WhatsApp profile picture. And despite my amazement when learning about such – to my eyes highly unusual – acts of commemoration, I adhere to the norms that govern my structural access to the field and, most importantly, the gaze of an international academic public. Nevertheless, I do hope that this book finds many interested Ghanaian readers from within and outside of academia and am glad that this has become much more likely with the open access version of the book.

While learning about people, their lives, their relations, values, objects, materials, production and beliefs, the community structure in Peki and the role of the dead in this complex arrangement, I was aware that I was looking at these things through a lens that is very differently connoted in Western everyday life than in the lives of people in Peki. Ethnography and the discipline of anthropology have recently undergone a reconceptualization and critical re-evaluation regarding their agency in 'Othering' non-Western cultures and possibly reproducing colonial visions of cultural essentialism and stereotypes. This becomes particularly relevant for research that is carried out trans-culturally, and Africa happens to be *the* classic example of the cultural Other. The challenge for a discipline that evolved alongside the colonial encounter and profited from it is to become aware of its past, positions of privilege and entanglements with exploitative power relations, whether historical or current. Seen as a chance for anthropology however, theory and research which interrogate the discipline critically should not aim at its destruction. Academic anthropology is represented by a small and therefore quite fragile community of knowledge, of which I am a member and which I value deeply. This community assembles a multitude of voices that are committed to placing themselves in uncertain territory and to give up the comfort and identity of their own habits and environments to collect insights into what social life looks like in its broad diversity across the globe. This practice of methodological displacement is coupled with a rich body of

knowledge which helps to illuminate stories of encounters. Such a practice is, I would argue, still something that is rarely done for other reasons. The role of the ethnographer is often an uncomfortable position and, as such, it may produce interesting friction points leading to new insights. Anthropology, if done in a way that intends to reach out and communicate, therefore has the unique potential to foster understanding among people and create awareness of the multitudes of ways in which life can be lived and socially shared as a human experience.

Interestingly, death, seen as a human universal, can be interpreted as a fact of life that constitutes the human condition and makes people more 'the same', despite their cultural and local differences. It can also function to draw out the increased potentiality of the Other, simultaneous alienating and equalizing. It is not only cultural Others who die: the human universal of death itself also remains an 'absolute Other of being' to the living (Bauman 1992: 1). In disagreement with a humanist agenda, which anthropology has been and is still associated with, I argue that a contemporary and decolonial perspective on death should not serve to state that we are all the same, despite our apparent differences (Argyrou 2002). The fact that all humans die does not mean that this makes us all 'the same', meaning humans with common values and experiences, with shared aims and perceptions of the world. The association of death with power and structural inequality, with questions such as which lives may be grieved for and who holds the right to decide over matters of life and death, has been critically taken up by theorists such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler and Achille Mbembe among others. However, research that looks at death, the impact of biopolitics and its social life can demonstrate the particularities of one way of coping with death, its historical implications, its functions, and the place it holds in today's world. As another, more recent and increasingly central concern of anthropology, global flows and connections are always part of the local picture, wherever we look. The anthropology of death is included in this perspective through studies of urban-rural connections (Lee 2011) and studies of death in migrant communities (Havik, Mapril and Saraiva 2018). With this in mind, the book considers the lessons that one can learn from an 'anthropology of death' against this actualized and politically relevant background.

Surprisingly, the teachers who have helped me the most in my attempts at understanding death and Ghanaian ways of living, experiencing and grieving in the town of Peki have not just been my interlocutors and anthropological ancestors, but also my own grandparents. During two weeks of filming in Peki for what was to become the short film *Now I Am Dead* (2019), my maternal grandfather Heinz Wilde died, at the age of ninety-eight, in Germany on 12 August 2018 (a date which has since always been saved in my mental diary as associated with the song 'August Twelve' by the American psychedelic rock band Khruangbin). This event, the coming of which my family had semi-intentionally hidden from me so as not to

topple my travel plans, had a direct influence on the course of the filming. The original concept of the film had been to follow me as the anthropologist doing fieldwork and to make this specific kind of interaction the subject of the film. What actually evolved was a film about my attempt to mourn the death of my relative while being far away from home, yet surrounded by the topic of death in everything I had been studying. I ended up taking different kinds of suggestions and advice from friends, neighbours and interlocutors in Peki, which produced many interesting conversations on perspectives and emotions around death with people from the community, a funeral banner for my grandfather and a commemorative church service with a gathering at my neighbour's house afterwards. The course of events, as it unfolded, left me feeling bedazzled and amazed – this was not how I had imagined my grandfather's funeral. I initially also felt like I had failed my most important responsibility, namely, to support my mother and grandmother during this time and to take charge of the funeral organization in my newly won role as an 'expert' on death. Yet, as time passed, and especially after the death of my grandmother Ingrid Wilde on 17 February 2022, I started seeing this experience, and the understanding that it had provided me with, in a different light. My maternal grandmother was the first relative (no close friend has died so far, I am fortunate to say) whose loss I could actively follow and feel in a qualitative present and 'deep' way. I believe that this was so because I had access to the body of my deceased grandmother and could engage with my feelings through this interaction. Already restricted in movement and cared for by a permanent live-in carer, my grandmother had suffered a surprising and quick series of several strokes, which left her unconscious in hospital. She died there soon after from suffering another stroke. Because the (old and male) undertaker that my family had used for burying my grandfather was not available at the time, my mother was recommended a younger female undertaker who was 'new to the business', after having managed a furniture store for some time. When my mother mentioned to her that I, her child, had been working with and alongside undertakers as part of my research, this undertaker suggested that I join her for the dressing and preparation of my grandmother's body. By German standards, this is highly unusual, as relatives and other mourners often seek to avoid contact with a deceased's body at all cost, outsourcing this service to the undertaker. There are usually also no open casket viewings or lying in states. At the time of my grandmother's death, I was in Berlin, a good 600 kilometres away from my family. In Germany, it is legally prescribed to bury the deceased within a week unless there is an investigation going on related to the death. I therefore had to hurry to make it in time for the dressing. In Ghana, the temporal dimensions of such events are much wider, often leaving many months until the body emerges from its temporary hold in the morgue. In the end, I convinced my mother to attend this dressing with me. While she was initially very scared to look or partake, we found a way to engage in this last act of loving care in a harmonic and even humorous way, which,

so my mother says, gave her an immense feeling of relief and reduced the fear and creeping anxiety related to death and dead bodies. After all, this was our beloved mother and grandmother whom we were helping to get dressed – one last time. What I felt was sorely missing, as we undertook this at a very empty and very cold funeral parlour and morgue that was situated on the grounds of the cemetery where my grandparents are now both buried, was the hustle and bustle of other people which I was so familiar with from my work in Ghana, be it at the morgue or at lying in states and funerals. Here, in the German context, we were alone, two women working in undertaking and two people representing female lineage as mother and non-binary daughter, dressing another woman's dead body while the wind of the late-winter storm which had made my travel there quite difficult howled around the building. I realized that my socialization with death, although it had only started in my early thirties, was essentially Ghanaian. I felt uncomfortable with the German quiet, the idea of doing this dressing behind 'locked doors' as the undertaker had assured us (So that no one else might wander in unannounced? Or so that the dead remained separated from the living?), and without the support of a group of other mourners, family members or friends. Yet, I believed that the qualitative difference between my contribution to dressing the body of my grandmother and the dressing of other bodies in the community of Peki could not be decisive. In the months that followed, up until the point of writing in late October 2022, I learned that this assumption had been wrong.

The dreams about my grandmother started a week before her death. At the time, nobody could have foreseen her nearing death, as her health was stable. I had a dream in which we were rummaging around in her house while she was apparently not around. As I got ready to leave, I saw that she had been sitting in her comfortable chair where she used to sit day in, day out. As I went to engage with her, she pretended she did not know me, calling me a slut, and laughing menacingly. She then proceeded to get up with superhuman speed, running around the house, insulting people, and tearing down furniture. I was puzzled. What had come over her? In real life, my grandmother had always been a warm and emotionally supportive presence in my life, with fondness for the time that she had spent with me as a toddler, her first grandchild, who she considered almost like her own daughter, so she told me over and over. After her death, I was repeatedly haunted by dreams of my grandmother in different states of being undead or coming back to life. All these dreams somehow related back to me dressing her dead body as a point of emotional and visual reference.

At the time, I was deeply disturbed by these dreams, as they came to depict my loving and caring grandmother as a presence that was angry, that did not want to find its allocated place among the dead, and who followed me around, saying she did not feel like leaving yet. Over the summer, these dreams subsided, only to re-emerge when my writing of this book intensified again after a period of conference visits, holidays and being sick

with Covid-19. Yet, now something about the content of these dreams had changed. Having become so used to these visitations, I even asked her in the dreams what she wanted and why she kept showing up in a state of uncertain ontological existence. Her fury had also changed to now initially being calm and becoming disturbed by an event that occurred around her later. I realized that a dream about my grandmother in which she had been stored in the basement of a house that my family inhabited in that dream was my personal adaption of Robert Hertz's secondary burial model, which plays a major role in this book as an analytical key to understanding ways of socially processing death. I also recognized that my way of emotionally relating to this person, whom I continue to love dearly, and of grappling with her death was at the same time German as it was Ghanaian. In one dream, I was dressing my grandmother for her funeral, and her face finally looked peaceful, her mouth and eyes closed. When a Ghanaian undertaker then proceeded to glue her lips together with superglue, something that the undertaker I worked with in Peki did as standard procedure on every body, my grandmother's body began to convulse and she coughed until her mouth opened. The treatment with a liquid synthetic material which was supposed to close her off from the living and to shut her body had created a kneejerk anti-reaction. My grandmother came back to life, crying and confused, asking where she was and what had happened. A German undertaker then declared her revitalized and we transferred her onto a bed, where we shared a moment of joint crying and mourning but also joy upon her return. Then, abruptly, as I had just settled with the idea that she was indeed back and identical with the grandmother that I knew, her body went limp – she had died, again. As I awoke, trying to make sense of this dream, it occurred to me that my grandmother, being German, had taken issue with a practice particular to Ghanaian ways of preparing a body. Instead of embracing the control and clear differentiation between the dead and the living which synthetic materials in Ghana seem to offer, she had been disturbed by this as an act of violence, ultimately disturbing her rest rather than enabling it. Similarly, in the dream where my grandmother was stored in the basement of my family's house, I inquired as to why she was being stored there and who would eventually remove her to her resting place. My family answered, in line with Hertz, that it was necessary to keep her there for some time. As I discussed this with them and objected to this practice, I eventually spotted my grandmother walking up the stairs and onto the roof terrace where we were talking. She looked a little weak and pale and was wearing a night-gown, but seemed otherwise fine. She joined the conversation and complained loudly about her being kept in the basement. When I inquired what she wished for, she stated that she wanted to be buried with my grandfather, whose coffin, in the dream, was stored in the cellar room nearby. As she answered, I at first felt a sense of relief, finally having found a way to stop her reappearing. Yet, even in the dream, I remembered that actually what she had asked for was already true, as she was in fact buried next to my

grandfather. When I tried to make sense of this, my grandmother sat down at the table with us and requested a serving of the fruit salad that people were eating. Since there was no appropriate bowl left for her, I served her a portion in a cullender, which left the generous serving of whipped cream that she had also insisted on to drip onto her nightgown. She ate with much appetite, unbothered by the dripping dessert.

What I believe these visions and dreams are continuously teaching me is that it takes a personal connection to experiencing death, via the loss of someone who is indeed loved and missed dearly, in order to understand other people's suffering and loss. These experiences can never be 'the same' as such, no matter whether there are culturally different practices and beliefs involved or whether it is simply the regular degree of separation that we experience with other people. But in order to also emotionally relate and think through the deaths and practices that I am writing about in this book, of others and 'Others', it needed my grandmother as an emotional link, a teacher and a translator, to make these fully understandable to me. She also helped me to understand my own culturally-emotionally coined ways of assessing which way of engaging with a dead person was appropriate, including the degree of separation and fixation that is desirable to achieve. I am therefore eternally thankful to my grandparents for guiding me in my dreams and to those interlocutors, friends and collaborators in Peki and Ghana who allowed me to share their very personal moments of sorrow with them.

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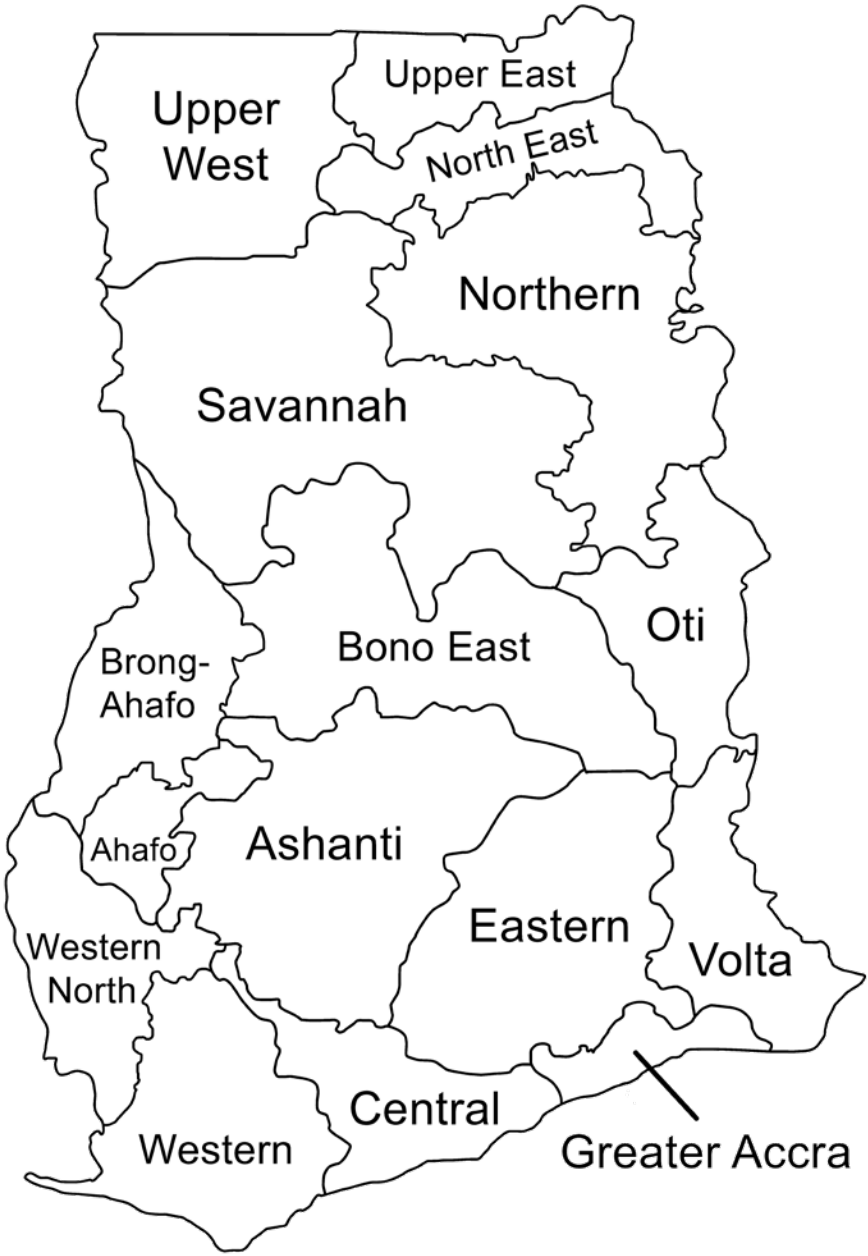
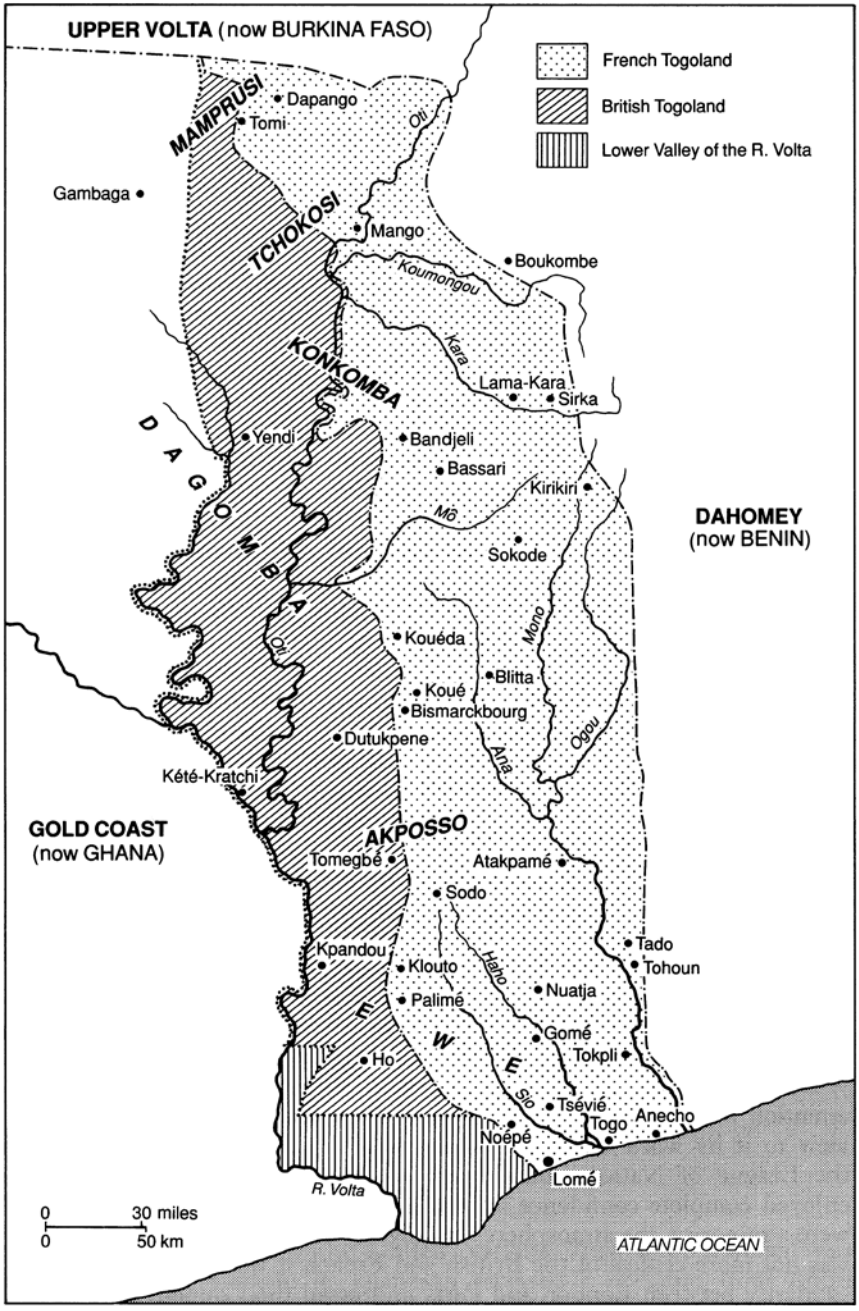
Map 0.1 Geographical map of Ghana with Peki marked. Based on a map by By Karte: NordNordWest, Licence: Creative Commons by-sa-3.0 de, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=76319672

Map 0.2 Map of Ghana with its administrative regions in 2016. Based on a map from the UN Maps and Geospatial Services, https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/ghana



Map 0.3 Map of Ghana with its sixteen administrative regions in 2019. Map by Rwhaun at Wikimedia Commons, License: CC-BY SA 4.0, license https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2019_Regions_of_Ghana.png

Map 0.4 A map of the South Dayi District with Peki. Ghana Statistical Service, South Dayi Report.



Map 0.5 A map of the divided Ewe territory and the Volta Region as British Togoland. Taken from Mazrui and Wondji (1999: 874). Rights held by the UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the drafting of a General History of Africa. License: CC-BY SA 3.0 IGO

Introduction
Death, Time and Synthetic Materials

In Peki, a town in the Ghanaian Volta Region, funerals are loud, popular, public and extremely busy events, which take place over the course of dedicated weekends. Every second Friday, the town transforms into a temporary stage for commemorating those who have passed, bundling dozens of funerals together. Their temporal, material and spatial intensity engages all senses while being highly social. It is the essence of gossip and prestige, the who, what, when, how and why, that occupies the minds of community members while close kin, neighbours and guests rub shoulders over the course of the festivities. Despite the stark contrast between the vividness of these events and what they bemourn – the end of life – there is a profound grief, which resonates on a deeper level. Bringing together sociality and sorrow, the buzz of funeral weekends is driven by the urgency of settling issues that, ultimately, are extremely relevant to the living and essentially of a political nature. This book looks at those urgent affairs and intentions of the living, which become invested in the dead. It does so by focusing on the temporal and moral aspects of bodies, synthetic materials and transcendental entities as these become important for negotiating political processes within the community. Despite all the intents and purposes that community members may bring to the table, other elements, such as the bodies of the dead, spirits, deities and materials like plastic or concrete form part of this process, sometimes supporting the intended outcome, sometimes subverting it. Hence, this is a story about entanglements beyond human control, not just between 'humans and things', the latter of which according to archaeologist Ian Hodder stand out as materially durable in comparison to our fleeting lives (2012).

Before burial, the bodies of the deceased are stored at the local morgue for months or sometimes even years to prepare the best possible funeral. Materials which in Western-scientific categorization fit the labels organic and synthetic[1] and degrade at a different pace play key roles in this lengthy

process: formaldehyde and super glue, funeral banners printed on PVC and dead bodies lying in state, cellophane grave wreaths and cassava plants, satin and locally woven *kente* fabric, plastic buckets and earthenware pots, cemented tombs and red soil. In all steps of the funerary activities, synthetic materials feature prominently and are held to embody durability and other positive moral values. Meanwhile, the decay of dead human bodies in association with other biodegradable materials is mostly seen as a negative event that must be controlled. It is the combination of materials incorporating different potential qualities, moral attributes, temporalities and aesthetics that plays a major yet not immediately visible role in commemorative practices, affecting long-term processes of community formation. The tension that arises between these different material orders reflects issues that are at stake when addressing the tension between the realm of the dead and the world of the living. Tense relations around synthetic materials also stem from the colonial encounter and, in its continuation, contemporary unequal economic relations. Similar things can be said about regulations around burial practices, beliefs around death and the involvement of the nation state in contemporary deathways. Responding to such a diagnosed multiplicity of tensions, this book traces the connection between death, a globalized-capitalist circulation of synthetic materials and the long-term systemic inequalities and harm caused by colonialism, which continue to have a massive impact on our contemporary world.[2] Considering the intersection of these fields, I will unpack how this nucleus of socially effective force fields shapes the negotiation of power relations in a Ghanaian Ewe community.[3]

The question that lies at the heart of these thoughts is how transformations of social practices, of the dead and of synthetic materials co-constitute one another and what role temporal scales play in this. Speaking about the most popular of all synthetic materials, Heather Davis traces plastic's apparently endless mutability and resourcefulness back to Western high modernist utopias, in which it came to represent a durable opposite to death while offering independence from organic life and otherworldly beings: 'Plastic represented a shiny new world, one that removed some people from the cycles of life and death, that superseded the troublesome, leaky, amorphous, and porous demands of ancestors, bodies and the earth' (2022: 34). In Peki, the demands of the dead, some of whom become ancestors, resonate throughout the community. These demands are responded to by attempting to control, fix, feed, please and eternally maintain the dead's material and spiritual elements as these go through a series of transformations. In light of this observation and following Davis' thoughts, I set out to investigate if and where in my 'field'[4] the durability of synthetic materials such as plastics and concrete serves to achieve conservative agendas when combined with a demonstrable control over the dead. Writing about plastics and time, Davis points out that these synthetic materials are of fossil origin and shaped by petrocapitalism, thereby collapsing deep time and a drive for short-lived consumption into plastic matter. As such, plastic time seems to be ignorant

of history and life: 'Plastic fits within a blind drive towards the future, where the present is constantly discarded and the past has ceased to exist' (2022: 33). In this new temporality of plastic, being 'made to be wasted' (Hawkins 2013) is furthering petrocapitalist processes while creating toxic environments and waste that endures, stubbornly. Taking this observation to a level of social analysis in the context of funerary practices, I wonder if (and at what cost) the extended life of synthetic materials, when these become waste or other types of 'matter out of place', serves to promote transformative social agendas and to liberate elements of the dead from control. Combining largely local and contemporary ethnographic observations with a focus on global socio-political entanglements across time may, as I would argue, offer the quality of sightedness in response to this blind impetus of plastics and other synthetic materials. This perceptive gaze on synthetic materials is one which speaks from the present, looks at the past and reaches out towards different possible futures.

The Curious Case of Glitter Makeup on a Dead Body

My very first encounter with a dead human body happened to be a tense experience, one which I had very early on into my fieldwork in Ghana (but, at the age of thirty, relatively late in life). At the beginning of this book, it lends itself as a guiding affective image that illustrates the entanglement of the dead and synthetic materials in Peki. On the second night after my arrival in town, I attended the lying in state of a female elder. When I nervously entered the room in which the body was placed, I found its walls and ceiling clad in satin, with all doors to adjoining rooms and all windows covered. The entrance to the house led straight into this setting, making it appear as if the building had shrunk to a single room. A draft of air, sweeping through the open door and some invisible outlets made the layers of fabric sway in the breeze. The room was tiny and narrow. An elderly lady lay in a coffin that occupied the centre of the room, leaving very little space to circumnavigate it in immediate proximity to the body. Around me, people were saying their goodbyes, talking to the deceased and leaving small gifts to make sure the body and spirit made it through the night safely.

I remember my affective reaction to being in this space: I grasped my throat with both my hands and pulled my shoulders up tensely. On top of a mix of shock and disbelief, I experienced irritation about what in my eyes seemed like quite extreme makeup on the face of the deceased. She was adorned with what could have been glitter nail polish as lipstick. It only dawned on me later that what I had then perceived as an aesthetic faux pas, from my culturally European point of view, was in fact a tactical application of synthetic materials on a dead body. I would also learn later, when closely working with an undertaker in the community, that the mouths of the dead are firmly shut by applying super glue, yet another synthetic material. This experience serves as a moment of ethnographic observation which, beyond

the immediacy of my affective reaction, contains a deeper lesson: the dead and synthetic materials are intentionally positioned in relation with each other in Peki. The former may take on the seemingly temporally durable and, like in the case of glitter, sometimes aesthetically spectacular properties of the latter. But through their association with synthetic materials, the dead may also live longer than wished for. This co-constitutive relation between synthetic materials and the dead serves as a leitmotif for engaging with the ethnography at hand.

Human bodies, things and materials are attributed with qualities that are shaped by cultural frames and individual perception. In relation to death, materials perceived as durable may help to put the dead in their intended place, a process of attribution which fundamentally depends on perspective. Synthetics seem to promise durability while the dead are ephemeral, prone to fading away. If the two meet under the right circumstances, the durability attributed to synthetics may pass on to select elements of the dead, helping to conserve their legacy in an ideal state. However, synthetics and the dead may also turn to other qualities that are inherent within them. Through these qualities, they may display different kinds of agencies, which may become amplified when both, synthetics and the dead, are combined. In efforts to control the trajectory and uncertain agency of the dead, synthetics promise to lend agency to the living in the town of Peki for temporally and spatially containing the dead. But since synthetic materials often overstay their welcome, meaning that they are notoriously difficult to recycle or remove at a macro- and micro-level once they are considered rubbish, they are in the same uncertain situation as the dead. Ultimately, synthetic materials and the dead in Peki form a tense relationship that exists between states of control and slippage, which creates problems for the living in fashioning ideal relationships to the dead. These relationships will have a positive influence on the social standing of the living and their relationships with community members. Hence, all involved in this ghostly game must navigate an uncertain terrain.

Synthetic Materials, Social Transformation and Colonial History

Death, as it turns out, is a kind of unknown territory that is at the same time relational while being loaded with various intentions to execute control, all of which influences how the living interact with one another. To understand how these different spheres – death and life, the material and the social – are connected, let me ask a rhetorical question. What does a plastic object have in common with an embalmed body that has been sitting in the deep-freeze of a morgue for a year? Initially very little. The former is merely a thing made of synthetic polymers, durable yet hard to fix once broken, while the latter is the organic form of a human being that is no longer alive, preserved temporarily but poised for decomposition. The plastic object may be at hand or become rubbish, while the human body commands piety and

special engagement as it is more than the sum of its parts. But when thinking about ways in which the lives and afterlives of both are at the same time prolonged, yet highly precarious, there turn out to be more similarities than initially meets the eye. As matter(s) of uncertainty, dead bodies and synthetics also imply moral registers of evaluating their physical and ideological states while undergoing transformations, be they in life, death or in between these two poles.

I do not invoke this image to instigate feelings of shock. Rather, I believe that this admittedly unusual comparison can help to unpack how colonial powers and their diverse local appropriations continue to seek control over the social structures of those they seek to dominate. By colonial powers, as indicated before, I am referring to the ongoing afterlives of colonial interventions and their current effects on human and more-than-human spheres. Kwame Nkrumah, the first head of state of Ghana as the first African nation to become independent, coined the term neo-colonialism to describe and critique such effects that he perceived in the 1960s (Nkrumah 1984, 1965). While acknowledging that neo-colonialism could potentially be understood to include a very broad set of effects, Nkrumah was mainly concerned with specific ways in which Western nations and economies could install shadow governments in former colonies, either through military control or, more subtly, through economic and monetary means, with the aim of continued extraction of wealth from these countries. Contemporary critical anthropology is indebted to foundational critique from thinkers of the Black Radical Tradition and decolonial thinkers from Latin America and South Asia. The Black Radical Tradition is represented by, amongst many others, W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter Rodney or Audre Lorde, and scholars that keep this tradition alive today are, for example, David Scott, Christina Sharpe, Achille Mbembe or Fred Moten. Latin American voices include, amongst others, Walter Mignolo, Maria Lugones and Arturo Escobar, while the tradition of South Asian and specifically Indian critical thought is most famously connected with Mahatma Ghandi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha, continued by contemporary voices such as Julietta Singh or Leelah Gandhi. Contemporary critical thought in anthropology and beyond continues to think about the effects of colonialism as a force that needs to be given major consideration in contemporary analyses of social life. In an effort to critically reframe how Western analytical concepts are complicit in the actualization of contemporary colonialisms by way of a demonstrated critical gesture, such as, for example, through the concept of *ontology*, Elizabeth A. Povinelli writes: 'I will argue that the political relevance of any claim about existence emerges from the ways colonial power entangled existence, spawning capitalism and its long-standing governmental partner, liberalism, and in the process leaving the earth potted by the materially differentiated force of their toxic activities' (2021: 2). Science and technology scholar Max Liboiron, who practises and promotes anticolonial indigenous environmental research, engages with the social history of plastics and

subsequently offers a similar understanding to Povinelli's framing of colonialism. They write: 'I find that many people understand colonialism as a monolithic structure with roots exclusively in historical bad action, rather than as a set of contemporary and evolving land relations that can be maintained by good intentions and even good deeds. The call for more recycling, for example, still assumes access to Indigenous Land for recycling centres and their pollution' (2021: 6). Following these thoughts, I am using the words colonial and neo-colonial in a similar sense in this book, referring to the entangled effects of material and social states of existence that are based on unequal power relations which also, but not exclusively, heed back to historical times of colonial imperialism. In her analysis of the influence on Ewe people by missionary and Western political institutions during colonial times, Birgit Meyer describes a process of negotiation, marked not just as a subordination of local people but rather by 'attempts on the part of Ewe converts to deal creatively with foreign influence' (2002: 169). Christianity, as one of many of such foreign influences, was adjusted to local beliefs and made to operate within a much older local framework of ideas and beliefs (Meyer 1999). Opposed to these complex processes of acculturation, Meyer posits different perceptions of what colonialism is or was, pointing out that it may be associated with uni-directional processes and moral attributions, such as alienation or reification, depending on which perspective it is viewed from. However, these views tend to overlook the complexity of interactions that took and take place. In the field of death and commemoration, Ghanaian deathways and the materials that they entail today have been shaped by colonial, missionary and global capitalist forces, in conjunction with local actors, social structures, world views and concepts. Yet, as a look at the social and material ways of relating to the dead in Ghana shows, attempts at domination by external forces are certainly not a trump card, rendering my local interlocutors powerless. Rather, they become embedded and appropriated in manifold ways of local negotiations over economic, political and spiritual issues. Tracing their intersection, I am telling a story about the organization of neo-colonially shaped power relations in a locally specific and globally connected social context, namely an Ewe community in the South-East of Ghana, through the lens of death, time and their connection to synthetic materials. Offering an alternative perspective to Heather David's assessment that plastic 'cannot be local' (2022: 49) and that it 'appears without ontology because of its accelerated dislocation' (2022: 50), I find that, while not using the term ontology here, plastic and other synthetic materials do take on particular and unexpected moral evaluations and relational purposes in Peki. These are highly local and address interlocutors in different worlds and times, such as spirits, ancestors, God, living community members and land, while being intimately tied to global interconnections past and present.

Within anthropology, there is emergent scholarship on synthetic materials, a category usually referring to 'synthetic fibers, plastics and fabrics'

(Calvão, Bolay and Bell 2021: 7). There are studies which look at the social lives and possible properties inherent in such materials (Drazin and Küchler 2015; Pathak and Nichter 2019; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021), at meanings and ontologies associated with them (Braun and Traore 2015; Chao 2018), at their ecological and economic global entangledness (Krohn-Hansen, Nustad and Harvey 2019) and at waste, toxicity and recycling (Chalfin 2019; Papadopoulos 2021; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022; Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). However, synthetic materials have not been the focus of an ethnographic study and it is in fact not easy to find a widely used and available definition of what constitutes synthetic materials as a category. Hence, I propose to define synthetic materials as materials which become finished materials in a process of chemically altering several compounds, a process which results in a new material or substance with different characteristics to the initial components. For this process, industrial processing equipment is needed at some point of the production chain, making it impossible for an individual to undertake the making of synthetic materials independently. Synthesis describes a chemical process in which the individual parts become a unit by transforming the structures of components involved. Artificial is a term often used interchangeably with synthetic. In line with chemistry's categorizations of materials, artificial refers to a process of synthetization that has been controlled by humans, for example in a laboratory or factory. In her critical history of capitalist industrialization as the making of synthetic worlds, Esther Leslie attributes the synthetic to human activity: 'There is one part of nature that synthesizes other parts of nature – humans, who exert energy in the transformation of nature' (2005: 248). Synthetic substances hence become synonymous with crafted and cultural, as opposed to natural. Heather Davis remarks that 'the synthetic or "artificial" nature of something suggests the way in which it develops, emerges or is created irrespective of its surrounding environment . . . Synthetics actively deny the relations in which they are embedded' (2022: 46).

In the context of exploring sustainability around materials, the natural sciences also distinguish between renewable and non-renewable resources, which are associated with the categories of natural and synthetic materials, despite oil (pre-synthesis) being a non-renewable resource (Betts 1991). Synthetic materials may hence be new materials that are the product of a chemical, human-controlled reaction and yield a material embodiment of unity and durability.[5] This needs some contextualization. After Latour and the critical re-evaluation of a binary nature-culture divide and of science as social practice, anthropologists are aware that ordering categories from the natural sciences which reflect these binaries do only partially speak to the hybrid social properties of materials (Calvão, Bolay and Bell 2021; Masco 2021). Material scientist Mark Miodownik (2015) gives an account of human interaction with the material world. In attributing the properties of materials to scale while also telling stories about human interactions with materials, he takes a mediating perspective between what we perceive and

experience around materials and what material science and chemistry see in them. He points out that 'although a material may look and feel monolithic, although it may appear to be uniform throughout, this is an illusion: materials are, in fact, composed of many different entities that combine to form the whole, and these different entities reveal themselves at different scales' (2015: 357). Understandings of detailed characteristics that go beyond the basic chemical composition of materials, into the micro-, macro- and finally atomic scale, then allow an understanding of why they may have the properties they display. Yet, in the end, it is also their social role and our various associations and attributions of meanings, feelings and evaluations that play a role in how materials shape social life, and vice versa.

Composites form another category of materials, in which components with different properties combine into a new material with new properties. The technical difference that distinguishes them from synthetic materials is fuzzy, but while the compounds of composites still retain some degree of separate identity in the final product, they do not retain that same degree of autonomy in synthesized materials, despite both processes being irreversible. Cement, for example, is a material which is today largely produced by synthesizing different components at high temperatures. This serves as a base material for processing into concrete, a composite material which usually escapes being categorized as synthetic. However, concrete has been labelled 'the world's most used synthetic material' by *The Guardian* (Kane 2016), and anthropologist Joseph Masco counts concrete, but also aluminium and of course plastic, as synthetic materials (2021: 136). So, what is to be done with this fuzzy category of the synthetic? From an anthropological point of view, which focuses on the social relations that these materials help to produce, artificial meat, medication, cement, concrete, fabrics made from synthetic fibres and common household plastics are similar in several ways, which is why I propose to understand them jointly as synthetic materials.[6] They are not recyclable by disassembling them back into their original components; they acquire entirely new possible properties in their processed form (Allen 2015); they are regarded as 'artificial' while based on initially 'natural' components (such as minerals or petrochemicals); and they are inextricably linked to capitalism (Taussig 2004; Masco 2021), having been perceived as drivers of the Anthropocene and a globalized idea of Modernity (Forty 2012; Archambault 2018). Most importantly, though, synthetic materials, following this broader understanding, are extremely mouldable at some point of their production cycle: they have, or have had, plasticity. This plasticity, however, turns into its exact opposite as these materials are given form and it cannot be regained once that is done. The materials become hard and fixated in the shapes they have been given, leaving the agency over determining their form to those who are involved in the manufacturing process. For most things made of polymer-based plastic, for example, the initial form-giving process takes place in factories, while the objects that are produced may later be altered in other creative ways.

Katie Lloyd Thomas discusses the use of plasticity and giving of form on a philosophical level very engagingly with regards to concrete (2015). While usually based on commodified and industrially produced 'Portland' cement these days (Harvey 2019: 150), concrete also allows the giving of form outside the factory walls. Yet, as Penny Harvey writes in her discussion of Adrian Forty's extensive mediation on concrete (Forty 2012), its most engaging quality is 'to exceed categorical qualification' (Harvey 2019: 150). Due to this, she calls concrete 'an entirely synthetic material, but the aggregates intrinsic to its composition carry a degree of uncertainty associated with the unconformity of soft matter' (2019: 150). Through a transformation from plastic to fixated, different synthetic materials acquire certain qualities that are comparable amongst one another, such as their apparent durability and longevity. These attributes and the fact that taking agency over their shape becomes more difficult along the line render synthetic materials powerful yet problematic. The fact that they 'exist[s] in a perpetually unstable state' (Allen 2015: 238) makes them easily mouldable. However, the moulded product that is hard to alter may also stand in the way of people's intentions while possibly transforming in unforeseeable ways, lending itself to becoming 'matter out of place' and ultimately ending up as rubbish .

The dead also hold the potential to be shaped by the living or to escape their intentions. This is somewhat easier when applied to the legacy of a deceased and their imagined new existence, but becomes more difficult when dealing with actual dead bodies. These, like synthetic materials that end up in a fixed form with often very little reshaping possible, have lost their 'living' plasticity and are difficult to bend and shape, as I learned hands-on during my work with an undertaker. Instead, dead bodies are poised for decomposition, setting in motion another very plastic process, yet one that follows its own rules. By means of bodies, places, materials and stories, the dead can be made to last, appropriated or forgotten, depending on how people choose to remember them. In Peki, much like in other places across the world, those dead who retain a presence in the world imbue their legacy-makers (often, but not always, kin) with power. Those who have departed in 'bad' ways or with unresolved issues may possibly come back to haunt the living, claiming agency that can turn against community members. Those cases then need to be addressed and counteracted by the community. Both possible scenarios show that the dead play a key role in negotiating power relations among community members. This makes them valuable but uncanny pawns that must be controlled well to achieve the most favourable outcome for oneself, one's kin, one's clan, one's political party and so on. A fashioning of the dead as new otherworldly persons happens via engaging with temporal and transformative aspects of the material world. The dead can be made 'ideal', just like synthetics, but there is also a constant struggle to contain certain elements that are unruly or even transgressive. By way of ethnographically illuminating two sequences in which the dead in the town of Peki are transformed, either in reaction to a 'good' or a 'bad' death,[7] it

becomes apparent how synthetic materials and social entities are invested with attributes of durability and control, ultimately linking back to the question of individually and structurally executed power over people's lives.

At the very moment of attending my first lying in state in that small room, I was far from producing such elaborate thoughts or even analytical reflection. The inevitability of the dead body, my irritation, but also the build-up of tension during a long and hot walk to the house, the commotion of people on the street and the wait together with the other mourners, had culminated in a sense of acute awareness of the strangeness of death. In fact, it was strange to me. While people in Peki deal with the occurrence of death and the presence of dead bodies as part of their everyday lives, I had not been in any way forced or obliged to experience anything like this while living in Europe. Therefore, this material proof that death exists, in the form of a dead body, felt different from an abstract understanding of death. Although I accepted it as a reality, it had not 'really' been real. Peter Bjerregaard, Anders Emil Rasmussen and Tim Flohr Sørensen critique this attribution of 'facticity' to things, bodies and substances broadly referred to as the 'materiality of death' (2016: 5). They suggested that it is not death that possesses materiality, but rather the act of passing through death, materially, temporally and imaginatively. An understanding of death as a process of transformation is in line with this reframing. It is not 'death per se' that I encountered but rather decaying matter in the form of a dead body. Yet, my encounter with a dead body had a distinct affective quality to it than an encounter with a tombstone does not. This body was different to living bodies I knew. It had been fundamentally changed by death, marking a fleeting but nevertheless material representation of this state. Since human death had in fact not manifested itself in my life, other than in the form of a closed coffin at my paternal grandmother's funeral, it had not so far had the material quality of 'existence' that it now acquired. As stated earlier in the preface, I will include rather than obfuscate my focal point of view in the narrative that I am presenting here, owning up to the fact that I cannot represent a neutral position and, as culturally European, may partially refer to my own perspective as a subject to be decolonized.

My study is set in contemporary Ghana. Here, current practices of mourning are tied to long-term historical interferences between the local population and Western colonizers. The same is true of local uses of synthetic materials and their place within the history of global economic exchange. Plastics and other synthetics are developed and circulated within a neo-colonial and global-capitalist system. Often, as Joseph Masco remarks, the global distribution of synthetic materials is driven by the Global North, 'generated by nuclear nationalism and petro-chemical capitalism' (2021: 146) while leaving a large part of the global population in the position of consumers or waste depositories. Part of taking an anticolonial position as an anthropologist lies in the task of contextualizing ethnography before this wider historical background that still haunts our present, both in the Global

North and South. In that regard, regulations around death on the one hand and the presence of synthetic materials on the other share a common history of domination and the latter have been labelled a colonizing set of materials (Masco 2021: 133). Synthetic materials, most famously plastics, have taken over unexpected markets and ecological niches across the world to the extent of literally colonizing ecosystems and economies, often with deadly consequences. The history of human death and the dead, as written with a focus on Europe and West Africa, is equally entangled with colonial domination. Thomas Laqueur's (2015) account of Western deathways and how the imperial colonial project shaped those, and John Parker's history of death in West Africa (2021), which was equally shaped by colonial presence, complement each other like two pieces of a puzzle. However, when looking at contemporary practices relating to death, West Africa speaks an entirely different language than many so-called 'Western' cultures and customs. Here, death is immediately present in public and shared social life. This powerful publicness across different social spheres, corresponding with what Marcel Mauss has termed a total social phenomenon (2002), was also a reason I chose to write about it, at the time being a researcher who was new to Ghana and in many ways relied on a topic that invited me in. And

Figure 0.1 Funeral posters, mixed in with political campaign posters, announcements for religious events and commercial ads, hang next to a stall selling eggs and bread, all wrapped in see-through plastic bags, in Peki, 2016. © Isabel Bredenbröker

while funerals in my home country of Germany are an intimate, almost private affair, in Ghana it is quite the opposite: you cannot go to too many funerals, and everyone is welcome!

Three Lessons from the Anthropology of Death: Between Mastery and Failure

I am presenting my ethnographic accounts in dialogue with two key theoretical fields, namely anthropological theories of death and of materiality. A central question arises at their intersection: what role does the material world play in dealing with a powerful shared social condition, here death? It is one of the grand questions when thinking about social life and transformation in general. In the context of Peki, the urge to take control, to master life and death, is reflected in the multiple practices and perspectives on synthetic materials as 'unchanging' which represent attempts at containing death. But while some elements of death can be shaped, when do these efforts turn towards wanting to master death, a condition that is essentially unmasterable? Where is the qualitative line between taking agency and claiming mastery? And what effects do these slightly different aims have on relations between the living? While aiming to execute some degree of control is essentially a proactive gesture, mastery, its conceptual cousin, is a political tool that has been at the core of the colonial project and aims to dominate. Control of a shared social condition can only ever be possible in part, for example in the realization of diverse individual aims and the bundling of power in governmental structures. How, then, is the material world either complicit with human intentions or acting as a force that reveals mastery as something which may never be fully achieved?

Essentially, as I want to argue, attempts at controlling elements of death are part of clever micropolitical negotiations between people, while the grand aspiration of mastering it expresses the intent to dominate over others. As such, biopolitical control over life and death in the sense of Michel Foucault (2010) and what Achille Mbembe has termed necropolitics (2019) have a long history of being used as political forms of controlling and dominating. Yet, these macropolitical systems also exist in micropolitical circumstances and may be dismantled there. Thinking along the lines of Julietta Singh (2018) who has taken on the intellectual project of 'unthinking mastery' in a dehumanist and decolonial sense, mastery and its impossibility always relate to power structures, on macro- and micro levels. In colonial contexts, attempts at mastery became a counter colonial strategy in response to being subjected to colonial forces. Yet, this counter-mastery was equally bound to fail or create new problems. Singh recounts how Frantz Fanon's and Mohandas K. 'Mahatma' Gandhi's anticolonial strategies, despite their differences, both had at their core an aspiration to mastery that mirrored that of the colonizers. This happened at the expense of the rights and concerns of 'women, animals, the disabled and outcasts' (Singh 2018:

24), hence perpetuating inequality on a different level and reproducing oppressive power structures which need to be challenged. It is then in the instances when mastery fails that the innovative forces of human relations make themselves known, where power relations change, where assumptions are challenged, where grand narratives break down. The material world, our bodies, lives, and deaths are repeatedly sought to be controlled and ultimately mastered by humans. Individuals and cultures will forever strive to have the upper hand in a match against death while playing the cards they have been dealt.

What can anthropology contribute to understanding these efforts? It cannot shed light on one essential question, namely 'what happens afterwards' to those who have gone. Unless a person claims to have a direct line to the beyond and communicate across this divide as a messenger, we are left guessing. However, we are also left to second-guess the messenger and even our own perception, should we find ourselves in such an in-between situation. Yet, what anthropology can do is to pay close attention to how the living make their moves in reaction to death and to study the intentions they pursue as they do so. To that avail, the anthropology of death has produced a rich discourse that helps to understand the connection between death, the material world, and the organization of power relations among the living. Anthropology considers ontological outlooks on death, be they explicitly religious, more generally cosmological and spiritual or even outspokenly unideological. Yet, anthropology does not have to produce new answers of that same ontological quality. Rather, it looks at the multitude of human life and social organization that we are faced with as a cosmos, one that can be accounted for by paying close attention to what is happening in the world.

While making sense of structural questions of social organization around death has been a core concern of anthropological discourse and the theory it has brought forth, I want to stress that anything that happens in relation to death and dying is not just a process that can be abstractly made sense of and formularized as a theory of social structure. Rather, death possesses an excess quality of never being fully understood, of causing emotional upheaval on a personal and social scale, and of revealing the fragility of individual life and sense-making in the world just as much as of social workings and doings at large. I suggest that it is this excess quality, similar to excessive meaning beyond semiotic readings, which is at its very core emotional, that gives death and social ways of processing it such an immense power for transforming the social structures of the living. The anthropology of death has dedicated itself to looking at how death and the social are connected and the models it has brought forth remain helpful for understanding how death continues to contribute to the organization of social relations, hereby revealing itself covertly as part of political anthropology. As we will see, the shaping and fixating of materials, bodies and social forms lies at the core of these anthropological musings, mirroring the potential of embodying plasticity or fixedness.

Robert Hertz's Secondary Burial Model in Context

The work of the pioneering anthropologist Robert Hertz proves extremely productive to think with when attempting to understand processes of transformation, materially and socially. As an early text in the anthropology of death, it contains cues to the three major foci that have come to shape anthropological reflection on death. The first focus lies in the conceptualization of biological (as opposed to social) death. This offers not only an important theoretical distinction by means of which death and the social are connected, but is also the basis for theorizing materiality in relation to death and the social, leading up to more recent post-humanist approaches. Second is the concept of regeneration as a social and cosmological concept implicated in social responses to death, implying general ideas about the nature of the social. Continuing this thought, regeneration can also be grasped as a material process of recycling, replenishing or regrowing. And thirdly, a more recent interest in understanding death directly via its materiality has emerged, something which is in fact a fundamental concern of anthropology's engagement with death, which had been buried for some time. All these fields relate to one another and speak to the question of how social relations, the dead and the living, material things and bodies transform conjunctively. Anthropological discourse on death rests upon two traditions that have branched into different directions, one being a focus on symbolisms of death and belief systems based on sources from classic antiquity, as seen in the works of James Frazer and others (Bachofen 1859; Frazer 1913, 1933, 1996 [1890]; Tylor 1871), while the more recent tradition has moved 'towards an emphasis on social morphology' (Bloch and Parry 1982b: 2). The latter is the path I have taken here since it helps to unpack how intentions by multiple actors are expressed and negotiated around death by means of transforming social relations.

Robert Hertz is foundational for that second tradition. The essay 'Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort' (Hertz 1907; Hertz, Needham and Needham 2004) was the first anthropological text that put forward a distinction between death as biological and death as social through a reading of ethnographic observations. Hertz looks at 'death as a social phenomenon' with the aim of identifying certain universal functions and features (2004: 86). His study focuses on the treatment of the corpse and the controlled transformation that it undergoes during double (or secondary) burials, materially representing the dissolution of the individual person and the regeneration of a continuous vital force for the community of the living. His core thesis is that death is a socially and culturally constructed event, temporally and socially extending far beyond the biological death of an individual person. Embarking from Hertz's theoretical model and critically developing it proves particularly fruitful for re-thinking material engagements around death from a contemporary perspective. And while the anthropology of death as such is a specialized yet

wide field, there are concrete lessons to be learned if one follows the trail of Hertz's thought.

Lesson One: Material Transformations Shape Social Transformations (and Vice Versa)

The structural observation that Hertz puts forward is that, through the socially controlled unmaking of the corpse in ritual settings, the social person of the deceased is effaced step by step, allowing their death to be celebrated subsequently as an affirmation of life and of the social order. The so-called secondary burial of the remains then proves that this death has been transformed masterfully to serve the intentions of the living. The materiality of the corpse therefore represents more than just evidence of biological death, it becomes a site for negotiating the social aspects of death and marking the workings of time. In Peki, 'good' death is generally achieved by resisting change, conserving the body (which happens by freezing it for sometimes up to several years before burial) and then creating a material placeholder for the deceased, for example in the form of a durable grave, which help to make the transformed dead eternal. In many ways, this mirrors older burial practices in Ghana, where relatives were buried under the floors of houses, hereby literally becoming part of what constituted an ancestral home. Today, synthetic materials seem to be the perfect partners for achieving a similar kind of durability outside the domestic setting. Yet, these materials sometimes prove to be as unreliable as the dead themselves.

As becomes evident, all three major foci mentioned – death as social, transformative and material – are inherent in Hertz's work. He establishes that the dismantling of social relations, rights and responsibilities carried by the deceased also involves the transformation of relations among the living. The physical body of the deceased, as a material proof of biological death, thus anticipates the social body that emerges from the transformation of a living person into an ancestor. Its transformation and the ways in which the living achieve mastery over death by controlling the way the body changes are essential. Regarding the role of death-related practices and commemoration in Peki, this means that looking at material things and bodies that are of relevance here does not only help to understand underlying symbolic associations around death, but, much more engagingly, it shows how the ways in which death is made to matter come to shape social relations. This happens through processes of associating bodies, synthetic materials, and their transformations with temporal, 'ontological' and moral states of being, rather than just giving them a symbolic meaning. In other words: the ways in which the living evaluate the transformation of the dead, of material things, bodies and social relations, all influence each other. Ultimately, this leads to a constant reassessment of the social and power relations that govern it.

Synthetic materials, seen from a local perspective, are often imbued with positive temporal, moral and aesthetic qualities in relation to death as well

as in everyday use. Yet, regeneration, recycling and reconfiguration are equally tricky businesses of transformation in Peki, both in an immaterial and in a very material sense. The town's rubbish tips are filling up with synthetic materials that can only be burned or buried, while cemeteries cannot be reused due to cemented subterranean tombs that are impossible to break up. It is in instances like this, be they structural or individual, where the material world demonstrates resistance, a movement of refusing to yield to mastery. In the context of theorizing musical practice, Bennett Hogg and Sally Jane Norman remark that 'agency only has significance in a world that offers resistance' (2013: 116). Similarly, effortless music making proves to be less artistically productive than engaging with instruments that resist human attempts at mastery in multiple ways, a property which is more and more intentionally incorporated into the design of such instruments. Resistance also expresses itself in immediate material proximity to death, such as in the dry and inflexible quality of a body that has been frozen for a long time, or in the way that plastics and foils of grave wreaths degenerate in the tropical heat and rain, rather than remaining unchanged and sightly. Resistance is also present in different opinions about the moral status of a deceased's death, inspired by individual agendas of possibly not wanting to pay for one's dead relative's misdoings, especially not to non-kin community members who claim to be at the receiving end of such makeup payments and services. It is here, in these moments of disagreement, failure or resistance, and in the situated perspectives that my interlocutors take, where the transformative potential that arises from engaging with death through various materialities can be found.

Lesson Two: The Social is as Diverse as Intentions Expressed in Response to Death

Death and the transformation of social relations have been paired in the anthropology of death since early on. Following Hertz's thought, anthropologists have posited regeneration as a remaking of the social fabric in response to death (Bloch and Parry 1982a). This connects to the 'grand' question that was raised earlier of how social groups deal with shared powerful conditions. In the discourse around death within anthropology, death has been conceived of as producing a fracture within the social organization of the living and therefore as a threat to the social order. However, the concept of regeneration, through and in response to death, begs the question: regeneration of what? A second set of questions that logically follows is whether regeneration of 'the same' is really something that is aimed for; if so, whether it can be successfully achieved, or whether it fails to be achieved; and if so, for what reason?

Seen through the Hertzian lens, the answer to the question: 'reproduction of what?' sketches a picture of society in which the social seems to function as a higher unit, striving for harmony, reaffirmation and security beyond

individual concerns. This conceptual framing has seen followers and critical re-developments. Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, for example, went on to develop Hertz's approach in the form of a semiotic model for funerary contexts in any kind of cultural setting (1991). Yet, their understanding of society remains that of a smoothly running machine. More recently, Hertz's model has been criticized for working with an idealized 'harmonious' vision of the social (Jindra and Noret 2013: 4). Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry introduce regeneration into the discourse as a key word. They also take up Hertz's systemic interpretative model and build on it, focusing on the relevance of the social order's secured institutions of authority. Bloch and Parry understand society as a product of ritual activity and challenge Hertz' understanding of society as a homogenous group where regeneration becomes a totalitarian concept with very limited possibilities for expressing dissent, difference or conflict.

In the Hertzian model, the transforming corpse stands at the centre of a social process which strives for stability and conservation. Rather than hiding the body and obfuscating material change that may stand for social change, the ritual activities that Hertz focuses on make use of this change to revoke it through a process of controlled transformation. It is not just the unpredictability of biological death that is confined through social practices here, it is the threat that death poses to the social order on a larger scale. In Peki, activities relating to the dead have huge political potential: they are formative of the social. Synthetic materials and dead bodies alike are attributed with durational and preservative qualities to help maintain control, while possibly not aiming to maintain the status quo of the social order. Yet, rather than giving way to a unified and almost superhuman kind of social structure, the living are investing multiple agendas and intentions into their dealings with the dead. The social, as it turns out, is therefore a much more unruly force that seems to use the dead as bargaining material for different intents and purposes. It retains a degree of plasticity that is hard to master as it transforms constantly in response to its individual parts.

In her work on plasticity, a quality which is attributed to plastics and other synthetic materials but which is also inherent in the idea of social transformation, the Hegelian philosopher Catherine Malabou finds three application of the term plasticity: to give form, to receive form and to explode the idea of form (2012b). As sudden transformations of the brain and the neural system, accidents in the Freudian sense, the latter kind of plasticity marks a way of transforming that is out of control. Speaking about people with neuro-psychological afflictions, but also of socio-politically transmitted trauma on a larger scale, she points out that there may be constructive and destructive kinds of plasticity, depending on the moral framework from which it is interpreted. The brain may create new neural pathways that are desirable or suddenly abort most of what enables human sensual faculties and identity as preconditions for life. Seen before the background of colonial history and its brutal attempts at achieving mastery,

the effects of these interventions can rightfully be regarded as wounds, just as much as the literal 'new wounds' to the brain that Malabou discusses. In making a connection between the globally social and the neurologically material, she observes that the effects of both are 'transformations unto death' that become apparent also 'in the aftermath of war, terrorist attacks, sexual abuse and all types of oppression or slavery' (213). Violence now lies in the forced separation of subjects from their memories. This assessment resonates with contemporary decolonial critiques, such as have been articulated around the return of objects from ethnographic collections and more generally in relating to the dead and the colonial past (Ndikung 2018). What Malabou's thoughts show is that the transformations of bodies and substances and the transformations of social contexts are closely connected. They can inform on how both may serve the intention to control, or to evade those aims. Hence, plasticity may here be regarded as a material and bodily quality but also as a quality of transformative social processes which has the potential to spin out of control, containing 'good' and 'bad' moral properties that depend on the eye of the beholder.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli discusses the proximity of Malabou's concept of plasticity to the French philosopher George Canguilhem's concept of normativity in thinking through the transformations and efficacies of a creek which is an Aboriginal dreaming (Rand 2011; Povinelli 2016). To Canguilhem, the urge to establish a norm is a defining characteristic of life, rather than being defined by 'a set of qualitative data' (Povinelli 2016: 96). In this new framing of what is considered alive, living things are those that shape their environment and creatively give form to it. Povinelli wonders how the past and future transformations of this particular Dreaming-Creek named Tjipel may be understood productively and shaped justly through the conceptual frames of plasticity and normativity. While Povinelli determines that ultimately these analytical paths may not offer a fully satisfying grasp on the matter – being different to indigenous concepts of geontological subjects such as Tjipel – plasticity still offers a being the possibility to give form but also to receive and change its own form, hence agentially possessing the potential to establish and change norms which apply to it (Rand 2011; Povinelli 2016). For Malabou, the concept of the synthetic is here mirrored in her understanding of such a subject as a 'synthetic structure', which achieves self-determination by means of Hegelian 'temporal synthesizing': in the Hegelian context 'it is the structure of anticipation through which subjectivity projects itself in advance of itself, and thereby participates in the process of its own determination' (Malabou and Derrida 2005: 18). This is interesting as the idea of synthesis is related to a human technique of navigating time and to the idea of becoming whole in order to take control of one's own destiny. While Povinelli deems the Hegelian idea of the synthesizing subject unfit for an entity like Tjipel which explodes this concept, formally and materially, Malabou's adaption of Hegel's idea can still lead us back to initial thoughts about the nature of 'the social', which

is an entity that qualifies as an 'assemblage' (Povinelli 2016: 100) as much as Tjipel. The question of what the social is in a contemporary Ghanaian town community leads to a need to reframe this homogenizing concept. At the same time, materials and their homogenous properties, as identified in synthetic materials, may be used to construct states of (self-)determination and control on multiple levels.

Lesson Three: Death Can Preserve or Transform Power Relations among the Living

We now know that activities around death are co-produced by the material world and that they are important for influencing social transformations of diverse kinds, be these controlled, out of control or informed by past injury. The question remains how either the transformation or preservation of the social status quo can be achieved. To answer this question, the third lesson requires an excursion into the history of political theology and the politicization of death, considering strategic forms of governance. Through connecting death to attempts at defining the status quo of social relations and the distribution of power, the political nature of death becomes obvious. Social and individual duration in the face of death is often aspired to, yet this poses a problem of an 'essentially political nature to do with the legitimization of authority' (Bloch and Parry 1982b: 11). Bloch and Parry see Hertz's model as a solution, in which temporary burial removes the polluting and threatening individual aspect of death, while the secondary burial re-affirms the existing order and authority by taking control of the unpredictable. Their work might therefore be better for understanding conservative agendas, while not shedding much light on other aspects of society's relation to death, namely forces and agendas of change. It also does not conceptually consider what happens when things do not go as planned.

In contrast, the ways in which people in Peki grapple with death reveal practices and material things in the context of death as constantly addressing and facilitating power struggles within social organization. The local, pre-colonially established concept of 'bad' death installs lingering insecurity and possible failure right in the heart of institutionalized attempts to reinstate control over death. Regeneration, though strived for in funerary and commemorative activities in Peki, never fully affirms the social as a homogenous unit, while giving space to imaginary ideals of wholeness and belonging as well as to new units to which one may feel allegiance. It is therefore particularly interesting to observe how ideas of regeneration and duration are expressed in relation to the material world in Peki, such as bodies, materials and objects. The moments in which perspectives on how these earthly things transform or endure clash with other perspectives on the same material conditions are also the moments from which important insights about the nature of negotiating social relations via the material world can be gathered. Following Singh, (colonial) mastery is in its essence based on

material conquest and on a moral (self)proclaimed status of supremacy, making it essential to investigate narrative and matter alongside each other (2018: 8, 16). The political imaginary, something that brings forth ideology, interprets material conditions in a certain way to achieve this, hereby combining perspectives on materiality with an authoritative narrative.

This is what the historian Ernst Kantorowicz describes in his 1957 study *The King's Two Bodies* (2016 [1957]), which shows how (royal) power aims to conservatively regenerate beyond the king's individual death. It offers a model for understanding how power can survive death through a complex set of institutional workings and fictions. This is helped by means of legal institutions, effigies as material representations, religious institutions, and corporeal governance. The 'two bodies' concept relies on the idea that the king has an immaterial 'body politic', one which does not die, age or transform. It represents the crown, which is immortal and immutable. Its members are the subjects and institutions of the state. The king's body natural refers to his physical body which will inevitably die. The only moment at which the two are separated is in death, and here the king's body politic does not die but is instead transferred into a new and living body natural.

The separation of the body natural from the body politic and the emergence of a body social in the context of medieval governance is insightful for understanding how the individual and the social may or may not be connected. Such separations are not exclusive to the European Middle Ages and royal governance. Divisions of representative and social functions, which become acute in the case of kings, as well as the distinction between the biological and social death of an individual, are conceptualized according to social and individual agendas. These may be diverse and lead to transformations of the social. Historically, the two bodies model is connected to the Western concept of the state, a form of governance that later became a colonial export. Kantorowicz offers a historian's perspective on how governance, the physical body and the metaphysical (interpreted through Christianity and the Church) have worked as a complex machinery, shaping political processes in Europe. The spiritual element of a superhuman power with which the king is endowed, is turned into a seemingly secular authority, while continuing to work in the same 'mystical' logic as before. The religious (or symbolic) part comes to serve an important role since it determines and is determined by material, real-world bodies and events. Ultimately, though, this secularization demoted the king's function in relation to the social. It is precisely this potential of death as a facilitator for change and diversification of power, often subverting the intentions of those who claim to hold a position of superiority, that practices relating to death can also reveal. Claudio Lomnitz's book *Death and the Idea of Mexico* provides a contemporary ethnography that shows how death has been appropriated as a signature trademark by Mexico as a postcolonial nation (2008). Lomnitz describes how the master's tools are appropriated and turned against them,

now working for independence, something which, as Julietta Singh rightly points out in her critique of mastery, may cause subsequent problems for the newly formed nation. As Kantorowicz describes, historically established mechanisms also remain active in the background of modern European governance. While allowing the king to be done away with or to retain diminished royal representatives in the secular state, the medieval logic of governance continued to have a powerful effect, masked as secular governance. However, sometimes using the dead against an oppressive force has also proven to yield perplexingly successful results.

Along those lines, the work of the anthropologist Gillian Feeley-Harnik resonates as an excellent example of an ethnography that studies the demise of kingship and the reappropriation of royal death in a situation of colonial domination (1984, 1989, 1991, 2008). Feeley-Harnik contextualizes the phenomenon of worshipping dead royalty among the Sakalava in Madagascar by looking particularly at the Southern Bemihisatra (1984, 1991). She roots her analysis in a focus on the role and local understanding of labour. The Southern Bemihisatra work for their dead monarchs 'while participating only marginally in national political economy' (1984: 1). Seen against a historical background of French colonial rule on the island, she shows how the seemingly absurd development of a 'political economy of death' has emerged in response to a fruitless attempt by the French colonists to replace and destroy native institutions. The access to the realm of real royal power was kept out of reach of the living (French) authorities by removing the executive forces of power from their immediate representative (1991: 142). The society that Feeley-Harnik describes and its use of a political economy of death had a structure similar to Kantorowicz's medieval royal rule. Feeley-Harnik's work, like Kantorowicz's study, draws connections between death and power, this time in an African context and from an ethnographic point of view. Yet, the bodies of Malagasy kings and their symbolic functions come to play a quite different role than in the context of the European Middle Ages. Instead of looking at royal governance that is in full possession of the mechanisms which make it strong and 'eternal', Feeley-Harnik's ethnographic material presents a native Malagasy royalty that is struggling not to die out. Royal power here is being hollowed out from two sides: by the colonial authorities and by royal subjects who appropriate royalty for their own purposes. Instead of serving to preserve the 'status quo', the political economy of death becomes a counter-colonial strategy, removing the sovereign that has a masterful status into the realm of the dead and hence obfuscating the real seats of power to the outsiders (the colonial 'masters'). Instead, dead royalty becomes the vehicle for appropriating power and expressing a joint political agenda – opposition to the colonial rule – alongside individual agendas and identities.

Feeley-Harnik paints a nuanced picture of a differentiated society with collective as well as individual representations. In that respect, her description comes a lot closer to the multi-faceted historical and contemporary

situation found in Africa, and in Peki today. Categories of inside and outside are more open to reconfiguration and hence produce a less idealized image of power. Activities in relation to (royal) death do not serve the purpose of regeneration but rather of defence. Instead, the various activities that occur offer the possibility to generate personhood and identities beyond such an equalizing social identity. In contemporary Ghana, the institution of indigenous governance with different positions of honour and royalty embedded in it continues to exist, along the nation state and its representative structures. This arrangement maintains an essentially 'traditional' indigenous governance system and upholds the existence of a number of royal families, kings, queen mothers and elders. What I want to take from this third lesson is that there are different strategies in response to death which aim to legitimate or challenge authority. All of them rely on bodies and material representations of power as well as 'ideologies': narratives that prescribe how to interpret reality, also including the reality of the material world. It is at this point where anthropological theories of signification and materiality need to be considered along these three lessons.

Signification and Materiality: Breaking down Clear Categories

Descriptions from the 'field' take the specificity of the ethnographic context as their starting point towards making sense of materiality in the context of the human life cycle. They tie into a discourse within material culture studies that offers a broad range of theoretical tools. The word materiality itself as a key term migrated into the focus of anthropological discourse from archaeology, through the work of, amongst others, Daniel Miller (Miller 2005), Chris Tilley and colleagues who established a focus on material cultures studies in the early 2000s at the University College London Department of Anthropology. The discourse around materiality provides different tools for theoretically and analytically understanding the material world around humans, and recently the more-than-human, such as in the work of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett or Philippe Descola, among others (Barad 2003, 2007; Bennett 2010; Descola 2013). There are approaches that put more emphasis on relations and fluidity, such as Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (2005) or Alfred Gell's art nexus model (1998). Other approaches, such as found in the work of Webb Keane (2003, 2005, 2018) or Susanne Küchler (2002), discuss how signification is processual, perspectival and related to long-term processes of skill and knowledge sharing. Yet other approaches have problematized the productive use of the term materiality in the face of materials and their qualities, such as most prominently by Tim Ingold (2007) but also interrogated it in approaches from the anthropology of design, such as represented by Adam Drazin (2015, 2021) and others. I am following these approaches when speaking about materiality, drawing on conceptions of matter that highlight agency and interrelatedness as well as materials and their per-

spectival effects alongside post-semiotic attributions of meaning that are equally fluid.

Things and materials float from states of meaningfulness and the attribution of multiple meanings and values into states of temporary meaninglessness, depending on perspective. For my purposes, accounts that consider the state of the material in these varying contexts are therefore a good way of shedding light on the process of transformation that is death and on the multiple agendas, practices and parties that are invested in appropriating the ensuing changes in support of their various aims. As we have just seen, the anthropology of death provides concepts that are helpful for understanding the role of the material world, substances, and bodies in relation to death. Robert Hertz' secondary burial model (1907), being an early work in that discourse, is extremely useful for conceptualizing the roles that the body and the material environment play in understanding death's political potential. But what other models has the discourse since brought forth that help to conceptually grasp the role of the material world in the attribution of meaning(s), which then serve various processes of (re-)organizing social relations? A few interpretations that veer more towards the semiotic have emerged based on Hertz's work. Metcalf and Huntington provide such a semiotic approach (1991: 62). According to their reading of Hertz, his analysis of 'collective representations' of death can serve as a well-structured model that helps us understand the deeper symbolic and political implications of different societies' relationships to death. Bloch and Parry's work also assesses the formative and re-affirmative function of death rituals for the social order. Following Hertz's point, they stress the connection of practices around death with the symbolic sphere. Death is symbolically related to the continued existence of a social order and its institutions, to the sphere of exchange, and to power held by individuals and institutions in society. The term 'ideological representation', which they use to mark such symbolic functions, reflects this quite well. While these interpretations have been influential, I want to offer a different approach to using Hertz in relation to materiality, moving away from looking for signification in the realm of the symbolic.

In their development of Hertz's approach, Metcalf and Huntington as well as Bloch and Parry do not focus on Hertz's considerations of the material in relation to the transformation of the body. Their texts were written before the theoretical turn in anthropology towards material culture studies and the focus on materiality. Regarding contemporary conceptualizations of the material world in anthropology, the binaries implied in Hertz's work have largely been replaced by a growing fluidity of boundaries. A weakening of opposing conceptual categories has occurred in favour of models that permit an understanding of social life which has become diversified and influenced by a multitude of factors. Adam Drazin uses the term 'composites' in order to grasp this breaking-down of clear categories defining the material world (2015). He also proposes to attribute materials with

'tendencies' rather than properties or qualities, thereby including the perspective of those who perceive the material world. In contemporary work, what were formerly clearly established categories of the symbolic versus the material, of spirit versus matter, are undergoing a continuous process of deconstruction. As the editors of the journal *Material Religion* phrase it, the ideological and symbolic sphere (of religion) 'happens materially' and is 'inseparable from a matrix of networks of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places and communities' (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). Nor is materiality any longer viewed as 'cultural form [which is] inherently representational' and it can no longer be 'read in an interpretative process which reveals true knowledge lying behind its mirror-like surface' (Küchler 2002: 212). And while material objects and materiality may be regarded as signs carrying what Webb Keane calls 'semiotic ideologies' (2008, 2018) – attributed meanings that are structurally ideological – they have other possibilities beyond this function. As 'qualisigns', a Peircean semiotic concept that was adopted by anthropologists such as Webb Keane, Nancy Munn or Pauline Garvey (Garvey 2013; Keane 2003; Munn 1986), they may function in a simultaneity of sign systems and evaluations. Peirce's original definition of qualisign forms part of his semiotic theory and denotes a sign in which only a 'simple abstract quality' bears the function of transporting meaning (Atkin 2023). With a focus on what are tendencies rather than qualities, the qualisign, according to Keane, is a sign by which 'significance is borne by certain qualities beyond their particular manifestation'(2003: 414). These ideas of perspectivally oscillating interpretations of tendential 'qualities' bring the importance of relationality, plurality and situated perspectives on what the material may 'do' to the fore. As I detail elsewhere, the attribution of moral and temporal properties to materials and states of being (alive as well as dead) can be productively traced by following post-semiotic approaches such as offered by Keane's concept of qualisigns (Bredenbröker 2024b).

As a lens for conceptualization, materiality was dropped from thinking about death post-Hertz and only picked up again much later. The three lessons from the anthropology of death that I take on board are therefore informed by how death and materiality have been theorized in conjunction. Adding to that, theoretical models that are, as such, unrelated to death, but which help to understand processes of transformation, relationality and temporality are needed to think about death as a process that manifests transformation at the intersection of the social and the material. As such, these new theoretical leads can replace formerly articulated theories within the anthropology of death that rely on semiotic analysis and symbolism. In their place, Alfred Gell's anthropological theories of art and time offer models for understanding social processes from a material perspective, while they are not directly related to the anthropology of death. Instead, they augment Hertz's theoretical approach that helps to understand how engagement with the dead, materially and spiritually, produces the body

social for the living. How, if we grasp social engagement with death as attempts of mastering or controlling the unmasterable, can humans claim to maintain and execute agency in the face of it? Or, to rephrase Gell's main questions addressed by his anthropological theory of art (Küchler and Carroll 2021: 24): how does the social making of death work and what does it do (in my particular ethnographic context)?

Gell, who placed the term agency on the discursive table, understands art objects to be operative from a nexus of relations. In *Art and Agency* (1998), he offers an understanding of art as defined by action and social agency, rather than just aesthetics or conventions. An art object, according to Gell, is an index in which different human intentions (as created by the artist) become manifest, literally as indexically imprinted on the art object. These, and the possible agency of the artefact, are assumed (abducted[8]) by different recipients, yielding different assumptions. The index and assumptions abducted from perceiving it may be modelled after one or several inspirations (prototypes). In fact, 'any constituent part [Index, Artist, Recipient and Prototype] may potentially act as agent over any other constituent part' (Küchler and Carroll 2021: 23). Developing Peirce's semiotic theory of the index, Gell's art(-like) objects may then, due to agency they possess, also be person-like, and persons may be art-like due to both potentially being 'sources and targets of' social agency, which may be construed in different kinds of agent-patient-index-prototype relations (Gell 1998: 96). An inanimate idol, for example, may be a social agent since it materially embodies quietude. The activity of abduction is here on the part of the recipient, who, with the necessary cultural-religious background, will be able to associate the idol with quietude. Any object or person may thus be such an index if situated in a nexus of abductive relationships. This means that the focus of interpreting the role of the material and its signification, in the art nexus model, moves away from attributing clear meanings and instead towards looking at indexes as relational things.

Gell's conception of intentionality in the art nexus model has been subject to ongoing discussion since his untimely death in 1998 (Chua and Elliott 2015b). As Susanne Küchler and Timothy Carroll have argued in their recent revision of Gellian scholarship, intention on the part of an artist or maker is not the sole source of intentionality in the art nexus model. Instead, as they argue, 'there is good reason to put the emphasis on the assumption – or specifically the abduction – of agency' (2021: 21). This leaves part of the agency in the sense-making of the artwork and towards unfolding its social agency with the recipient. The index also holds part of that agency, as does the prototype, which lives and unfolds in the perspectives of patients to whom the index relates. In Gellian terminology, the instance which is affected by agency is the patient. The result of multiple possible agent-patient relationships is a kind of distributed personhood (Gell 1998: 222; Chua and Elliott 2015b: 10), which exists in the ever-evolving relations of the art nexus and does not allow for one clear attribution of

meaning or intentionality to dominate, long term. While Gell's application of the art nexus model initially only aimed at visual representations or artefacts, the extended application of this term to include, for example, 'human indices' (Carroll 2018: 12) has been established. A dead body and materials associated with the dead may thus equally become indices, since they stand at the nexus of various social activities that aim at the production of good death. The concept of indexicality in Gell's work therefore provides a fitting analytical framework for revealing how the socially produced dead are in fact similar to what Gell understands as artworks: they stand at the centre of, and contain within them, inductive relations co-constituted by the living, by materials and dead bodies. In the making of death as a social and material practice, society is also shaped by the values that the living invest into materially mediated ideologies around death. Gell's work on relations in the art nexus and the concept of semiotic ideology, following Webb Keane, are hence fitting complementary theoretical pillars for unpacking how certain properties and representational functions can be attributed to persons and things, concretely in my case: the dead and the materials that give them agency or keep them in check. Keane defines semiotic ideologies as 'basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world' (2003: 419). This concept may to some degree be compared to Gellian prototypes, as regarding culturally shared ideas about material properties and their moral qualities or shared ideals of personhood for the dead. As it turns out, the execution or control of agency in the case of death in Peki happens in mutual and multiple processes of formation, assessment and co-constitution in which individuals or social institutions are not the masters of their own actions but merely contributors to a collaborative process. Yet, when considering the dead, these appear as humans of a different kind as their bodies have lost intentional, attributable agency of the kind living human bodies can be seen to have. There is thus the potential and fear that these dead persons, wherever they may be, can now execute agency in uncontrolled ways, from unforeseeable locations other than their bodies, hence attempting to turn living community members into patients or indices. This means that different processes are at play at the same time. While community members and institutions each attempt to inscribe their own intentions on the dead as indices, ultimately resulting in a new 'dead person' after negotiations are over, there are also constant attempts to keep possibly unwanted actions on the part of the dead in check. The dead, therefore, are special kinds of more-than-humans whose agencies may be found in altogether unexpected places, something which social action will attempt to counteract in a number of ways. As such, social attempts at containing and mastering death are forever bound to be aspirational and can only be realized in parts.

Temporalities

The same is true for attempts at controlling or mastering the temporality attributed to the worlds of the living and the dead, something which ultimately translates into the quality of being durational. Strategies that aim to control and navigate time, and hence the dead, are always at risk of losing control. Here, such as already mirrored in the development of a diversified perspective on signification and materiality, conceptual approaches to time and temporality in death have seen a move towards more fluid boundaries and concepts. On a general level, contemporary theoretical conceptions of categories, such as, for example, the biological and the social, are moving away from conceiving of these as opposed fields. Anthropologists Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth take up this criticism in their work on the role of the body in relation to death, making it their aim to destabilize the dichotomies associated with death and life, which are, they state, 'historically emergent cultural constructs' from a Western perspective (1999: 10). Rather than seeing a person's last breath as a manifestation of an abstract higher force beyond human influence, death, as anthropologists understand it today, is 'just as biological as it is social' (McKee 2020: 40). The temporality of dying extends from life, before the death of the physical body, into an uncertain future or even eternity. No matter how people are thought to live on after death – as ancestor, in a religious or cosmic world view, or not at all – the disappearance of a person with their social ties, functions and obligations changes those social relations for the living, on a more intimate as well as possibly on a larger structural scale.

According to Hertz, the passing of time is of crucial importance for these social and cultural processes. Death does not occur in an instant but is a process whose temporal structure mirrors that of life-giving processes. He describes the time spent in mourning as following closely the decomposition of the body and the dismantling of relationships involving rights, responsibility and property associated with the deceased person. Once freed from its earthly container and associations, the soul must be recaptured in an artificial container that mirrors the image society has of itself. In this way, the dead are incremental to the making of the social. During the final ceremony, the body is reclaimed and buried in its final resting place. The physical body has been altered. Time has passed, allowing the mourners to dissociate themselves from the deceased. The soul, which until now has been wandering between its final spiritual destination and its previous earthly home, is ready to depart from earth for good. Through interaction with the remains of the deceased, either by decorating them, incorporating them, polishing them or in some other way, the connection between the body and the soul can be used to send spiritual elements of the dead on its way. In their new destination, the deceased will continue to exist. The living are freed from the threat and possible dangers that the soul and corpse, in limbo between life and death, posed to them. With the material and immaterial parts of the

deceased at their respective destinations, society can celebrate its triumph over death. Only in specific cases, such as particularly 'bad' deaths (during childbirth, accidents, drowning, lightning or suicide) may the soul not have an opportunity to re-enter life in an altered state.

The aim of the work for the dead in Peki and Christian communities in southern Ghana, linking this to Hertz's somewhat ideal model, is to preserve the body and to remake it as a more durable representation of the dead, suspended in time and contained in space. This is expressed in a local preference for enduring material qualities over ephemeral ones. The body is now in the perfect state to be manipulated by the living. Simultaneously, an alternative, infinite social time for the dead is produced, which is contained and hence will pose no danger. In *The Anthropology of Time*, Gell understands individual temporal experience as shared and co-constituted by other temporal experiences in what he terms social time (1992: 202). His concept of chrono-geography, a way of navigating this complex temporal experience, serves to illustrate and conceptually understand the temporal and spatial connections between moving bodies, objects and seemingly stable places (190–212). Gell describes the relationships between places, time, distinct sets of rules and the constraints that are placed on bodies and social agents. Building on ideas from human geography, he conceives of time and space as co-dependent. This co-dependence is expressed in terms of mobility (or restrictions on it) and affects human life and agency in a very real, material way. Restrictions on movement or containment – what Gell calls constraints – may be primarily spatial, temporal or social in nature. Yet, they have a general effect on how time and space are experienced, how they can be accessed and conceptualized: they affect human agency in the world. Based on the understanding of time as always containing within itself the experience of the past and the anticipation of a future which is again modelled with the past and the present in mind, Gell sees the human ability to navigate time as relying on mapping strategies. It is these mapping strategies that are being played out in interaction with materials, attributed significations, bodies and places. This model can be applied to the ways in which the dead are sought to be kept in check in Peki. Instead of remaining a threat to the living, the time of the dead is sought to be transformed into a temporal medium of control whereby the dead are yet again made to serve the various aims and purposes of the living within social time. This control is sought to be established and negotiated materially, ideologically, spatially and temporally, with again no clear boundaries set between these fields but rather a constant co-constitution of them. The time that ensues between experiences, anticipations, different worlds and their temporal logics is what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) terms queer time, as opposed to straight time. Specific to plastics, Muñoz's concept of queer temporality is in line with Heather Davis' framing of plastics as often out-of-control and entangled queer kin (Davis 2022). Gaining momentary control of this non-linear temporality may be an intention of individuals, yet there is no

guarantee it will work long-term, leaving potential for failure, change and surprise. Nonetheless, specific practices and the use of synthetic materials are recruited to help with keeping the upper hand in Peki.

Outline of the Book

Part I 'Place: Afterlives of Colonialism' zooms in from a wide angle, which considers historical facts and infrastructure in Ghana, to a narrower focus on the town and contemporary death-related practices. Part II and Part III then bring the material and temporal aspects of these practices to the fore in the discussion of ethnographic material. Building on ideas established in this Introduction, Chapter 1 'Death and Power: The Nation, Indigenous Concepts and Colonial Remnants' disentangles the connections between practices relating to death, colonial history and contemporary political structures in Ghana and Ghanaian Ewe communities. It frames ways of channelling power and relating in the context of different local social institutions and concepts, such as indigenous governance, the state and kinship. In the light of colonial remnants and influences, this chapter considers the major structural institutions that play a role in the distribution of power and how these have been transforming and transformative in relation to the dead. Chapter 2 'Death in Peki: Sequences' addresses the role and history of death-related practices in Peki, my primary fieldsite in the Ghanaian Volta Region. It presents local framings of death based on historic documentation and my own ethnography. Drawing a picture of contemporary practices relating to death in town, the chapter distinguishes between two sequences that are locally used to process and produce 'good' and 'bad' death. Wrapping up the first part of the book, the chapter connects these sequences of events to contemporary ethnographies of death and power, historical influences and contemporary forms of social organization.

Part II 'Containment: 'Good' Death (*Ku*)' addresses how modes of control or mastery are sought to be implemented in relation to death and what role synthetic materials play to that avail. Chapter 3 'To the Cemetery! Navigating between Worlds with Cement and Plastic' looks at the dead body's journey towards containment in the 'good' death sequence. It illustrates the beginning of this passage by looking at the cemetery and investigates effects that materials, environments, rules and social actions have on constraints and movement. The chapter begins to flesh out how these effects are formative of economic processes and moral evaluations. The assessment of bodies and materials, here particularly plastic and cement, as well as their controlled movements in time and space are portrayed in relation to ways in which the living attempt to navigate the temporality of the dead. Chapter 4 'From Morgue to Family Compound: Overcoming Socio-Material Constraints' continues the discussion of the efficacy of materials and bodies in the social making of death and the containment of the dead. It illustrates these aspects further along the journey of the dead body using

ethnography from the local morgue. As the controlled transformation of the dead progresses, the storage facility, washing of the body and attendance of a public contribute to a successful unmaking of the social person in death. It also gives ethnographic details of the lying in state and funeral celebrations taking place at a family compound, where the remaking of the deceased's persona in death happens. The use of clothing and decorative items alongside site-specific rules and regulations render the deceased at once touchable and out of reach. This chapter concludes the journey of the deceased in the 'good' death sequence, showing how the body becomes an index for the manifestation of power relations in the community.

The last part of the book, Part III 'Transformations: 'Bad' Death (*Ametsiava*) and Beyond', looks at how death effects a multitude of transformations and how these sit precariously at the border between control and the loss of it. Chapter 5 '"Bad" Death: Normalizing the Accident' introduces different ethnographic cases of events in the 'bad' death sequence. It shows how, by means of movement, temporal attribution and synthetic materials, the disruptive elements that follow a 'bad' death are sought to be contained, yet always remain on the verge of control. Here, the body as index can never be fully secured, thus giving way to transformative social processes that may challenge the existing order. Chapter 6 'Playing Tricks on Death: Alternative Strategies' continues the argument introduced in the previous chapter and adds ethnographic descriptions of various alternative strategies where the prescribed sequence was altered, offering opportunities to challenge the status quo of power in the community. Again, the role of synthetic materials, places and bodies is central to the analysis of a political economy around death. The conclusion 'The Agency of the Dead, the Agency of Synthetic Materials' brings the book to a close, with a final look at the intertwined nature of power structures, the temporality of death and the potential qualities of synthetic materials. It reflects on the attribution and use of synthetic materials in a neo-colonial present and before a historical context specific to West Africa, relating back to thoughts voiced in the introduction.

Notes

1. Heather Davis, following Catherine Malabou (2012a), proposes an alternative order by observing that 'form transforms, substance remains', which then 'could be the way to differentiate biodegradable materials (as form) from recalcitrant materiality (as substance).
2. For a recent critique and discussion about how to think through the impact that racial and colonial interventions and the concept of the West had on cultures and regions which became its Other, see Elizabeth Povinelli's book *Between Gaia and Ground* (Povinelli 2021). In this book, I am following this critique which, with Povinelli, makes it necessary to begin thinking through contemporary states from what she terms the 'ancestral catastrophe of late liberalism' rather than beginning a critical investigation 'with questions about first conditions'.
3. The history of Peki and being Ewe as a cultural identity as well as Ewe as a language

are explained in more detail in Chapter 1. It is important to note that contemporary Peki is inhabited mainly by people that identify as Ewe and speak the Ewe language. Hence, I am speaking of it as an Ewe community. Nevertheless, there are also people speaking other languages and of other (largely Ghanaian and fewer non-Ghanaian) cultural identities present in Peki.

4. I am using the term 'field' in inverted commas to show a critical distance towards it, while not wanting to replace it with a new term entirely as I believe it is important to discuss core anthropological terms productively and learn from these conversations. As a term that is established in anthropology to mark the place and site of one's work, it is yet a term that sits uneasy with me, given its origin in the battlefield. I find that the term creates an artificial distance between the person doing research and their social environment during research, while also objectifying interlocutors as part of that 'field'.
5. Of organic or inorganic components, chemical distinctions attributed to the molecular makeup of materials and substances that do not equal the distinction between natural and cultural.
6. I hereby follow the social effects and perceptions that these materials have, while acknowledging that a lot of it also takes place on the 'hidden' levels that material science addresses.
7. These moral assessments are partially the product of translation into English as there are Ewe terms that denote 'good' and 'bad' death. However, as English is also spoken in the community, albeit only for more official purposes, and often used on visual media such as funeral banners and posters, these terms are still not strictly 'just' translations but do also resonate with local interlocutors. Yet, on funeral banners, for example, other words will be used to describe what then in effect is here categorized as 'good' and 'bad' death. I have also written on moral assessments of death and materials in Peki elsewhere (Bredenbröker 2024b).
8. As opposed to deduction. Abduction concludes, from observations of an effect, what the cause of this effect may be.

Part I

PLACE

Afterlives of Colonialism

1

Death and Power
The Nation, Indigenous Concepts and Colonial Remnants

In the Ghanaian South, with its public and intense culture of mourning, the social and political relevance of properly attending to the dead can be acutely felt. This chapter seeks to unpack the entanglements between ways of relating to death and power structures, including missionary and colonial activity in the region. I will discuss this based on historical examples and their contemporary post-colonial forms. As the discussion of ideas from the anthropology of death in the Introduction highlighted, social practices that respond to death are intimately connected to the distribution of power. Such practices may seek to execute control or achieve transformations of the social, hereby investing the dead with qualities of plasticity or fixity that may translate to social change or conservation. While publicness and performativity on a local and immediate level are needed to tap into the full political potential inherent in the social making of death, some important elements of commemoration take place off stage. These are, for instance, conversations and practices relating to money, moral assessments, debts and in-between spiritual states. The same is true for the mechanisms of power and systems of social organization, which are largely invisible. Yet, they determine how commemoration and funerals may take place and how these feed back into social organization. In a circular motion, social organization and commemorative practices constitute one another, with the latter undoubtedly forming part of the social arena in which political struggle takes place. Yet, death may appear to some extent as a smoke-screen behind which these struggles seem to aim at things that may also be interpreted as largely sentimental. To make death visible as a total social phenomenon in the Maussian sense (2002), this chapter describes and contextualizes institutions of social, political and religious life on national and local levels. It outlines political structures as a culmination of nation-state, 'traditional'[1] governance, colonial influences, economic relations, kin relations and individual aims. It also reflects on the relationship between

'traditional' religion, knowledge about religious practice in historiographic and ethnographic documentation and the contemporary presence of other religions such as forms of Christianity and Islam. All these infrastructurally important aspects – economy, politics, kinship and religion – relate to death and its material representations. Taking a bird's-eye view on historical and contemporary social structures, this chapter helps to gain an understanding of their entanglement with death on a global, national and local scale. It tackles the question of how transformations of the social fabric are related to perspectives on material and spiritual transformations. While introducing Ghanaian history and Peki as a place contextualized within it, I am following the overlaps, clashes and intersections between the fields of death and power, with particular attention to the role of the material world within it.

Historical and Colonial Impacts: Peki and the Volta Region

Diversity and an underlying multiplicity of agendas regarding the distribution of power have recently come into focus within the anthropology of death. Especially against the background of a post-colonial history and neo-colonial present, the role that attitudes and practices around death play stand in direct relation to how state power and other ways of holding power have been set up. In the attempt to execute control over death and by means of death across the African continent, multiple actors were involved in attempting to facilitate change. John Parker fittingly sums these up as an 'unstable coalition of . . . colonial state(s), Christian missions, reformist local elites and the regime of biomedicine' (2021: 7). Such efforts at executing power via regulating death manifested as, for example, the ban on house burials and the introduction of cemeteries in the 1880s (191–209), or missionary rewritings of local beliefs into Christian imagery (Meyer 1999). As Parker points out, African actors of course had their own practices of relating to death before the colonial encounter. He cautions that European interventions should not take centre stage and dominate thinking about African deathways. Considering the colonial intervention and political interactions on micro- and macro-levels within Ghana and on the African continent, the status quo in Peki contains elements of all the above as influential factors in contemporary funerary practices. Peki exists within a democratic nation with a transforming political landscape and a diverse multi-ethnic and multilingual population. Pre-colonial and colonial structures continue to have an effect, also in practices relating to the dead. However, these are being dealt with and appropriated locally in multiple ways, rendering those involved active participants in the making of social practices while entangled in a wider set of structural conditions that are largely outside of an individual person's control. It is therefore enlightening to see where these two fields of relating to power – that of the wider and historically shaped body politic and that of individual agents within it – intersect in a concrete locality and how different factors of social organization play out in the arena of death.

In pre-colonial times, Peki was organized in the form of a state. In 1734, it fell under the suzerainty of the Akwamu, an Akan state, and subsequently incorporated elements of Akan culture. This proximity to the Akwamu leads Alexander Keese to pronounce that the people of pre-colonial Peki had a 'complicated relationship' to 'Ewe culture' (2015: 230). This, so he concedes, shows in different ways of referring to and using the category of 'Eweness' as an identity over the course of history and, as we will see, until today.[2] After an uprising against the Akwamu in 1833, Peki emerged as the leader of the 'Krepe'[3] (often held to mean Ewe inland) states. In 1886, Peki was incorporated into the British protectorate of the Gold Coast and British rule was officially recognized in 1898. In 1890, parts of Peki state were handed over to Togo and fell under German rule after the border between the Gold Coast and Togo came into effect, reducing the size of the Peki state. From then on, the British colonial administration pursued a policy of indirect rule through the authority of the *fiaga*, the so-called Peki Paramount Chief, offering protection from enemies in exchange for goods and trade relations. Birgit Meyer gives a detailed account of Peki's pre-colonial, colonial-missionary and post-colonial history (1999). Her text also provides vital information on local governmental and social structures in Peki from the mid-seventeenth century until colonial contact. At the time, Peki had a sophisticated political and social structure consisting of clans, chiefs and towns, which constituted an independent state that, as she speculates, only allied with other Ewe states when there was a political need to do so. Historical events did not only have a lasting impact on the current structure of the town, but they were also formative of a sense of Ewe identity and, more specifically, the ways in which Peki people as Ewe relate to the state of Ghana and other groups and ethnicities within it today. These various struggles for self-determination are intertwined, as I will suggest, with contemporary efforts to take control over the dead of the community. In fact, they form part of these struggles themselves, albeit in a different arena than the explicit national or traditional political field. Due to struggles for self-determination at large and due to imposed changes to practices and beliefs pertaining to death, practices relating to the deceased were and remain of acute relevance and are directly connected to the field of political struggle. At the time of my research between 2016 and 2018, people in Peki identified strongly as natives of the Volta Region despite the town's location close to the border with the nearby Eastern Region. The nearest Eastern Region community, Anum, is a Guan community and therefore recognized as different. There have been conflicts between Peki and Anum, as well as with other nearby communities in the past (Welman 1925; Meyer 1999: 6). Peki still has an ongoing conflict over 'stool' (traditional governance) land boundaries with the neighbouring Ewe community of Tsito-Awudome, which has been in a state of cold traditional war since 1957 and is still an unresolved legal case before the Ghana High Court, while having formally been closed several times with subsequent appeals

and revocations of the appeal (GHESC Ghana Supreme Court 2009, 2019).

The Volta Region – as one of the previously ten and, since February 2019, now sixteen regions of Ghana – has a special place in the history of the Ghanaian state because of the way it was incorporated into Ghana. Most of what today is the Volta Region was under German colonial 'protection' as the *Schutzgebiet* (protectorate) of German Togoland. Decades before German administrative claims and interventions in the region, missionaries from Bremen and Basel paved the way for German rule with an acculturated Christian faith, the use of the German language and Western modern values, which were taught to the indigenous population (Alsheimer 2007; Azamede 2010; Gründer 2012; van der Heyden and Feldtkeller 2012). In their respective works, Kokou Azamede and Rainer Alsheimer describe the process of mutual influence and adaptation between the local Ewe population and missionaries in detail, pointing out that what transpired was in fact not only an assimilation and appropriation of new ideas, but rather a multi-channel exchange that can be termed 'transculturation' (Azamede 2010). In reaction to an attack by French and British forces on the German colonial authorities in Togo during World War I, the German administration had to withdraw from West Africa in 1914 (Gründer 2012). Subsequently in 1916, German Togoland was split into two parts, one French and one British, in line with the colonial 'divide and rule' policy. The Treaty of Versailles, which came into effect in 1920, declared the defeated German Reich *kolonieunfähig* (unable to maintain colonies), hereby officially ridding it of its colonial presence and rule, including in the Volta Region. The eastern part of former German Togoland became French Togo, today the Republic of Togo, and introduced French as its official language, a measure that continues to divide the Ghanaian and Togolese Ewe today, on top of the already existing differences in local Ewe dialects and traditional practices. The western part of the previous protectorate became a mandate under British colonial administration in accordance with a League of Nations Trusteeship Council. The area was governed by the Gold Coast administration, but not officially incorporated into the Gold Coast as a British colony. In the end, due to the immanent independence of the Gold Coast in 1957, Britain informed the UN that it would not offer to take up an individual mandate for the administration of British Togoland after the independence of the Gold Coast. Instead, it proposed to integrate British Togoland into the Gold Coast so that the two territories could become independent as one. Ewe spokespeople had meanwhile approached the Trusteeship Council, protesting the possible division of Ewe groups by national borders and different administrations. These were both Togolese and Gold Coast parties (Mazrui and Wondji 1999). A long series of Council meetings ensued, during which various interests on the part of the British, the French, the UN and local populations like the Ewe competed for their preferred solutions. A UN Visiting Committee was sent to British Togoland

in 1951 to make further enquiries and propose a plan of action to the UN. At its recommendation, a UN plebiscite on full integration into the Gold Coast or maintenance of the current Trust Territory status was then held in 1956, resulting in 'a majority in favour of union with an independent Gold Coast' (Beigbeder 1994). However, the Ewe population mainly voted against annexation by the Gold Coast (Mazrui and Wondji 1999).

With the Gold Coast's independence in 1957 as the first African nation, the newly formed government of the state of Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah decided to integrate the Volta Region and turn it into one of its administrative regional units. The result of this complicated process, which involved many different parties and interests, did not turn out in favour of Ewe unification, and the proceedings themselves could be challenged based on their complexity. The Ghanaian government previously noted that a majority of Ewe were in favour of joining French Togo, which would have united them as an ethnic group within one state (Government of Ghana). The government also described the outcome of the plebiscite as 'unclear'. During my research, I heard various, different opinions and rumours about the historic vote, its outcome, and contemporary efforts to achieve political independence of the Volta Region. There was repeated mention of an alleged speech by oppositional presidential candidate Nana Akufo Addo during the 2016 election campaign, in which he was said to have threatened the expulsion of the Volta Region from Ghana after his election. Especially during the campaigning for the presidential elections, which were held during my fieldwork on 7 December 2016, the Volta Region was regarded as the home of 'problematic' voters. This election turned out to be important as it led to a change in government, sustained by the following general election in 2020. The Volta Region has traditionally supported the NDC (National Democratic Congress), the political party of former president John Mahama who was running for re-election in 2016 and of former president J.J. Rawlings whose mother was Ewe. In fact, the Volta Region had the highest support for the NDC as a percentage compared to all other regions (80.97% of total votes for John Mahama in 2016). News reports and rumours of Togolese Ewe relatives crossing the border to vote illegally for the NDC gave the Ewe a dubious national reputation regarding their loyalty to the state of Ghana and the Akan-centric NPP (New Patriotic Party). Akan groups and the Ashanti kingdom have historically been the most powerful and affluent ethnic groups in Ghana, a legacy that is still maintained. On another note, I also met many people who were outspoken about their support of an independent Volta Region or a Togolese Volta Region. The (political) division of Ghana into a south-western and a north-eastern part is reflected in the presidential election results, which for both years show a dominance of NPP voters in the South and a majority of NDC voters in the North of the country, with a few constituencies voting NPP in the north-east and a few constituencies voting NDC in the south-east, including the Volta Region. As a very general observation, there is a north-south divide between voters of

both parties. After the 2016 election, a group from Ho, Volta Region, who called themselves the 'Homeland Study Group Foundation', attempted to declare the independence of West Togoland. During research in Ho in 2017, I was told about this group by one of its supporters, and their activities were reported on by various Ghanaian news media at the time. This shows that the events that led up to the incorporation of the Volta Region into Ghana, and turned Ewe people living there into Ghanaians, have a possibly continued, possibly renewed resonance with the local population and are a cause of heated discussions in communities, in newspapers and among politicians. The Volta Region, as it existed during my fieldwork between late 2016 and mid-2018, was populated by all Ghanaian ethnicities. As of February 2019, the northern part of the region became the Oti Region, following a promise made by the newly elected NPP party after their 2016 election. Both major Ghanaian political parties, NPP and NDC, had already campaigned with a promise to create new regions in 2008. The NPP took this promise up again in their campaign in 2016, promising that the creation of new regions would make development more accessible to structurally weak regions. President Akufo-Addo promised the creation of smaller administrative units to 'ensure effective administration and the devolution of power' (Gyampo 2018: 1). The creation of the Oti Region was decided on by a 98% majority in a referendum held on 27 December 2018 and implemented in February 2019, resulting in a loss of roughly 50% of the Volta Region's land surface and 28% of its population (Wikipedia). While an analysis of the micropolitics behind this divide exceeds the scope of this book, Ghanaian responses suggest that tentative ethnically motivated considerations may be at play in the division between the two regions, resulting in the isolation of Ewe population from northern communities that are largely not Ewe but Guan and Akan (Kwawukume 2018). The negative opinions of Ewe culture expressed publicly by influential Akan and Ashanti groups and the NPP's weak position in the Volta Region and among Ewe communities imply a possible correlation between these factors. Comments in Ghanaian news outlets online suggest the government might have aimed at isolating the Ewe in the southern Volta Region and framing them as hostile towards the northern Voltarians, an attempt that may be rooted in the history of the Volta Region (Kwawukume 2011). These public voices show that there is a place in Ghanaian media for disputes about Ewe or Voltarian identity, marking it as a field of contestation.

As past and present developments suggest, people of Ewe cultural background and with them the area known as the Volta Region have been in a difficult relationship to various forms of governance, colonial as well as contemporary. This is important to keep in mind when looking at entanglements of indigenous and national forms of governance and how these play out in the arena of death. Ewe positions have been and are to some extent still marginalized, which affects the organization of politics and power in places that are considered Ewe homeland, such as Peki and

the Volta Region. Having to fight hard to gain control over one's own affairs in Ewe communities does therefore also influence funerary practices and negotiations made around them, as these combine national as well as locally and culturally specific practices and regulations. Aiming to achieve permanence – materially and socially, in life as in death – hereby receives a deeper historically contextualized meaning. While place-specific Ewe identities and their cultural history shape what happens locally, local and national systems of governance affect one another directly by combining representational democracy with indigenous forms of governance. In Peki and the Volta Region, these are as much embedded as in the rest of Ghana, while presenting a predominantly Christian population, as opposed to the north of Ghana with a Muslim majority.

The Nation and Indigenous Governance Systems

When looking at ways in which death is regulated, both national and indigenous political actors have a say in how funerals may be held, how dead bodies may be treated and what practices should take place in in what way. It is therefore helpful to understand past and contemporary governance systems and their relationship to a very diverse Ghanaian population. The 2017 population figures[4] for the Volta Region are in fact a strong reminder of just how diverse Ghanaian society at large is: 'Eight major ethnic groups are represented in the region and about 62 sub-groups speak 56 dialects' (Government of Ghana). The Ewe make up most of the Volta population (68.5%), while other significant parts of the population come from Guan and Akan backgrounds. Of the Volta Region population, a majority identifies as Christian (67.2%). The Volta Region was organized into twenty-five districts under the control of a District Assembly, a local parliament for the district that consists of so-called assembly members, who are usually not affiliated with a political party but act as independent representatives of the government. All communities have assembly members who represent them, as do the Peki towns. The district assembly is situated in the capital of the South Dayi district, Kpeve. South Dayi has a total of twenty-one elected assembly members,[5] nine appointed members and a member of parliament. Diversity is part and parcel of Ghanaian society and local and national political administrations are tightly interwoven, incorporating 'modern' democratic structures as well as indigenous political organization. This can be regarded as a result of processing colonial intervention, pre- and post-independence. It is the historical connection of these two backgrounds that also adds to the political potential of death, as both fields of governance relate to, and are affected by, death-related practices in multiple ways. Indigenous governance does here also take a special role because it is at the same connected to traditional religious practice and beliefs, which have blended and cross-pollinated with Christian and other religious practices in the South of Ghana.

At the highest level of administering power, governance is shaped by representatives of the nation state and of indigenous governance systems. The trickling down of power which then happens via relations, affinities and obligations on different levels does, however, not have to imply that the top level successfully holds the most power. In Ghana, as a post-colonial state which is in many ways in a neo-colonial situation, the formation of the state itself and the ways in which governance is structured, is shaped by the colonial past, integrating Western democratic elements and indigenous governance structures. The Ghanaian national political system recognizes and works with so-called traditional governance structures, in what is known as the chieftaincy system, a representative system of indigenous authorities. The Ghana Chieftaincy Act of 2008 provides a recent update of the initial legal document from 1971, marking the coexistence and co-constitution of the national and traditional governance systems (The Parliament of the Republic of Ghana 2008 [1971]). Chiefs are the leaders and political representatives of communities, combining within themselves not only political responsibilities towards their community but also a spiritual element as well as the functions of military leader and custodians of the land (Prah and Yeboah 2011). Before the colonial period, chiefs had 'combined legislative, executive, and judicial functions' (Samuel and Halidu 2018: 1). Marfo Samuel and Musah Halidu find that, despite a perceived public view of the chieftaincy system as weak due to its position subordinate to the national government, it is still people's go-to institution for solving conflicts. Isaac Owusu-Mensah reviews the chieftaincy system's development throughout the pre-colonial period and until the post-colonial stage and finds that 'chieftaincy in Ghana is the custodian of customary values and norms, one of the few resilient institutions that have survived all the three phases of Ghana's political history, and that it occupies that vacuum created by the modern partisan politics' (2014: 261). Regarding the administration of death-related practices, national government and traditional governance as part-national and part-local are both involved in the making of rules around death. Sometimes these rules complement each other and sometimes they oppose each other, leading to conflicts in interest. While the state primarily takes on the domain of biopolitical regulations of death, usually grounded in health and sanitation related concerns, indigenous governance includes established local practices. Community structures are particular to a locality and its spiritual-religious concerns. Indigenous governance will consider traditional beliefs as well as other locally practised religions, such as most popularly Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity in the case of Peki. As such, chieftaincy and indigenous governance structures have a double role in the social making of death in Ghana, as they are concerned with the spiritual and the mundane at the same time.

All Peki towns have town chiefs, or *dzasebenewo*. Alongside the paramount chief, the heads of clans and the heads of families, they make up a

group of chiefs, something that may confuse a person not familiar with the local context, like myself upon arrival. In fact, there are many chiefs and it does not become obvious from just hearing titles and names who is a person of real influence in the community. One needs to know families and their positions within the town's social structure to make sense of different kinds of chiefs. In Peki, chiefs and elders represent the Peki Traditional Area as a cultural, political and religious group. Among other things, representatives of this group have a public say in how funerals are held and what rules they must adhere to, such as allocating graves for burial, releasing bodies from the morgue, defining when bodies are allowed to enter town, deciding whether a deceased's moral status and debts are cleared, and many more. While formerly sharing a Traditional Council with the neighbouring Eastern Region group of the Guan, this association was severed over thirty years ago. During my research, the Peki Traditional Area was headed by the Peki *adontehene* (second chief serving under the *deiga*, who may represent the *deiga* while he is out of town), usually a *dzasehene* of a Peki town (at the time Togbe Ayem Mordey, chief of Peki-Avetile). It is not uncommon for chiefs in Peki, as in Ghana more generally, to live in Accra (or even further away) and, if possible, to commute to their stool constituency for weekly administrative business. Culturally a patrilineal society, the position of the chief has historically been a male-dominated one in Ewe society. Today, similar to structures in matrilineal Akan society in Ghana, there are also female representatives of chiefly authority, the Queen Mothers. The positions of the *dzasehene* (town chiefs) and *deiga* (the Peki stool name of the *fiaga*, meaning head king) are tied to stools that legitimize their status. The stool is an object of symbolic religious-political power and subject to a protocol of strict rules and regulations. Different kinds of chieftaincies may be present in a community or family. A *togbe*, the polite address for a senior male member of the community, may be a chief at the level of head of the family or may rank higher.

Nationally, elected chiefs are registered in the National House of Chiefs. There are also regional houses of chiefs: the Volta Region House of Chiefs was co-founded by the late Peki *deiga* (paramount chief) Togbe Kwadwo Dei XI. Togbe Dei XI (Seth Yao Tutu Brempong) was *deiga* of the Peki Traditional Area from 1961 until his death in 2009. Funeral proceedings for him had been initiated in 2013 and he was buried in March 2015. After his death, the town faced a conflict of several years over the succession of Togbe Dei XI. There are three royal families in Peki who take turns in fulfilling the role of *deiga*. A former *deiga*'s body may not be buried until his succession is decided upon and the successor may only be formally enthroned a year after the funeral. The gravesite of a *deiga* may also not be publicly known, for fear of external intervention, theft or witchcraft around the grave.[6] The conflict over the succession to the previous *deiga* was resolved in 2017, eight years after his death, when Kwadzo Dei XII (David Kwaku Bansa) officially took over the title with a big public celebration. In the meantime, there

were various auto-coronations and claims to the title, which lacked official recognition, meaning consensus within the community.

Local political units that exist as decentralized institutions, which report to bigger units and are finally connected to the political system nationally range from non-party affiliated community groups to the unit committees and to the regional assembly. Unit committees are voluntary citizens' organizations that exist within communities, such as individual Peki towns. Their representatives can be approached for immediate concerns and practical matters regarding life in the neighbourhood without having a party-affiliation or a religious or traditional governance function. If matters arise that need more centralized handling, these committees can take such issues to the assembly members of the community, who, as already noted, are organized in a district assembly. There are district assemblies for each district in a region. Peki belongs to the South Dayi District. Assembly members may be independent or affiliated to a party. A Regional Coordination Council for the Volta Region brings the Volta Regional Minister, representatives from the regional House of Chiefs, district chief executives, the presidents of the regional assemblies and representatives of other decentralized ministries and governance institutions in the region together, combining citizen-organized initiatives, party representatives and traditional representatives. The recent creation of new districts in Ghana, which divided the Volta Region in two to create the new Oti Region in what had been the Volta Region's previous northern territory, demonstrates the government's intention to decentralize governance throughout Ghana and to empower smaller, more local administrative units, such as the regions. The way in which citizens, politicians and traditional governance representatives are brought into contact, as described above, has already laid the foundation for enabling local units and communities to represent their interests in the context of a wider, national political background. As a national governance strategy, the government of president Akufo-Addo apparently hopes to strengthen national affiliation and representation by empowering local communities and regions. As a government and party which gives certain liberties to local actors, among them chiefs and traditional governance authorities, national governance aspires to be recognized as beneficial and benevolent to the needs and interests of these local actors. The strategy seems to be working: the creation of the new regions was well received in the referendums, which showed huge support for the measure. As the history and status quo of political structures in the Volta Region and Peki shows, governance is distributed over a closely connected network that integrates pre-colonial, colonially introduced and post-independence structures, which are shaped after the Western model of the democratic state. This in turn means that most of these 'limbs' of the body politic, speaking with Ernst Kantorowicz's imagery (2016 [1957]), relate to death as a node of power, since regulations around death also come from all of the above areas. Furthermore, it also means that indigenous social structures that are not considered strictly politically representational,

such as kin and clan structures, play an equally important role and form part of this body politic. In turn, kin relations and the rules that govern them also influence how death can be responded to on a social level.

Kinship and Family Structures

Peki families are united in clan structures. Families belonging to one clan tend to live next to one another, forming the Peki towns. During my fieldwork, the relation of kinship structures to the organization of death and mourning became materially apparent when I began to study the local cemeteries. One of them was reserved for members of several clans and those belonging to the respective families that made up the clans. Everyone else who wanted to be buried in the cemetery had to purchase the right to do so from the clan. It equally showed in the assignment of grave digging services, which was implicitly a job for male younger members of a deceased's clan. The patrilineal kinship system is generally seen as the predominant system of Ewe kinship organization and it also exists in Peki. Patrilineal kinship in this case implies that 'sons and daughters are considered to be primarily members of their father's and not their mother's kin group' and thus their father's family clan (Greene 1996: 21). Descent is determined by associating individuals with their male relatives and ancestors (Westermann 1935; Nukunya 1999 [1969]). Also, according to Sandra E. Greene's attempt to summarize the complexity of Ewe kinship structures, 'all [Ewe-speaking communities] demonstrate a preference for lineage exogamy, in the form of cross cousin marriage, and for intra-ward marriages, where the betrothed are residents of the same district within a particular village' (1996: 21). Clan structures, on the other hand, do not seem to have been uniformly present in all Ewe groups (Fiawoo 1974; Greene 1996). Sandra E. Greene describes the Anlo Ewe clans as 'dispersed patrilineages that retained their identity as kin groups' and that among the Anlo, there was a preference to marry daughters to men from within the clan. Aside from the existence of clans, other differences, such as a diversity of local dialects distinguish the Ewe groups. Referring to the historical documents of Jakob Spieth, Birgit Meyer notes that, as a further specification, 'though the Ewe descent along the male line (*tɔgbuinu* or "father's thing"), they also acknowledge the matrilineal link (*nyurianu*, or "maternal uncle's thing") with the brothers of the mother. This is reflected in inheritance regulations. Whereas the sister's children inherited their maternal uncle's (*nyuria*) personal movable properties, except his gun, the brothers (if still alive) and children received the deceased's palm tree plantations, as well as his gun' (Meyer 1999: 4).

Greene traces the role of gender in the Ewe patrilineal structure among the Anlo Ewe, an Ewe group comparable to (but not including) the Peki Ewe, who mostly reside in what today are Togo and Benin. Here, she describes that in their case, the kinship system was in fact more flexible than simply tracing ancestry in a clan along the male line. Instead, several other criteria

were considered, and clans were created according to their occurrence and therefore their needs. Examples include being a foreigner or outsider, sharing funerary customs or a name, having arrived in the settlement early or late, or following immigrant versus autochthonous gods. This, as she describes it, grew in response to a large-scale migration in which Ewe peoples fled from the ancestral inland town of Notsie down towards the coast. During this migration, old social structures and settlements were reconfigured. New arrivals, framed as 'others', had to be integrated into Ewe communities, thereby changing the ways in which the Anlo Ewe defined 'we' and 'they'. Greene concludes that by rephrasing their ethnic identity through re-made narratives of kinship, the Anlo's 'others' were not only 'able to redefine themselves as insiders, but that they did so by redeploying for their own benefit the same local concepts that had been used to marginalize them socially' (1996: 182). This seems comparable to what Gillian Feeley-Harnik found in her ethnographic work on the Sakalava in Madagascar, namely that instead of rigid social structures, there were opportunities to bend existing systems and concepts for one's own favour and intentions in what she terms the local 'political economy of death' (1991, 2008). In Greene's case, an analysis of gender as an influencing factor shows that social systems of organization were not completely rigid but instead influenced by change within the social group, as well as by individual agendas. Death, she shows, could become one arena for channelling intentions while using existing concepts and structures that superficially appeared to retain their conservative function. In addition to the kinship ties created by blood relations or through marriage, kin had a symbolic role in the community, which is especially important in the organization of funerals.

Alongside direct family members who participate in their roles as kin, members of the clan also take on representative roles during a funeral. These individuals are expected to attend the washing of the corpse. And in fact, I saw funeral guests take on the symbolic role of parents during funerals in Peki, allowing the real parent, for example an elderly mother, to step back from her public role as the mother of the deceased and receive comfort from others instead of taking an active part in the events. I also found that there are usually two people who act as *tɔvi* (literally: child of the same father, half-brother or sister), godparents to the deceased, in death as well as in life. The role of the *tɔvi* is a vocational role, similar to godparenthood, which a person from the same clan as the recipient can be asked to take up. Usually, there will be a male and a female *tɔvi*. When the formal process of asking and accepting – usually offering and accepting a bottle of spirits (Schnapps in Ghanaian English) – has taken place successfully, the *tɔvi* is supposed to serve as an advisor, if possible, benefactor, guide, linguist or, fulfilling just the minimum requirements, a person with a lead role during the funeral. At the funeral, the *tɔvi(s)* serve as the responsible persons regarding, among other tasks, the selection of clothing that the deceased will wear, the preparation of washing materials for the morgue and the preservation and

distribution of the deceased's personal belongings. On several occasions during my fieldwork, *tɔvi* were appointed post-mortem for just this purpose, usually to their displeasure. Despite not having had a relationship with the deceased during life, they took it upon themselves to perform funerary duties. During funerals, *tɔvi* wear a designated piece of cloth wrapped around them over their regular clothes. It is one of their duties during funerals to pour libations (clear liquor poured onto the ground) to the ancestors on several occasions and to pour a calabash bowl (fruit of the calabash tree) of water on the body before the washing begins. This combined reading of ethnographic observations and contextual research on the genesis of Ewe kin structures shows that prescribed roles and ways of relating, in life as in death, were and are by no means static but rather always in transformation. Thus, they have been able to respond to migration, new arrivals, external governance and other circumstances, something which again also has found various ways of expression in the arena of death and funerals. Belief and religion can be regarded as yet another factor which has been shaping local ways of relating, to power and to kin, by relating to god(s) and other worlds. Tracing the history of beliefs, spiritual practices, and religion, adds an important element that is linked to both the organization of power and the dead.

Religion

The entangled history of European Christianity and contemporary Ghanaian Christian religious beliefs, as also practised in Peki, marks a specific historical connection between Europe and Ghana. The Peki community, and southern Ghana more generally, boasts an extremely active Christian religious life. There is an overwhelming variety and number of Christian churches in town, both Pentecostal and Presbyterian. The history of Islamic faith and religious practice in Ghana is somewhat less attention-seeking than the loud and public presence of Ghana's Christian faith. Yet, while the south is largely Christian, the north of the country has a predominantly Muslim population. In Accra, both faiths are equally present. In Peki, a relatively small but not insignificant Muslim community exists. A new mosque has recently been completed on the edge of town in Wudome with money from Turkish donors. Until then, there was a mosque in a private house in Afeviofe. Islam in Peki is a fringe belief and a lot of Christian people I met had negative attitudes towards Muslim members of the community, showing less tolerance towards their beliefs, presence and religious practice than towards 'traditional' priests, believers and rituals. Although the treatment of Muslim community members is not central to this book, regulations around Muslim death are relevant as ways of dealing with 'Others' in the community through death. Generally, Christianity and local Christian religious practices occupy the centre stage in Peki's religious life. As such, spatial change that has been reflective and formative of negotiating these

tensions in the past may continue to be influential in the same vein today. And whereas Kantorowicz (2016 [1957]) describes a process of secularization in European cultural history, in which the theological aspect of the political slowly becomes more and more hidden, the religious elements of political organization are becoming more and more visible in the realm of Ghanaian public and political life. Beginning with Nietzsche and continued by philosophers such as Gianni Vattimo, the European development 'away from religion' has been discussed as the 'death of God' in the West (Vattimo and Caputo 2010), being the result of Modernity's ideology of rationality. In many countries in the Global South, such processes of secularization have been turned into their exact opposite: here, one is faced with the overwhelming presence of God and gods in all aspects of everyday life. And whereas many Western countries and cultures have removed the presence of death from public life and recognition, it is one of the most important occasions for public gatherings, announcements, and commemorations in southern Ghana. Obviously, such a perceived invisibility of the dead and death in society, as I also grew up with in Germany, equally requires immense effort and control over the material world, supported by institutions and structures that help putting death in its place: away from the eyes and minds of the living. In that respect, the European 'Western' development differs from the development in Ghana, among other places in the Global South. Looking back at largely missionary and colonial sources to tell the story of beliefs and deathways past, which are the predominant written sources from these times, confronts contemporary historical scientists but also anthropologists like myself with the task to balance these sources with local sources. Hence, a critical discussion of missionary and colonial material alongside oral history and material culture is needed, which are what ethnography may use to grasp a status quo against its historical backdrop.

German missionary Jakob Spieth's *Die Religion der Eweer in Süd-Togo* (1911) makes specific mention of Peki and religious practices in Peki, while his *The Ewe People* (Spieth 1906; Spieth and Amoaku 2011), a more comprehensive account of Ewe culture, is largely based on descriptions relating to the Ho area.[7] Unpicking Spieth's texts for what she appropriately calls a 'tentative reconstruction' of Peki Ewe indigenous beliefs, Birgit Meyer finds that the community, like other Ewe communities in the area, worshipped an open pantheon of deities and spirits (1999: 62). She cautions that 'Spieth's informants did not talk about Ewe religion in general – there is not even an Ewe term to express 'religion' (Spieth 1911). Rather, they talked about service (*subɔsubɔ*) to particular gods. Meyer also remarks that there existed a diversity in religious practice: 'Indeed, in contrast to missionary pietism and written religious traditions, Ewe religion did not form a fixed system of representations and practices to be shared by everyone' (Meyer 1999: 62). This statement requires a brief excursus into the history of the missionary presence in Peki as background to a critical reading of textual sources on so-called 'Ewe religion'. In 1847, German pietist missionaries of

the Norddeutsche Missions-Gesellschaft arrived in Peki from Bremen and built a mission station in Peki-Blengo. Among them was a missionary called Lorenz Wolf, who is still commemorated in Peki today as the bearer of good Christian news and founder of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (E.P. Church) which became popular across Ghana. The station was temporarily given up during the Asante Wars which took place between 1869 and 1874 (Alsheimer 2007). The missionaries returned to Peki-Blengo in 1906 and remained in Peki until 1916, having to withdraw after Germany's defeat in World War I and its subsequent loss of colonial influence. Meanwhile, local actors had already been trained to continue the work of the church. In consequence, the presence of Christianity proved to be lasting and several independent churches emerged, among them the E.P. Church, which is still influential in Peki today. These days, the E.P. Church co-exists with a multitude of smaller, often private, or international Pentecostal churches which are popular throughout the whole of southern Ghana (Meyer 1999).

As Meyer remarks, attempts to write a definite textual account of Ewe thought, social identity, social organization and belief are, to a certain extent, going against the way in which these concepts have existed in the past. As an oral society, much of what became manifest as Ewe cultural practices and was orally canonized as 'traditions' was in fact very fluid and open. Nothing was carved in stone, written on paper or repeatable as a formulaic cultural product. This also applies to Ewe concepts of personhood, which are marked by fluidity and openness (Rosenthal 1998). Rosenthal contrasts this with a Western, Protestant idea of personhood as a 'unitary wholeness of being' according to which 'parts of the person can be synthesized and hierarchized to form an autonomous whole' (174). In Pentecostal practice, indigenous ideas could be balanced with Christian ideas, hence accounting for the popularity of Pentecostalism in Ghana today (Meyer 1999). Noah Komla Dzobo, a former moderator of the Ghanaian E.P. Church and a researcher into traditional religious concepts and philosophy, remarks that in Akan as well as Ewe culture, the concept of knowing is a foundational aspect of what constitutes a person (Dzobo 1992). Through a study of Ewe and Akan proverbs, he concludes that there are a variety of forms of knowledge and truth, which may influence the ways in which personhood may be expressed, thus allowing for differences within the concept rather than following a doctrine or a set of moral principles. Dzobo remarks that 'traditional knowledge' is knowledge that is 'passed down by word of mouth' (*nyatsiame*) (76). Ewe songs, as another oral cultural form of knowledge, also maintain an open, meandering narrative structure and continue to be frequently sung on all kinds of occasions, including funerals. Ewe became a written language with the arrival of Lorenz Wolf in Peki, alongside other German missionaries in the region such as Johann Bernhard Schlegel. Jakob Spieth did not only write extensively on Ewe culture but he also translated the Bible into Ewe (1907). Alongside ethnographic accounts, Diedrich Westermann wrote a grammar and dictionary of the

Ewe language. Both works are still considered fundamental for learners of the language today (Westermann 1905/6, 1907, 1935). The question of how written language – as a tool that fixates concepts – may appropriately represent such fluidity is something that chroniclers and researchers should bear in mind. In addition, the perspective of the missionaries' ethnographic writing was tinted and paradoxical – primarily regarding religion, but also impacting society on a larger scale. Their works constitute the first written documents on Ewe religion and culture, though they were written from the perspective of those who wanted to fundamentally change native religious beliefs and thus social and cultural life.

Birgit Meyer approaches this intertwined history as a process of negotiation and translation that took place between the missionaries and the local Ewe population. She tells this story as an account of Ewe Christianity and Pentecostalism in Peki. Local strands of Christian faith have incorporated traditional beliefs (Meyer 1999). Meyer's reconstruction of the Ewe pantheon and Ewe cosmology is informed by Spieth's texts. To a large degree, these local ideas are intertwined with the concept of Ewe personhood, also representing something fluid and open. Gods and spirits formed part of the cosmology, including and beyond the realm of what constituted a person spiritually. The name of a Peki deity, which missionaries translated as 'Christian' or 'only God', is *mawu*. Until he became the only God, *mawu* may not have been all that relevant, as Meyer suggests (65). *Mawu* was considered quite removed from people and their daily concerns. Instead, there were a great number of *trɔ̃wo*, 'gods with specific domains and responsibilities' who could be addressed and sacrificed to through their priests. The *trɔ̃wo* were considered male and 'inhabited a natural phenomenon or artificial object' (67). Meyer also states that '*wuve* was the state *trɔ̃* of the Peki. There were two places where he could receive sacrifices – a small forest between Avetile and Afeviofe near a stream named after the *trɔ̃*, and a large forest near Dzogbati' (66). *Wuve* was worshipped in the annual Yam festival, which still takes places in Peki every two years, as communities of the Gbi, Peki and Hohoe, take turns in hosting the festivities. I did not have the chance to attend the Yam Festival myself during my time in Peki, but it continues to be of relevance for the community and was, as Meyer describes, 'the most important collective ritual . . . aimed at the future well-being of Peki as a whole'. Meyer describes the worshipping of *trɔ̃* as a 'dynamic affair', due to the large choice of *trɔ̃* as well the possibility of emerging new *trɔ̃wo,* from which one could choose according to needs and one's own judgement. 'Thus', she concludes, 'there was no fixed pantheon' (67).

Besides the local deities, the dead played a role in the local cosmology too. As ancestors, they could become guiding, normalizing or protective entities that one could contact and maintain a connection with. As wandering spirits, due to a 'bad' death or mistakes in conducting the funeral, they could potentially be harmful for the living. People I asked about qualifying these spirits as 'good' or 'bad' told me that they were neither, although

nonetheless nothing good could be expected of them. This in-between assessment in the face of two binary terms of moral evaluation, relating to ambiguous spiritual entities, fits well with the state of openness and fluidity that I have just identified for all important domains of public life in Peki, based on discussing critical literature, historical sources and my own ethnography. Similarly, Sjeek van der Geest also concludes that the moral assessment of deaths as 'good' or 'bad', based on ethnography in the Kwahu-Tafu district of the Eastern Region, do not operate with fixed categories but rather rely on social and political negotiations, rendering moral assessment that may appear straightforward subject to negotiations and ambiguous (van der Geest 2004, see also Bredenbröker 2024b). And while binary or strong categories play an important role in public discourse in Peki, such as when assessing 'bad' death (*ametsiava*) and 'good' death (*ku*), these categories should not be taken literally.[8] Rather, they serve as ends of a spectrum that help to lend weight to the processes, which then unravel between its poles, in a struggle to determine which norms will be confirmed as a result and which will be challenged. The same is true for the materialization and assessment of other largely immaterial entities, such as ancestors. With regards to the relevance of ancestor worship in different African contexts, Jindra and Noret assume that 'the reality in most situations indicates a continued role for ancestors, but a more indirect one than in the past' (Jindra and Noret 2013: 31). And indeed, I did not find ancestors in the 'traditional' sense to be a visible and directly articulated presence among mourners, bereaved families or in people's daily lives. Judging from my own interactions and experiences in the 'field', ancestors had a reduced presence in conversations while also hiding in plain sight, such as in the form of funeral banners and other new aesthetic and material representations of the dead (Bredenbröker 2024a). In commemorative practice, there was frequent 'pouring of libations' for the ancestors in ritual or formal settings. It was also common practice to speak to a deceased directly when visiting their graves or other sites associated with them. Spieth mentions the relevance of the presence of ancestors for the power of Ghanaian stools, which is then passed on to the chief or head of family worshipping that stool (Spieth 1911).

Divine Banyubala (2014) states that the belief in ancestry, the influence of perimortem activities on the ancestor's good will and on the deceased's possible status as an ancestor, as well as a process that he terms 'post-mortem personality identity renegotiation', are likely to be found in death-related rituals across Ghana. Evaluations of the corpse, its physical condition, treatment, and preservation are also relevant. But to my understanding, even though the production and circulation of objects, as well as further actions and transactions, were directed at communicating with ancestors, the concept itself was often a lot less 'literal'. I observed activities that may fit the term 'post-mortem identity re-negotiation' in various aspects of the funeral rituals, in events, interactions and exchanges that took

place in relation to a person's death in Peki. However, rather than being directly and openly linked to the worship of ancestors (termed 'traditional Ghanaian sainthood' by Banyubala) in verbal comments and ritual practice, these events mostly took the form of a predominantly non-religious, social practice.

During funeral activities and beyond, I met several 'traditional' priests and I engaged more closely with two (female) priests during my research. Most people I met did not have a (visible or publicly demonstrated) practice of worshipping or consulting these gods. Labelled 'idol worship' in the local Ghanaian English terminology, the worship of local gods and *trɔ̃wo* was generally frowned upon. People who wanted to present themselves as good Christians – especially members of the E.P. Church – would usually remark that they did not want to engage with or participate in traditional religious activities, such as greeting the New Year with a possession dance and drumming, or the funeral of a person who had died by suicide. However, I also found that Kuma Dadi, my initial family father and host, was often keen to accompany me to these events – to moderate, as he said, but maybe there was also some curiosity on his part mixed with that. As an aspiring catechist of the Dzake E.P. Church, a position he was later granted in 2018, he needed to present himself favourably in the eyes of the congregation. And while convinced of his publicly demonstrated Christian faith, he did not deny the existence of *trɔ̃wo* and spirits, but acknowledged their existence, saying that Christians simply chose not to engage with these gods. I find that to be an important insight into the way in which people in Peki relate to religion today. There is a belief in a spectrum of spiritual entities that exist – it is just a matter of picking a side and choosing to interact with them. As Christian institutions, the Pentecostal churches acknowledge the presence of 'other' spiritual forces within the self and the church. In Meyer's work, Ewe actors are pictured as active in the genesis of local Christianity. She stresses that her study seeks to contribute to an understanding of changes, looking at 'how people have dealt and still deal locally with "civilising", "modernising" and "globalising forces"' (1999: xxii). With this as her objective, Meyer's topic is the genesis of contemporary local religious practices against the background of their historical origins. Religion and religious practice, again, consists of fluid practices and concepts, which in Peki resulted from multiple factors that instigated or effected change. In reaction to 'change' as an increasingly important factor in the study of (not just) life in Africa, an unreflective use of established terms such as 'ritual' or of static concepts of 'traditional' social structures seems out of place. They are insufficient tools for understanding social realities in an appropriate way.

In Banyubala's example, he advises on the socio-legal correlations and possible adaptations of laws. He argues that, in their new and improved form, laws should take traditional values into account. While maintaining awareness of traditional attitudes towards the dead, his study attempts to provide policy advice for changing a generally negative attitude towards

transplant organs from deceased donors. This is an applied case study and policy advice that cuts across different disciplines, namely medical and legal practice, using 'sociocultural implications' as the key to understanding problems and solving them. It shows that beliefs and practices in the socio-cosmic field, as expressed in practices related to death and dying, become relevant when in conflict with 'modern' value systems, for example, Western medicine or legal codes imposed by the state. 'Traditional' beliefs have an influence on people's moral evaluations of practices which, from local points of view, may be seen as not connected to them, such as modern transplant medicine in contemporary Ghana. Knowledge of incommensurateness can help bridge the gaps between different realms of values and practices. This may also be the case for those who do not subscribe to 'traditional' faiths but have taken on any of the local varieties of world religions, be they Christian or Muslim. I have seen religious actions that were explicitly marked as religious in an institutional or authorized context and other activities relating to death. I have also seen many activities that were not explicitly termed 'religious' but could just as well qualify as such. Even if communicated indirectly, these activities might in the end also be directed at a cosmic entity. In that respect, religious practices past and present in different authorized sets of beliefs are formative of the work for the dead in Peki.

Contemporary Ethnography and Historical Contexts

Concluding this chapter, I would like to draw a connection with other ethnographic works which have highlighted the fractured nature of the post-colonial state and its diverse actors as these become evident in the field of death. My previous discussion of different major theoretical terms and ideas as 'three lessons from the anthropology of death' shows that an understanding of death as socially produced and politically instrumental runs throughout this discourse. Contemporary ethnographies of the past twenty years have achieved a reading of death as a site of negotiations over power. This happens in social contexts that are simultaneously shaped by a multitude of conflicting historical, individual and global forces. These recent works have done so by referring to older foundational texts and contributing to anthropological knowledge of culturally specific attitudes towards death and their social functions. As a result, post-colonial and late-capitalist realities, competing with ideas and fictions of 'tradition' have come to occupy the centre of studies that look at death more closely. In the context of Peki's older and more recent history, positions from anthropology that highlight the intersection between the state, power and death are productive points of comparison for understanding the complex situation of micro- and macropolitics around death in Ghana. As Claudio Lomnitz shows in the foreword to his ethnographic book *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (2008), anthropology and sociology saw a revitalization of the topic of death in the 1970s, after foundational work that has served as a reference for further

research. He remarks that the two central aims of this 'revitalization' were a 'critique of Western denial of death' and 'the use of dying, mourning, burial and commemoration as historical and ethnographic sources' (12). He concludes that criticism of Western deathways has resulted in criticism of its shortcomings. Therefore, a focus on death as an ethnographic theme is no longer a sufficiently interesting topic, since it has now been exploited to its maximum. Yet, Lomnitz, too, has produced what he has proclaimed to be obsolete: another ethnography that centres on death. Why? Critically framing his work and research against the background of a Eurocentric historiography of modernity, which is also mirrored in the existing history of death in the West (Ariès 1975, 2013 [1981]), he approaches his material by focusing on 'differentiated attitudes towards death' and 'social contradiction': 'Contradictions between self and other, between friends and enemies, or, even more broadly, between particular and species-general points of view concerning death are the key to a political study of attitudes towards death' (Lomnitz 2008: 17). In this context, Mexico becomes a site of such contradictions, an example of 'colonial societies that are simultaneously European and "other"'. The appropriate and timely question for Lomnitz, in the face of the discourse and his own material, is to ask 'what happens to attitudes towards death when political society is organized around this sort of fragmentation?' Categories that attempt to determine the 'native' or 'original' nature of rituals and beliefs are therefore done away with in favour of a much more complex picture. Lomnitz's aim is to illustrate how a wilful appropriation of death as a national symbol can be reflective of 'structural differences between nation formation in strong and weak states, between imperial and postcolonial states' (28).

In the context of a dialogue between my own ethnographic material and works from within the anthropology of death, Lomnitz's criticism and shift of perspective are certainly well argued and speak to the situation I faced in my 'field'. As the work of Gillian Feeley-Harnik shows, historical influences and flows, the creation of insides and outsides and the role of hostilities are never clearly demarcated but always permeate the constructed 'insides' of a social group. Her ethnographic material, which mentions wars and rivalries among different ethnic groups in Madagascar prior to colonialization, makes this very clear. Categories of inside and outside, stranger and insider, play a vital role in constituting native governance systems, turning events related to death into a tool for producing social coherence against the colonial administration on the outside. Similarities can be seen in the history of what is today Ghana. Lomnitz describes Mexico as a 'nation of enemies' (2008: 19) who have come to an arrangement with one another under the umbrella of the nation state. But at the same time, here, death has been nationalized, producing the state while perplexingly also weakening it. Adopting this position meets the description of what Lomnitz calls for: the 'simultaneous reference to a subjective, a collective and even a trans-societal horizon' as reflected in the social construction of death. As set out

before, access through materiality may offer the key to understanding such a complexity of influences as they become apparent in the interrelations of the material and the social world.

Other contemporary ethnographic works consider these updated 'conditions' to greater or lesser extents, and thankfully in different styles. Erik Mueggler's book *Songs for Dead Parents* (2017), which focuses on funerary rituals among the Lolopo in southwest China, provides accounts of previous and contemporary death-related practices, as well as their changes in the course of history with its various 'exterior' influences. The text provides ample room for descriptions and storytelling. One of Mueggler's main sources are songs that relate to the dead and construct a place for them. Mueggler focuses on the local functions of death, oral tradition and the corpse as sites that reveal social relations more clearly than living bodies could (Ha 2019). Instead of reading funerary activities related to death as the reproduction of the social order, Mueggler's ethnography offers more options. While dead bodies are, as he shows in his ethnographic material, a site of negotiating social relations among the living, these are by no means channelled into a specific direction or a pre-set social order. The dead are made into others, complementing Lomnitz's deconstruction of clear 'inside-outside' categories. Responding to a body of work within the anthropology of death that preceded his work, Mueggler writes:

> In this sense, work for the dead does not restore a social order fractured by death, as the tradition of the anthropology of death would have it. Work for the dead creates a formal and objectified image of the social world in the dead body, which participants can perceive as other to themselves. This process of assembly and disengagement, carried out over several decades, is the source of generative power, producing living bodies as effects of work on the dead. (2017: 7)

Careful attention to local practices and beliefs in relation to death therefore does not merely contribute to further collections of ethnographic details. Instead, it connects to themes beyond either of the horizons that Lomnitz treats as exclusive perspectives. As the history and current political transformations of Peki and Ghana show, individual groups are differently framed in relation to the state and, with death and funerals playing a major role in the South of the country, the kind of relations that communities and their members have to the state will ultimately also be shaped by and expressed in funerals and commemorative practices.

Death, Power and the Material World: An Anthropological History of Materials?

This first chapter has drawn a holistic picture of different fields of power and their roots in the past which determine the organization of social structures in Peki, the Volta Region and Ghana today. Colonial and missionary intervention led to a drastic change in local structures that

administered power, including a change in beliefs pertaining to the afterlife and mortuary customs. However, as the discussion of political systems, kinship structures and religious practices in the Volta Region and Peki has shown, these changes, while forced by institutions coming from the outside, were dealt with by local interlocutors and institutions, altered by communities and later on reappropriated by the State of Ghana by way of acculturation. Furthermore, local indigenous structures also contained within them inherent beliefs and properties that allowed for social change and transformation before colonial contact. Ewe culture contained many aspects in which practices, beliefs, rules and kinship ties were subject to fluid changes and developments, also pertaining to moral assessments, beliefs and practices around death and the afterlife. Contemporary systems of political organization, kinship and religious or spiritual practice, as I encountered them during my fieldwork, are thereby just as much informed by historical ideas of fixity in the culturally conservative sense of the word, as they are by change, which may come from various entities regarded as outside or inside a community. It is these two forces on the outside of a broad spectrum marking social change and the organization of power which are equally active forces in multiple negotiations taking place around death in Ghana. And it is also these qualities which happen to materialize in spaces, materials and bodies. A change in influences and times, as I have traced it in this chapter, ultimately leads to the expertise of history and archaeology, especially when attempting to learn about how the passing of time was expressed in material environments, human bodies and objects used in everyday life. Social and cultural anthropology can to some extent answer questions about changes that took place, largely in the field of historical anthropology. A study of the influx of different materials over the course of the events sketched in this chapter exceeds the possibilities of what ethnography working in the here and now can deliver. However, as this chapter has given context for the material conditions under which the dead in Peki were and are commemorated, this informs how an understanding of material practices and the use of materials in this context today can be understood. Synthetic materials, which have played a lesser role in this chapter but were introduced to West Africa through colonial trade and presence, can, for instance, no longer be said to be strictly 'non-indigenous'. I would argue that this is true for almost any global context today, with a few exceptions. The production, use and trade of synthetic materials has to a large extent been adapted in local contexts, even if these were not the localities where these materials were invented and sourced. The materials that were initially used in place of synthetics, or after which synthetics were modelled, like tortoise shell or ivory, were among the reasons why trade with West Africa was sought. These materials were extracted efficiently, like many other materials then and now, up to the point of near extinction of their animal and ecological resources. Today, similar to other changes brought about by colonial interventions and post-independence, synthetic

materials are no longer an 'Other', just like Christianity or Western-inspired burial practices. Yet, synthetic materials also retain within them problems of repair, recycling and access that still speak of global structural power inequalities. When addressing the question of social transformation and the organization of political life, as this book does, it makes sense to frame the status quo of socio-material practices before a wider social background. This means outlining transformations and fixations of the social alongside their material expressions. And while many of the material practices of the past in Peki cannot be featured here as prominently as the discussion of history at large, one may still turn the question on its head, advocating for why context is important.

To understand the multiplicity of values and qualities that are invested in materials which are used for work dedicated to the dead, it is vital to consider infrastructural contexts such as local religious practices, economic activities and socio-political organization, in the past and in the present. By asking how materiality 'matters' during processes that turn the body of the deceased into the social body par excellence, it becomes evident that the public material presence of things and human bodies that make death tangible is, first of all, fundamental for producing death as a total social phenomenon in the community of Peki. Activities and things relating to death tap into the power that this totality entails. Through their relationship with death as the ultimate transformation, these activities and things carry the potential for negotiating social transformations or the opposition to such on different levels – in terms of political power, in terms of moral evaluations, and in relation to economic values, social obligations and religious cosmologies. By looking more closely at the potential, fluid and transformative qualities that are immanent within the things that matter when managing death and dying, it appears that these allow for different interpretations, thereby actively enabling negotiations in which a plurality of perspectives and intentions have room to exist. It is these things and bodies that will take centre stage in the ethnographic observations of the second part of this book.

Notes

1. In Ghana and Ghanaian English, indigenous institutions are largely called traditional, both in literature as well as by my interlocutors and Ghanaian institutions themselves. I therefore refer to the term here as well, critically, because it is a commonly used self-description and title.
2. Alexander Keese (2015) traces the use of the term 'Ewe' as an identity category, finding that it was initially German-speaking missionaries who sought to find unity among people who spoke Ewe and appealing to this unity as a way to further Christianisation. However, he finds little proof that Ewe groups were in solidarity with one another due to a shared ethnic-cultural identity at the time. Eventually though, the term came to be of use as a category that proved instrumental as an 'anti-colonial weapon' with pan-Ewe aims while sparking debate across different political agendas within groups that identified as Ewe. It also proved 'useful when it came to

excluding groups on 'traditional' grounds' (271) and this interpretation of 'tradition' was used with great flexibility according to the needs of ruling dynasties (290).

3. Both terms, 'Krepe' and 'Inland Ewe', originate with Europeans who attempted to categorize local political affiliations. Neither is a native category. For a detailed discussion of the uncertainty of this term as a label without 'concrete meaning' see also Keese's discussion of Ewe identity. He concludes that: 'This label for an imagined community in the interior of the coastal region practically ceased to exist at the moment of the final Anglo-German partition of the Volta Region' (2015: 241). In the 1880s, according to Keese, 'Krepi' was attributed by German and British colonial and missionary actors to describe the supposed territory of the Peki Paramount Chief Kwadzo Dei IV or attributed to other groups such as the Avatime, depending on colonial preferences. Equally, local indigenous groups chose to use the term and express allegiance to it depending on strategic use.
4. Since this split occurred after my field research and new census figures for the Oti Region remain to be published, I will continue to refer to the figures and borders of the Volta Region that applied pre-2019.
5. Only one member of the assembly, the representative for Peki-Blengo, is a female representative, explaining why assembly members are usually called 'assemblymen'.
6. I had the opportunity to see a royal grave in Peki and as a grave structure, it was recognizable, yet the location was hidden and one would need a local guide to find the site. This comes to show that it may be easy for the community to prevent knowledge of these sites spreading to people not from the community.
7. Peki and Ho are generally regarded as northern (inland) Ewe (by missionaries). The Anlo (coastal) Ewe, on whom a lot of literature focuses, are to some extent a separate 'group'. They were considered more authentic by missionaries, who sought to unite the Ewe as one Christian nation through their work on the Ewe language and Christianization (Meyer 1995, 2002). Nevertheless, Birgit Meyer confirmed in personal conversation with me, that most of the description from neighbouring *duwɔ* (political units) relates to Peki as well.
8. I will use both terms, 'good' and 'bad', in parentheses throughout the book to highlight the relativity of these terms, similar to my reference to 'tradition'.

2

Death in Peki
Sequences

I arrived in Peki on a Thursday in late November 2016. I had booked a room at a local guesthouse where I had previously stayed during my initial, brief visit in August that same year. No other arrangements had been made at that point. Friday morning came bright and early with the warm November sun peeking through the bush of banana plants in front of my window at 6 am. But instead of marking the beginning of the weekend as a period of relaxation, such as I was accustomed to in the German (Christian) tradition, Friday in Peki is the day for starting the funeral celebrations that take place over the course of the weekend. Preparations are less visible during the day but become more public as soon as night falls. By midday on Friday, sitting sheltered in the shade beneath a giant mango tree in the yard of my guesthouse, I could hear loud music from afar. The guesthouse was located on the edge of town and offered a secluded refuge from whatever was going on in town proper. But just a fifteen-minute walk away in Peki-Avetile, 'spinners' (Ghanaian English for DJs) were testing their sound systems, and brass bands were rehearsing, setting the mood for the evening.

A few hours later, in the dark of a tropical night at around 7 pm, I found myself on the concrete road that connects five communities within Peki, leading from Peki-Avetile to Peki-Wudome. The street was filled with groups of people who had shown up to welcome the bodies of their relatives or friends back into town. There was barely space to walk, and I had to squeeze through crowds who were dancing and singing, past pick-up trucks loaded with bodies that had been collected from the morgue, groups of people ready to carry the deceased into the family compounds where they would be laid in state, as well as brass bands and hearses, which in Ghana have the form of ambulance cars with flashing lights and piercing sirens. As I slowly walked down to Peki-Wudome, which was located at the far end of a long and winding road, I felt the intensity of the busy funeral preparations

sink in with every step I took. When I made it to my destination, where I wanted to attend two lyings in state – one of a female elder who was my friend and assistant Collins Jamson's[1] relative, and one of the former paramount chief's daughter – I was already tired and wide-eyed from walking and observing.

As will become evident throughout this book, my observations of different funerals are obviously the result of chance or rather the funerals and events that occurred while I was present in town. You will find that I focus largely on the deaths and commemoration of 'normal' Peki community members. This, despite being a product of chance, is nevertheless representative of how death receives attention in town. While funerals of community members from royal families, such as the paramount chief's daughter whom you will hear about in a second, are obviously to some extent more conspicuous than funerals of poor community members, every death is worthy of attention and public display. I have found that this is one of the most important aspects which add to the intensity that the field of death and commemoration acquires in town. Despite not having had the chance to attend a chief's funeral (and we have learned that there are many and different kinds of chiefs, making that distinctive title somewhat blurrier), I do not believe that I have missed vital observations. After all, negotiations about power also take place between regular community members. Yet, the desire to extend the time that a politically important chief's body spends in the morgue and the worries that accompany their succession and funeral are also present in their family member's lives and deaths. They can be felt even after the funeral of such a chief, as their succession and the ways in which they died and were buried continue to occupy the community, pointing towards the continued importance of 'traditional' political leadership in Ghana and the impact that traditional leader's deaths have on communities.

Death in Africa, Ghana and in Ewe Culture: Historical Perspectives

Discussions of death in Africa have been, and remain, a noticeable research focus (Jindra and Noret 2013). Based on the classic studies of Hertz and van Gennep (Hertz 1907; van Gennep 1909), contemporary scholars identify death as an event of 'physical, spiritual and social rupture' in African contexts (Lee and Vaughan 2008; Banyubala 2014). Van Gennep attributed this event of rupture to the particular 'traditional' structure of African societies with their extensive kinship ties. Applied to 'African traditional societies' with their 'high relationship economies' (Gudeman 2016) and tightly knit kinship systems, the assumption that a dense social fabric produces activities that were directly aimed at maintaining its integrity used to be, and still is, wide spread. Activities that relate to death, including funerals, which have particularly high public visibility, are recognized as important social events in Africa (Lee and Vaughan 2012; Jindra and Noret 2013; Kalusa

and Vaughan 2013), including Ghana (Goody 1962; van der Geest 2000; Witte 2001, 2003).

The notion of an 'African' funeral has come to be known as an umbrella term for a 'social phenomenon', though different in specifics due to localities (Jindra and Noret 2013). In fact, African funerals and activities that deal with death take on a variety of forms, depending on the specific location, ethnic groups, religious practices and so on. In the introduction to their edited volume *Funerals in Africa*, which traces different forms and expressions of funerals or events surrounding death on the African continent, Michael Jindra and Joël Noret attest to a 'continuing (though changing over time) political significance to dead bodies in Africa' (2013: 2). This marks the central commonality between diverse death-related practices across the continent. Aiming to use studies of funerary practices to illuminate changing power relations and the increasing diversity of contemporary post-colonial African societies, they 'intend to show that funerals are major occasions for the (re)production and the (un)making of both solidarities and hierarchies, both alliances and conflicts' (2). Similarly, Rebekah Lee and Megan Vaughan state that 'funerary and mortuary practices express and shape a wide range of social relations, including the maintenance of kinship ties, the reproduction of communal values, and notions of succession and property inheritance' (2008: 344). Hence, activities dealing with death have a lot of potential in African societies and the afore-mentioned authors all credit death and funerary activities with the role of a total social phenomenon, following Marcel Mauss. However, while acknowledging the historically developed structures of African societies that make them distinct, Jindra and Noret no longer see these societies as superstructures with a kind of consciousness of their own that denies the diversity and diverse intentions of individual members; nor are they the pure incarnation of non-individualised societies, as Hertz frames them. Rather, they credit African societies and their relationship to the social processing of death with a high degree of differentiation and with multiple influences that shape them.

In that context, Ghanaian funerals in particular have come to be recognized in anthropological research as remarkable events due to their social importance and often conspicuous nature, such as in the works of Jack Goody, Marleen de Witte, Sjaak van der Geest or Suzanne Gott (Goody 1962; Witte 2001; van der Geest 2004, 2006; Gott 2007). Communities and groups across Ghana celebrate funerals as public events that take more time, energy, and attention than any other rite of passage, be it a birthday, a wedding, or a traditional religious celebration. The only events that may compete with funerals in terms of their consumption of time and money are church services in the Christian south, but usually a service will form part of a funeral, adding to its excessive nature. Activities and ways of dealing with death are equally important among the Ewe as an ethnic group living in south-east Ghana and parts of Togo and Benin. However, no contemporary piece of anthropological research has dedicated itself to commemorative

practices in Ewe history and communities. The Ewe as an ethnic group have not been at the centre of scholarly attention (for example compared to studies of Akan culture) when taking into consideration all ethnic groups living in Ghana, though some foundational texts from colonial times as well as more recent work exist. While early mentions occur in the texts of missionaries Jakob Spieth (1906, 1911; Spieth and Amoakou 2011) and Diedrich Westermann (1905/6, 1907, 1935), later works have also selectively focused on Ewe culture while touching on funerals and death-related practices (Asamoa 1971, 1986; Rosenthal 1998; Meyer 1999; Alsheimer 2007; Lawrance 2007; Brydon 2009; Venkatachalam 2012). Even though it is particularly the Akan in Ghana who are known for their very festive and conspicuous funeral celebrations (see McCaskie 1989; Witte 2001 van der Geest 2006; Gott 2007), Ghanaian Ewe communities have their own – to some degree similar, to some degree different – ways of making death the most important event in a person's life, as well as a communal mournful or celebratory occasion. In comparison to the Akan, these have not received a comparable amount of attention. Some written sources provide information regarding funerary and commemorative practices among different Ewe groups as well as elsewhere in Ghana. These texts are regarded as being generally informative regarding all Ewe groups. Divine Banyubala makes a claim for the comparability of attitudes towards death within Ghana based on similarities in traditional religious beliefs (2014). Regarding the shared colonial history and cross-pollination between indigenous practices and beliefs, this may be true, but practices across Ghana do remain locally specific and differ depending on culturally ethnic and local contexts. And while differentiation in scholarly discussion has come from an external Western point of view, as seen in the many categories into which Ewe people alone were grouped, as well as from Ghanaian scholars, local and cultural difference retains a valuable degree of information. Here, this matters specifically with regards to Ewe practices and Ewe history in relation to the nation state.[2]

Death in Ewe Culture: Jakob Spieth's *Die Ewe Stämme* and *Die Religion Der Eweer in Süd-Togo*

An important early source regarding Ewe funerary practices and beliefs is the work of missionary Jakob Spieth. His *Die Ewe Stämme* (Spieth 1906; Spieth and Amoaku 2011), accompanied by a volume focusing on religious life among the Ewe (Spieth 1911), describes aspects of Ewe life around the turn of the century. Spieth was an Ewe speaker and Bible translator, which, in contrast to other authors writing about Ewe people at the time, made him particularly able to communicate with Ewe interlocutors (Alsheimer 2007: 225). Spieth's account is a historical source written from the perspective of a German missionary living among Ewe people with the intention of furthering Christianity there. As such, it represents a particular point of view on

Ewe life and makes use of a selective frame of reference in which important pieces of information are placed. Interestingly, however, Spieth worked with native writers, trained in missionary schools, to note down conversations he had with informants as well as stories and narratives that these students heard in their communities.[3] Spieth's works constitute historical documentation written in a plain, observant style without strong personal judgement. As such, they also provide a structural picture of mortuary rites and the place of death in Ewe life and spirituality over a hundred years ago, filtered through the lens of a German missionary in interaction with the local population. According to Spieth's accounts, most communities differentiated between what was deemed 'good' deaths and 'bad' deaths (1911: 233–40). A 'good' death was a death from natural cause such as illness, allowing some time to prepare. In such cases, messengers were sent to neighbouring communities to inform relatives and other acquaintances of the death and guns were fired. This was followed by sympathizers coming to the house of the deceased's family, the washing and dressing of the corpse, and its subsequent burial. Men were likely to be buried in the compound, often under the floor of a room in their own house. The grave was dug from outside, reaching the house via a tunnel without providing an entry to the grave via the house. Women, who in a patrilineal society did not formally own houses, were usually buried in the bush. Spieth differentiates between the graves of rich people, who could be buried under their houses, and those of poor people, which are dug without much care and left shallow (1911: 237). Graves were dug either by people who were appointed to the task by the chief and were paid for their services in food, drink and cowry shells, or by male family members, who also received food and drink for their work. A wake was kept for the dead, who would then be buried within a few days after their death. The dead were buried wrapped in cloth or a mat and with some of their clothing, without a coffin. The grave was mostly left unmarked. Some people added items such as dishes, pots, ladles and calabashes to the grave (Spieth and Amoaku 2011: 309). Several days after the interment, the family visited a local priest to speak with the dead and inquire about the cause of their death (Spieth 1911: 238–39). This was because the dead might have been killed by a dead relative or a magician, who would then have to be held responsible for the death. This could be found out by carrying the body of the deceased around the town, which would attempt to direct its bearers to the house of its murderer.

Within a period of between a month and a year, the deceased's possessions were divided up within the family: 'After the funeral celebration the (movable) property of the deceased is distributed. Everything that is bad is carried outside the village and thrown by the way side, in order that the dead person himself can make use of it' (Spieth and Amoaku 2011: 307). After a period of up to six months, the 'rolling of the mat' takes place, a symbolic closing of the funeral rites. Some groups are reported to destroy the houses of the deceased after their deaths (307). After some time, the 'flattening

of the grave' (*das Grab ebenen*) was celebrated, an event after which the spirit was regarded as having reached his spiritual home and final resting place. However, the spirits of the deceased and physical manifestations of them could still enter the world of the living, for example to visit markets (Spieth 1911: 239). If the spirits failed to reach their spiritual destination, they could be dangerous for the living. One reason for such restless spirits could be a 'bad' cause of death. Other possible reasons were the inadequate performance of funerary rites, objects of the deceased remaining in the possession of a living person or debts outstanding to the deceased on the part of a living person. A 'bad' death was a sudden, unexpected death, which could, for example, occur through snakebite, hunting accident, suicide or in labour. A 'good' death could be treated according to a sequential protocol, which would culminate in the arrival of the deceased in the land of the souls. A 'bad' death, however, put the community at risk of suffering other 'bad' events. The spirit of a deceased person who had died suddenly could be potentially harmful to the community and required a funeral outside of town, the destruction of the deceased's house, the town's purification and revenge in the form of killing or attacking what had caused the death – for example, killing snakes in revenge for a snakebite (239–40). The spirits of those who died a 'bad' death could come back to haunt the living and their relatives. To prevent this or in reaction to a haunting, the property of a deceased person could be deposited along the roadside (249). The relatives of those who had died by suicide were asked to make recovery payments to the chiefs and the community. The bodies of people who had died by suicide were quickly buried in the bush without any lying in state, but nevertheless a funeral with food was held several days later. In cases of bad deaths outside, Spieth's *The Ewe People* gives several accounts of 'spirit collections'. In these rituals, soil is carried from the place of the accident to the grave of the deceased in a pot and left there. Sometimes rolling a mat after a violent death also involves offering food on a mat outside the town for all those who have died violent deaths. Questioning the dead to find their cause of death – a possible murder by a wandering spirit or a personal *gbetsi* spirit – shows that the cause of death is considered important and can be identified by contact with the spirit world. Spirits of the dead who have not come to rest can also kill and be identified as a cause of death. This means that the spirits of the dead become conversation partners when moderated by a priest, possible threats or possible helpers in the form of ancestors, who can bring about good things for their family members. In these various forms, the dead and ways of grappling with death are important for the lives of everyone in the community. The dead can bring support or devastation, depending on their nature, the nature of death and the treatment they receive. Ultimately, the question of where material and spiritual elements of the dead are located, whether they are in the right place, is meaningful. When looking at practices related to death in Peki today, it is therefore also important to understand the town's location as a place with historical implications.

Death and Place in Peki Today

Peki as a geographical location has a special meaning for people 'from Peki' when it comes to death. Funeral proceedings, interments, other 'traditional' practices or Christian church services for deceased persons from Peki are expected to be held in Peki, not somewhere else – a phenomenon that Peter Geschiere has described as autochthony (2009: 55, 190–211). Most of my interlocutors agreed that one counts as being 'from Peki' when one can prove one's family's presence over several generations back, including a local house that is recognized as the family house. Otherwise, one may be considered a stranger, even if one was born in Peki. This concept of autochthony is common in African perspectives on belonging. Burying community members at home is therefore a way to reinforce this claim of belonging, which, as Geschiere shows, is often a neotraditional invention rather than an age-old practice. The physical last resting place of dead bodies serves the claims of living family members for belonging and recognition in a place. For those who live away from their ancestral town, the wish to be buried in ancestral ground means that they have to become involved in local politics before their return or while they are away. Acknowledging comparable developments in other African countries, Geschiere shows with his study of Cameroon what an unexpected role 'funerals came to play as a final test of belonging in the new political debates triggered by political liberalization and democratization' (190). The same is true in Peki, where a successful life ends with a burial in Peki (if one is from a recognized Peki family). A family or person who has married into a Peki family or moved here (even if now second or third generation) remains a 'stranger', possibly over several generations. In contrast, members of Peki families who grew up or lived elsewhere in Ghana or overseas, and then moved to Peki are and remain locals. The urge to bury a person from Peki in their hometown also applies if this person, although from a Peki family and born in Peki, lived and died away from Peki.

It is the geographical location, the material presence of local soil and the presence of the community that determine this heightened relevance of Peki as a place for the dead. Funerals bring various guests to town. These populate the streets, hotels and compounds over the funeral weekends and often beyond that. The importance of 'being' in Peki, combined with the circulation of services, things and people from outside, is a significant factor in various aspects of community life. Understanding the implications of 'being' in Peki, its insides and outsides, means understanding how the community is connected. Surrounded by cooling forest and situated at a higher altitude, the town of Peki[4] feels far removed from the heat and buzz of coastal urban Accra. People say Peki is 'cool', a description that seems somewhat untrue to anyone who is not used to a tropical climate. But usually, no matter how hot the day, a gentle breeze will start to blow in the late afternoon, sweeping the sweltering heat away and leading into the night. The big advantage of

Peki – in comparison to many towns that are located on busy roads with heavy traffic – is that six of its towns are grouped around a paved road which is not used by overland traffic but only serves to connect the communities. Peki-Dzake is more isolated at about a kilometre from the nearby overland road and some three kilometres away from the central part of town. The other six Peki communities are aligned like pearls on a string with the town of Tsame being situated near the overland road. For anyone who is not a local, the borders between the 'towns within the town' are invisible. The distinction between individual towns and the fact of their belonging to Peki proper does not follow an official, authoritative drawing of borders and affiliations. The town structure of several communities united under the umbrella term 'Peki' is a remainder of pre-colonial community structures and reflective of clan structures that are grouped together as neighbours, forming the Peki towns. Yet, practices relating to death cross all borders within the community, be they visible or invisible, temporal or social. These practices are deeply influenced by transformations that have occurred in the community and form an integral part of transforming political and other social structures in Peki today.

Lynne Brydon describes the 'Krepe' region as well-connected and mobile throughout the colonial period (2009). Birgit Meyer starts out by describing Peki as a place that 'was not (and probably never has been) an isolated location' at the time of her research in 1989, with frequent minibus transports between Peki and Accra on a daily basis (1999: 23). The same is still true today. Life in Peki, as I experienced it during my time in the town, has its moments of feeling remote as well as feeling at the centre of local events, depending on the flow and pace of movement and the availability of transportation. People frequently travel from and to Peki, yet the absence of a bus station means that the journey is not always readily available, such as in Accra, but rather requires contact with drivers in the community if one wants to take a 'Peki car'. Otherwise, finding a seat on the traffic that passes through town depends on chance. Accra is only about 120 km away, yet the trip may take up to five hours due to bad roads and heavy traffic when coming into the Greater Accra area. The length of the journey and its relative discomforts therefore create a greater distance than the actual kilometre count might suggest. However, it is possible to travel back and forth within a day if necessary and people do so frequently. The artificial Volta Lake is not far from the town, but with Peki being situated in a valley between hills, it is cut off from direct and easy access to the lake. When travelling lakeward, be it to cross the big bridge near the Akosombo dam or to visit the town of Dzemeni in the Volta Region with its busy market, one must circumnavigate the hills, which takes about fifty minutes by car. Peki profits from an 'internal' cemented street connecting all five sub-towns of Avetile, Afeviofe, Blengo, Dzugbati and Wudome. The street is a convenient means to get around within the community, both on foot and by car. In comparison to Birgit Meyer's account from the early 1990s, and judging from what

my interlocutors told me, it seemed that the availability of taxis as modes of transportation to get around in town has increased significantly in recent years. People in Peki perceive this as a process of urbanization in the towns. Owning or driving a taxi has become a popular job and drivers circle the town on a set route, going from Dzake to Wudome and back. Prices for a shared taxi ride are fixed, which in the end gives the taxis the same function as that of *trotro* minibuses in Accra.

The roads and means of mobilizing people in and around the town successfully achieve a connection between Peki, the surrounding towns and urban Accra, supplying Peki with goods of various sorts and enabling a coming and going of guests and townsfolk. At the same time, the internal town road is a centre for leisure-time activities and socializing. Being connected and yet seemingly tucked away, the 'rural' state of Peki seems to be somewhat undermined. With a passing car always just a few moments away, one is never really stuck in this town between the hills, but may be gone within an instant and return the same way. Benjamin N. Lawrance discusses transformations of Ewe identities in former German Togoland throughout the colonial period. In his detailed historiographical study, he challenges the concept of the rural-versus-urban divide. Instead, he argues that 'tensions between village-level social and political cultures, and indigenous political movements that operated within the framework of "nation", were tackled in and around an increase in "periurban zones"' (2007: 2–3). In these ambiguously uncategorizable parts of land near a town or urban centre that were neither rural nor urban, 'periurban colonialism' influenced and shaped negotiations around social change. A rise in periurban zones, 'breaking down the dichotomy between rural and urban during the mature colonial area', is what he sees as the key to understanding 'the trajectories of change in Eweland and by extension in much of sub-Saharan Africa' (3). In that respect, it would be an over-simplification to understand Peki as just a rural town. Rather, its infrastructure places it somewhere between the urban and the rural, tentatively periurban. Furthermore, and more importantly, Lawrance's study suggests that spatial configurations and the ways in which these have been amended during the colonial period were reflective and formative of indigenous reactions to social change and the challenges of foreign rule. Categories of identification such as nationhood were tools for positioning indigenous interests tactically.

Peki grew in houses as well as in population as the result of an economic boom from cocoa-farming which began around 1890 and had ceased completely by the 1950s. When the boom ended due to infertile soil and plantation pests, the previously acquired wealth could not be maintained, and people left the town to look for work elsewhere in the Gold Coast or returned to the subsistence farming of local crops. Since then, people in Peki have had to find new ways of earning money, exchanging products and producing food and other things for their daily lives. The 2010 South Dayi population census treats Peki as one of the district's urban areas (Ghana

Statistical Service 2014). While that may be true when comparing Peki to smaller village settlements in the district or the Volta Region more generally, it still appears less urbanized in a lot of ways, for example when compared to the Volta Region's capital of Ho or to the national capital Accra. The availability of imported products and more sophisticated technological equipment and services is sparse. I learned about the intricate networks of people, information and things travelling between Peki, Accra and abroad when I worked with bereaved families and graphic designers from Peki, who were involved in the production of printed obituary media. While Peki does have a copy shop that offers black-and-white printing, there are no facilities with a printer capable of producing colour-printed banners on PVC, let alone prints of the size that make a banner or poster noticeable. Both the material as well as the print itself must be acquired in a bigger city or town. The economy of producing and transporting things (as well as bodies alive and dead) between Peki and Accra is important for organizing funerals and reveals how people navigate both space and time cleverly to achieve a favourable outcome for their dead. People rely on each other's presence and activities to provide necessary products and services in town, so there is no immediate need to leave town for anything.

Places of Death: Cemeteries, Graves, Spirits

The community boasts a total of seven cemeteries, which are all differently organized, owned and managed. This is important since it reflects the diversity of actors, regulations and claims which come to play a part in the management of Peki burials. The Avetile cemetery is an example of a public cemetery that is organized and leased by the town's traditional governance authorities, represented by the chief of Avetile's palace and a group of elders working with it. In comparison, Dzake cemetery is privately owned by a family, and the palace in Dzake has nothing to do with the leasing of plots and burials. In Tsame, there is a public cemetery which works like the Avetile cemetery, and there is also a second cemetery that is shared by three clans, whose members may be buried here. Non-members of the clans can purchase the right of burial in this cemetery despite their outsider status. Wudome cemetery belongs to the E.P. Church and is open to all members who have paid their tithes to the church. All others, again, must pay the church in order to bury a relative there. Some parts of this cemetery, including adjoining land, are privately owned and grave plots may be leased from the families who own it. The difference between these two administrative institutions in Wudome cemetery is also reflected in the material construction of the graves. On the land of the E.P. Church, graves may not be cemented or covered with concrete, nor decorated with tiles or any other kind of permanent headstone. Private plots will allow this, which is reflected in their price. In addition, there also exists a cemetery shared by the three communities of Blengo, Afeviofe and Dzugbati, which is partially

owned by the E.P Church and partially under private ownership. These shared ownerships create a somewhat confusing mixture of responsibilities and rules. Parts in which graves can be cemented, meaning that they will remain there indefinitely, are under private ownership and burial costs must be negotiated differently than with the representatives of the palaces, families or the E.P Church. The seventh cemetery is a newly opened, private cemetery owned by a wealthy industrialist from Peki. Finally, there are also two *agbadɔme* 'luggage' cemeteries for the spirits and belongings of accident victims, one in Avetile and one in Wudome. The impact of this diverse mixture of places and responsibilities around cemeteries on the community will be at the centre of the second and third part of this book, which follow movements across boundaries in the community. For now, it is important to make one initial and essential point: there are a lot of cemeteries in Peki, in relation to the size of the community. Their presence, in combination with associated sets of rules and regulations, retains the dead in the heart of the community. While my interlocutors have voiced concern over the proximity of the dead to the living, most cemeteries are in fact integrated into the plan of the town, sometimes on the edges of settlements but not completely removed from them, sometimes within a quite densely populated area. Not counted, but to be mentioned here, are church cemeteries in the church yards of mission-built churches. These consist mostly of older graves going back to missionary times, but the grave of a pastor may occasionally be added to it. There are also many graves on private land, next to people's houses, some older but some also very recent. While these kinds of home burials (which I have not witnessed myself) are legally not permitted, there are certain loopholes of acquiring the right to bury a relative on the family land, as I will discuss in Part II. A general observation from these different practices and opinions may be that attitudes to the dead differ among community members, and that there is an equal desire to keep one's dead close and to keep them spatially removed.

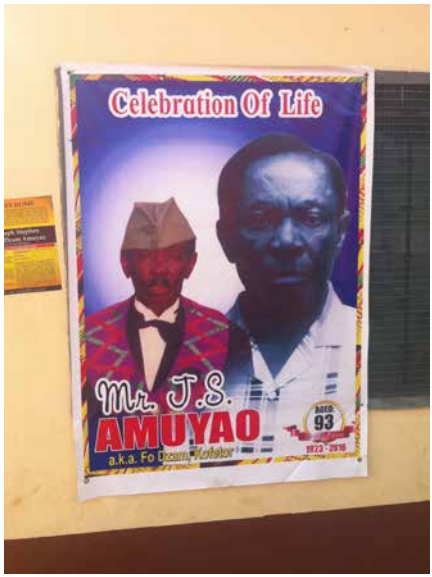
Regarding the participation of local actors and institutions in funerals and commemoration, it is also important to note from the outset that the community distinguishes between Christian, Muslim and traditional funerals, all of which are conducted differently and by different people in authoritative roles. Muslim funerals are exempt from the temporally durational aspect that the popular Christian funerals follow. Muslim community members usually leave the washing and burying of their relatives to family members of the same sex as the deceased and the whole procedure is supposed to be completed within a day. Graves are either left unmarked or marked with natural rocks. As such, these funerals, which are also reflected in the materiality of the graves, go against the trend in the community to bury in a durational way and make excessive use of material things while doing so – they even forego the use of coffins, burying the deceased only in a sheet. Christian funerals are much the opposite, involving a panoply of materials, things and finally in the ideal case, a cemented grave that promises

the eternal presence of the dead on earth. Christian burials, as Birgit Meyer (1999) notes, were an attractive alternative to traditional burials in missionary times, since they were cheaper (dues were only paid to the Church instead of to a large group of chiefs and guests) and spiritually the Christian God offered eternal life at a much lower risk. Traditional funerals were supposed to involve the gifting of food and drinks to all guests, the donation of sacrificial goats to chiefs and the ability to hold festivities that might last for several days without a break. Today, Christian funerals of any church affiliation involve a lengthy church service, which may be held by lay preachers and volunteers if need be. During my fieldwork, all services that I attended as part of a funeral took place in a family home or at a public location, none in an actual church building. This seems to have evolved since the 1990s, when those paying their regular tithe could expect a service at church. Yet, even then there was the flexible option of using volunteer preachers and taking the event home if the money didn't suffice for the 'full service'. But Christian funerals also offer another advantage in comparison to services offered by traditional practitioners: Christian priests, spiritual leaders and higher chiefs are allowed to see and interact with the dead body. For traditional religious practitioners with the role of priest, this is not allowed. They may only partake and offer other services that do not involve visual or physical contact with the body, and still require a white sacrificial animal for purposes of purification afterwards. As I will discuss, contemporary solutions to the problem of having 'the best of both worlds' may result in a mixed Christian-traditional service. Importantly, people in Peki continue to distinguish between a 'good' and a 'bad' death, the 'good' death being a death that is somewhat foreseeable and not sudden, the 'bad' death resulting from an accident or similar event. Today, cars are among the main causes of such accidental deaths. In cases of 'bad' deaths, people in Peki do different additional things that deviate from the sequence prescribed for a 'good' death, which I will outline in the following section before turning to the sequence for 'bad' deaths.

Ku: The 'Good' Death Sequence

Whether a death counts as 'good' or 'bad' death is most recognizable by the ubiquitous 'funeral banners', large scale images colour-printed on PVC (sheet plastic polyvinyl chloride), and smaller-scale self-adhesive posters that plaster the town's walls. While posters list many details on mourners and funeral proceedings, requiring a closer read, it is particularly the banners that visually categorize a death by giving headlines such as 'Celebration of life' and 'Call to glory', or alternatively 'What a shock' and 'Gone too soon'.

In response to a 'good' death, family meetings take place to organize finances, responsibilities and tasks. Families and clans take note of the monetary contributions and labour each member has offered to the clan and the community. Reflecting the tradition of Ewe oral culture, most important



Figures 2.1 and 2.2 Examples of a banner for 'good' death and a banner for 'bad' death, pictured in Peki in late 2016. © Isabel Bredenbröker

information is generated and passed on orally. While financial contributions to funerals or to a clan's collection of money may be recorded in written form, attendance at clan meetings, funerals and community labour is registered by witnesses, and information circulated and reproduced in the community. These records, whether in the form of actual documents or as a set of opinions and stories, are negotiated in various ways, before and after a person's death. The outcome of these negotiations influences the way the funeral is held, the financial implications for relatives and the moral standing of families and individuals in the community.

After a death has occurred, the body of the deceased is stored at the local morgue. This is situated in Peki-Tsame and forms part of the Peki Government Hospital complex. The morgue is paid by relatives at a rate of 17 Cedi per day (rates in 2016/17). Funerals take place every second weekend, following a schedule released by the *adontehene* of the Peki Traditional Area. In the week before a funeral, an undertaker prepares a room in a family compound where the deceased will be laid in state. The 'dressing of the room' usually happens on the Wednesday or Thursday before the funeral. Graves are also dug on Wednesdays. On Friday morning, the bodies of those deceased who are going to be buried at the weekend are washed at the local morgue by a delegation of relatives and undertakers. The bodies may only leave the morgue in a white body bag and may not enter the town before nightfall. After sunset, the body will be dressed and decorated at the family compound by an undertaker. The subsequent lying

in state on Friday nights is an occasion upon which the community and family members can mourn the deceased, who is displayed in a coffin or sometimes on a chair. Now, the body can be visited, communicated with, touched and mourned as the remains of the lost person. It is common to announce that 'there will be no wake keeping', meaning that the public is expected to leave the family at some point during the night. Ghanaians differentiate between a lying in state and the keeping of a wake. It has become unfashionable to hold a public 'wake', which means a gathering of people around the body that lasts from dusk until dawn. The reason for this is that wake-keeping is associated with traditional beliefs and practices. In the case of a Christian funeral, the family might want to distance themselves from this. Also, the usual reason for not announcing an official wake is that the longer and later such events go on, the more likely it is that arguments break out, drunken people fight, or people indulge in other forms of unwanted excessive behaviour. Posters giving detailed information on funeral arrangements therefore mostly include the sentence 'There will be no wake-keeping' to discourage people from expecting an all-night event that, if following traditional protocol, would then have to include free drinks, adding to the expenses of the bereaved family. However, close family members will stay with the body throughout the night.

Friday nights, when multiple lying in states occur may be busy nights for community members. It is quite common to visit several houses on these nights or to come across different parties of mourners in the process of transporting a body. These events may take unexpected turns and produce states of agitation whenever irregularities occur – which is frequently the case. Families may encounter disagreements when exchanging the customary bottles of spirits at the predetermined meeting point. In the case of one young accident victim (who therefore died a 'bad' death), the family hid the body from a large group of youths who had come to transport it into town from the morgue, possibly intending, as interlocutors suspected, to engage in somewhat wild behaviour, throwing the coffin around as an expression of anger over their friend's premature death, and transporting it to different places he may have wanted to visit in town. The result was an angry group of young people going around the town in search of the body. As a social pastime activity, visiting lying in states is a common thing to do on Fridays, especially for young people. Depending on the age of the deceased, crowds of young people may gather at homes and use the occasion to celebrate, drink and dance. The bodies themselves have a quiet but present role in these gatherings, as essential material representations of a lost community member. On Saturday morning, a church service will be held, either at a church or at the family house, after which the coffin is transported to a cemetery and buried there. Christian funeral services are often integrated into the funeral proceedings in the family house. The churches may also offer guided ceremonial statements and meetings at a count of seven days, forty days and one year after the funeral. This can include the remembrance

of a person in a Sunday service, or the attendance of a minister at a meeting to sing songs and unveil a finished grave at dawn after one year. Traditional rites may be dedicated as an alternative to Christian funerary rites or take place in the form of additional practices such as drumming or the slaughtering of animals while a Christian service is held simultaneously.

The production, exchange and circulation of material goods is another main aspect of activities relating to death, involving businesses, services and commodity production, for example, by coffin makers or undertakers. Whether at the funeral, in the making of an funeral banner, when organizing an allotment at a cemetery, when sharing the deceased's properties or when pacifying the spirit of someone who had departed in an untimely fashion, all activities involve a lot of different actors and locations. Among others, these include guests, family and clan members, youths, local officials such as chiefs and politicians, priests, craftspeople, medical staff, government workers, drivers and local volunteers. By advertising a funeral and a death via funeral banners in town, every death creates its own local public. Funerals and places where people gather in relation to them, such as the morgue on a Friday morning, are also popular places for small-scale vendors of produce, like fresh vegetables, dried fish or *kenkey*. Here, they hope to find potential buyers among those who have gathered. I was always grateful to come across a girl selling particularly tasty and filling tofu shashlik sticks around funerals as the lengthy church services would otherwise leave me starving if unprepared. Funerals and the question of how and when they take place are under the authority of the *adontehene* and his palace staff as traditional governance authorities. The palace releases a funeral calendar with permitted weekends for burial. Whoever wants to bury at the weekends in between must make a steep payment of 1,500 Cedi to the community account, administered by the *adontehene*.

A weekend may have up to thirty funerals in town, depending on the season. Through the regulation of funerary time by means of the calendar, the traditional governance authorities have control over funerary events in town and can restrict the intensity of events while also increasing the density of dedicated funeral weekends. In Peki-Avetile, payments for grave allotments, interim weekend funerals and the construction of cemented graves also go towards a communal account administered by the local chief's palace. These payments enhance the importance of the palace as an institution which regulates funerary events and benefits from them. In his Anthropology of Time, Alfred Gell remarks that control over the calendar is a tool for exercising power and that authority as well as knowledge of calendrical structures have been used by indigenous and colonial authorities in various contexts and at various times (1992: 306–313). In the case of Peki, the funerary calendar issued by the palace works as a powerful tool, which the indigenous political and religious authorities can use against the control of representatives of the larger national state, who have introduced their own rules into the funerary cycle. It helps to re-direct power, attention,

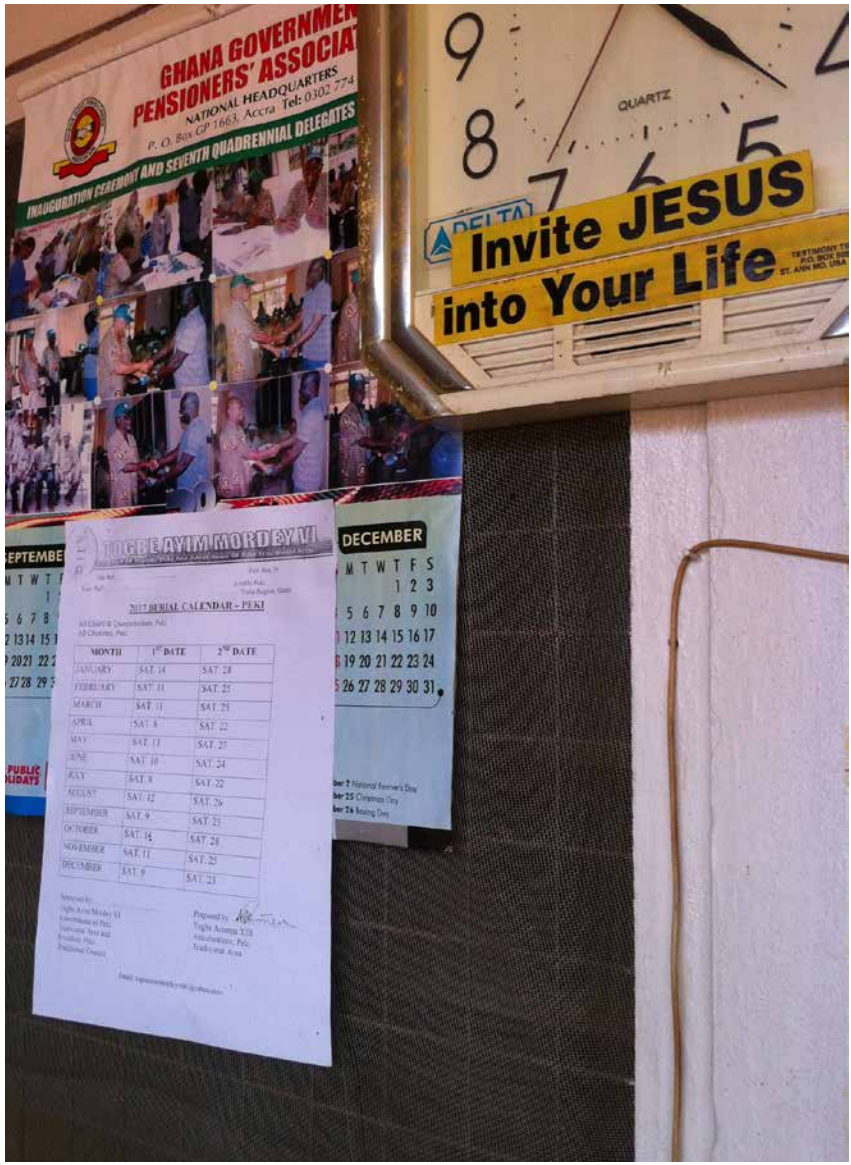


Figure 2.3 A document signed by the *adontehene* listing the weekends on which there may be burials in Peki in 2017 is hanging on the wall of a printing studio in Peki. © Isabel Bredenbröker

people and money into the local system of administration and the town as a lived social environment, thereby lessening the power of state rules and representatives, such as that represented by the Environmental Health Office, which are supposed to enforce state laws in relation to funerals. And

although a team from the Environmental Health Office is staffed by Peki residents, their professional engagement in the service of the state makes them 'foreign agents' to some degree. Referring back to Ernst Kantorowicz's description of the transmission of power within the body politic beyond the king's body mortal (2016 [1957]), the process of channelling power in the organization of funerary events in Peki may be understood as a similar tool. By controlling the workings of funerary events in town more closely than state representatives can do, local traditional governance representatives reproduce and reinstate their influence within the community.

Ametsiava: The 'Bad' Death Sequence

For the restless souls of those who have died a bad death, there are *agbadɔme* places, dedicated bushlands in and around town, one of them right next to the Avetile cemetery, where people can place 'luggage' for those who died suddenly. The *agbadɔme* are places where these restless spirits are believed to live, and the living may only enter safely by previous announcement ('knocking' in Ghanaian English) and pouring libation (a ritual pouring of liquor on the ground) for the spirits. *Agbadɔme* places and Peki cemeteries have recently been undergoing spatial transformations and some sites are wanted for new uses, which risks desecrating the land. But before luggage can be deposited there, other things must be done. In the case of a bad death, the soul of the deceased can be picked up from the site of their death, a week after the funeral has taken place. The family must pay for a traditional priest to lead the ceremony. In a communal effort, during which many community members participate in their role as members of the *asafo* (the traditional army under the orders of the paramount chief, which is open to men and women), family members and others visit the site of the accident at dusk. Usually accompanied by drumming and chanting, the priest retrieves the soul at the site in the form of a handful of soil, which is wrapped up in a piece of white cloth and carried like a baby on the back of a female family member. All attendees are given a strip of the fabric which they tie around their wrists and with which they return to the family house. Here, the soul is laid to rest for some time with the pieces of fabric, while everyone is invited to share water and flour that are mixed and drunk from a calabash which is passed around. Then, the soul is carried to the grave of the deceased and buried there by the traditional priest and family members. Until the evening, the family members wait in the house, which may on occasion involve heavy drinking and the smoking of marihuana. In the evening, different foods such as dried maize, rice and peanuts are prepared and tasted by a group of people. These are included in the offerings for the soul of the deceased that need to be deposited in *agbadɔme*. Usually, offerings include the clothes of the deceased, toiletry items and cooking utensils, furniture such as chairs and tables, as well as pots and containers. In the evening after sunset, all gifts are carried to an *agbadɔme* site. The traditional priest is present to request

entry at the site and keep everybody who is involved safe. During the time of my research, I was invited to take part in two ceremonies of picking up and depositing a soul, one of which I was invited to witness through until the end. It is not certain that those who have lost a family member through a 'bad' death will perform events from this sequence of events, since the traditional priest, gifts, food and drinks for the living have to be paid for. Sometimes, people choose not to perform these tasks because they conflict with their Christian faith. However, I did hear frequent stories in which people in the community or town had suffered from the negative effects of refusing these practices. Accidents and other bad events that occurred after the 'bad' death of a relative were linked to a failure to perform these rituals. Hence, the social pressure to take a 'bad' death seriously and act according to protocol appeared to be quite high.

Moral Evaluations of Death: Communal Labour, Diasporic Debt and Social Credit

The evaluation of 'good' and 'bad' deaths, linked to the cause of death, is not the sole indicating factor that determines what moral categories are ultimately associated with the death of a person. Apart from the 'chance' external factors that may cause a death to occur, other aspects, such as the social engagement of a deceased, their role in the community and their general conduct also come into play. Any evaluations under these categories are always put in connection to the initial cause and moral assessment of a death. Relatives and community members may try to turn a 'bad' death into a 'good' one or challenge the conditions under which a death can be made 'good', for various reasons and intentions. As I argue elsewhere in relation to funeral banners, even the apparently straightforward binary categories that banner headlines display are, on a deeper level of socio-material practice, not decisive (Bredenbröker 2024a). Rather, it is the use and omnipresence of banners which help to transform 'bad' deaths into acceptable ones and make ancestry achievable to deceased persons who formally may not have qualified for it. One important factor which links the way in which deceased are assessed post-mortem and in which members of the community will then respond to their death lies in communally organized labour. Before burial, a deceased person's life is assessed based on their positive contributions to communal life and labour. If that person or their children are perceived as having been inactive, their families are supposed to be charged a penalty fee of 100 Cedi, according to information from Peki Union[5] representatives. The real fines may possibly be higher, reflecting additional debts that need to be settled depending on what else was amiss in the person's life and who else makes demands on the family. The organization of labour and loyalty in Peki has a communal aspect. Communal labour (also interchangeably called community labour) is a form of organized work for the community and individual sub-towns, in which

men and women contribute to tasks that serve the communal good. This can be cleaning streets, sewers and public places, collecting rubbish, building a communal toilet for a town and comparable tasks. For communal labour, the town chiefs and their palace staff set tasks that need to be worked on, and fix times and dates. Usually, these tasks are set in agreement with elders from the clans in a Peki town. Since towns are divided into clans, with several clans making up a town, these clans are always in communication with their town chief. Once decided upon, tasks for communal labour are announced through public loudspeaker systems. Participation in communal labour, performing tasks that serve the greater communal good, is therefore an expression of loyalty to the chiefs who administer the communal labour and to the clans who inhabit the town, one of which will be one's own clan to which one is directly connected through monetary and participatory obligations. The towns regularly call for communal labour, which means all inhabitants who are fit and able should offer to help with cleaning or construction jobs around the town. Elders are exempt from physical labour. Communal jobs for women and men differ. Men are usually called on to do hard physical labour like digging and building, while women carry water and other things, clean and cook food for the workers. The public cemeteries are supposed to be cleaned by women on Fridays, the day dedicated to communal labour for this task. As part of this job, women collect and burn rubbish and cut foliage that is overgrowing in the cemetery. By contributing to communal labour, so-called 'registered' resident Peki citizens who live in the community perform part of their expected share of being a 'good person'. Registered Peki citizens are formally expected to pay a monthly tax to the community, administered by the town chiefs. However, most people say that this payment is usually not enforced or made by those living in Peki, and non-payment is not penalized.

The community distinguishes between registered citizens who are present and those who live abroad or out of town. Those who are present can contribute to communal labour and are therefore theoretically charged a lower monthly communal tax of five Cedi. Only registered Peki citizens have the right to be buried in Peki – and, as mentioned before, burial in a place of ancestry is highly desirable. For those who are 'from Peki' while not living in the community, there exists an administrative system to maintain ties, contributions and loyalty from afar to secure one's right to be buried in Peki and to receive help once a funeral needs to be carried out. The diaspora in Peki is organized in such a way that those who are from Peki can be kept in the orbit of the Peki community. Since 1923, the 'Peki Union' has served as an institution which keeps those who have wandered from their ancestral land in a relation of friendly obligation towards the community. After independence in particular, migration to the city and abroad became more frequent, creating a need for communities to engage their members outside in mutual obligations to benefit from these expansions, rather than simply having to accept a loss of community members, often the young who are

supposed to work and build the community. Since those in the diaspora are unable to contribute to the communal good, for example by participating in community labour or attendance at clan meetings and funerals, they must pay a higher community tax to compensate for their absence. They also must contribute to the communal good in other ways or in the form of additional payments, depending on their status and perceived income. Whether Peki people live in Accra or London, the Peki Union is there so people outside the town can make contributions to the community in the hope of accruing the kind of social credit that others who are present in town gain through labour and active participation in communal life. There are many Peki Union sub-groups for the individual towns as well as for towns and cities where Peki expats live, such as the Avetile Union, the Accra Union or the London Union. This is reflective of communal organization structures in the town itself, with cemeteries being organized differently from town to town and with the town's traditional governance structures differing slightly from one another. Originally, the Peki Unions served as local manifestations of home, where people could meet and connect, and they were important for the distribution of information about Peki before the advent of modern communication technologies. Today, in an increasingly connected world, this purpose has become unnecessary, leading in parts to a perceived decline in the importance of the Peki Union, as well as in its function as an equalizing institution which helps expats to make up for their lack of presence in the town.

Responsibilities for organizing a funeral usually fall to the nuclear family of the deceased, particularly their children. However, the clan and extended family are also involved in the organization and may either contribute to expenses or demand money from the children of the deceased. Whether children are going to receive support or whether they are going to face demands from the side of traditional governance and clan members depends on two factors: the evaluation of their deceased parent's participation in community life in the eyes of community representatives, and their own participation. If either of the two are seen as lacking, penalty payments will be demanded, often by different parties. When it comes to evaluating the deceased, the results will be shifted onto the shoulders of their children who, if the parent is found to have been inactive, will have to 'atone' for this. There may also be liabilities towards one's own clan which may need to be settled individually. Clans organize their member's obligations differently, but whatever the case may be, these internal organizations can create additional demands on top of the demands made by chiefs and representatives of the palaces. In the case of a clan from Peki-Wudome, for example, the clan collects ten Cedi from every member if a clan member has lost a relative and needs to organize a funeral. This money is then given to the family to finance the funeral preparations. Clan members also help during the festivities by digging graves, preparing food, carrying the coffin and other tasks. All of this requires their immediate presence, which can only partially be

made up for by sending money. During the funeral, monetary contributions are collected from sympathizers, one third of which is then supposed to be paid back to the clan. If a member of a clan is not present in Peki, does not send money to cover their dues and does not attend funerals to help and contribute there, they accrue a debt to the clan. Whether this debt is in the end identified as belonging to the deceased person, or whether it has been accrued by a child of a deceased, both scenarios require settlement of the debt plus penalty fees, payable by the children. In the example of the Wudome clan, fees are split into a demand made by the male clan members to the male children, and a demand made by the female clan members to the female children. If a penalty is not paid to the parties who are demanding it – the communal accounts administered by the town's palaces or to the clan – the family will not be allowed to bury the deceased. This may simply be the case if a locally residing community member is found to have been inactive, but it becomes more complex if the deceased or their children lived outside Peki, in which cases additional demands may be raised. A person may be accused of having failed to send money to the community or of not having engaged in the Peki Union. Contributions to the Peki Union may, these days, not even be recognized as a valid stand-in for active participation in the community, and monetary contributions may not be considered equivalent to help and contributions given in person, that is, by those who are immediately present.

Contesting Moral Assessments of Death

Community labour, diasporic payments and the assessment of a life spent as socially valuable are entangled with funeral arrangements and the demands that can be made on relatives. As becomes apparent from this, death is a moment in the social organization of the Peki community that opens spaces for possible contestation and pressures being exerted on people – both morally and economically. Public judgement, public space and the latter's maintenance as well as use are factors that play critical roles in funerals and in the demands stimulated by a death. Other fields that are directly linked to these processes of negotiation are innovation, disagreement, personal or group agendas, political struggles and claims for land. In addition, the multiple institutions of political governance and identification, the broad network of kin relations and obligations diversify the plane of relating to power. The state of Ghana and its representatives shares this plane with multiple 'traditional' and religious institutions on a local and national level. Shaped by concepts of belonging and their associated practices that existed pre-colonially and influenced by certain ruptures that these saw through colonial intervention, state power is to an extent a weaker and less appealing authority. It is this uncertain and always possibly challengeable position of the state, alongside other positions of institutionalized power, that becomes evident when looking at death-related practices in Peki.

There is no doubt, as the first part of this book has shown, that the influence of European politico-religious ideas and practices has been shaping Ghanaian religious thought and social organization throughout the pre-colonial and colonial periods until today. This is also reflected in historical and contemporary practices relating to death. In many ways, the social arena of death-related practices has been shaped by attempts at 'dealing with an Other', possibly in the form of resistance, or by appropriating new things and concepts. By giving room to assessing past and present states of social organization, governance and death-related practice in Ghana and Peki, I acknowledge and heed to the importance of considering historiographical accounts. This book is working under the methodological assumption that the past has a lasting influence on the present, reflected in the ways in which societies organize, identify and live. This chapter has provided an overview and assessment of historical texts by missionaries as sources of knowledge, framed these within a critical post-colonial perspective, considered historiographical and ethnographic studies on Ewe culture in an area that is today known as Ghana and Togo, and contrasted these with my own impressions from the field. With this first part of the book, I hope to have provided a good overview of what can and cannot be known about Ewe culture more generally and Peki specifically, particularly as a basis for understanding the relevance of funerary and death-related practices in the Peki community today. Material and spatial organization have influenced the ways in which people have been able to articulate identification with larger social units, such as nationhood. Moreover, spatial reconfiguration through external factors shaped how the Ewe (as well as other groups in Africa) have expressed resistance or taken opportunities to achieve a favourable political position for a community or group. As a conclusion with regards to Ewe political strategies, Benjamin Lawrance finds that 'among the Ewe there existed an indigenous tradition of political opportunism, a by-product of the rapidly shifting terrain of colonial rule and the varying proximity of the interactions characteristic of colonialism' (2007: 5). In relation to Gillian Feeley-Harnik's analysis of Sakalava strategies of resistance or withdrawal from the grip of colonial rule (1991), which were, among other things also expressed through a favour for specific local materials and difficult material practices, this is an interesting fact about past Ewe political strategies to keep in mind. Today, in post-colonial Ghana, various other external forces, such as global capitalism, the global market economy and relative poverty (in a global perspective) in West Africa, combined with 'Western' expectations of reform and gratitude for 'financial support', can be said to have taken the place of former colonial pressure. Practices and material elements relating to death, among them synthetic materials, have been a site of convergence in which various factors of change have been played out, alongside but also in opposition to one another, engendering change and the rise of resistance and struggles between multiple agendas and interests. The following part

of this book will now turn to the details of such material practices and the role that bodies, temporality and materials play in them today.

Notes

1. The use of names in my ethnographic accounts requires a statement. Going forward, if I am using full names (first and family name) for deceased people this is for two reasons, one being that their names were publicly published on obituary media throughout the community and the other being close relations with their families while in the field. I revert to first names only once a last name has been introduced, for better reading flow. Where the aforementioned criteria (or one of them) are not met, I revert to using first names as pseudonyms. Where sensitive information has been recounted to me, I will make the context untraceable to individuals. This is out of respect for the privacy of the dead and their relatives. I use full names or first names only for living interlocutors who wish to be represented in this way, equally using first names as pseudonyms where appropriate in cases where this does not apply, or where I could not ask for an interlocutor's opinion. For people unfamiliar with Ghanaian naming habits, it will be interesting to know that Ghanaian people usually have several first names, one of which tends to be their Christian name and one a local name, often indicating the day of the week on which they were born. In the Ewe tradition, Yao, for instance, is the name of a male person born on a Thursday. So, Alfred Yao, for example, are the Christian and Ewe first names of a deceased. It is also common practice in Ghana to use nicknames, some of which can be found in my acknowledgements. Nicknames are often used interchangeably or in place of first names given at birth and are no misrepresentation of people if they chose to carry this name. For further reference please consult the paper on Ghanaian nicknames by Albert Awedoba and Stephen Owoahene-Acheampong (2017).
2. Spieth divides his research subjects into twelve different 'tribes', of which the Peki people are closest locally to the 'Ho tribe'. The Peki Ewe are treated as a separate group of Ewe in research works (Meyer 1999; Akyeampong 2001; Venkatachalam 2015).
3. Parts of the material in the collection that was published are therefore also printed in Ewe alongside a German translation and appear to speak from a native point of view. The book has recently been translated into English by the Department of African Studies at the University of Ghana.
4. The District Analytical Report for South Dayi District, which forms part of the most recent governmental census from 2010, only gives an actual figure for five of the seven Peki towns, as part of a shortlist of the twenty largest settlements in the South Dayi district (Ghana Statistical Service 2014). The report gives a total number of 16,145 inhabitants for the five Peki communities of Wudome, Blengo, Tsame, Avetile and Dzake, also listing Agbate (a farm outside of town) and the town of Adzokoe (which is quite far away and not really integrated into the town), while Apeviope and Dzugbati are not mentioned at all. It can therefore be assumed that the total population is higher than the above number.
5. The Peki Union is an organisation for maintaining connections to the town between locals and expats.

Part II

CONTAINMENT

'Good' Death (*Ku*)

3

To the Cemetery!
Navigating between Worlds with Cement and Plastic

The road that leads to the communal cemetery of Peki-Avetile is a beautiful, wide but rough and steep path, shaded by old mango trees. A big sign at the entrance indicates 'Avetile Cemetery'. It branches off from the cemented road into town before Avetile proper, opposite a small shop that sells tools, cement, vegetables, and loose sweets for passing taxi-drivers. Under a roof of shimmering leaves and knotted branches, the path is framed invitingly. It can be used as a through-road to the house of the Avetile town chief when taking a smaller path to the left, which then leads on to a few houses including the guest house I stayed in during shorter visits to Peki. While this small path eventually leads to the overland road that runs past the town, the bigger path has a proper 'dead end', which is the cemetery. This entire bit of land, although on the edge of town, seems like it is its own liminal centre with a gentle gravitational pull. When one walks uphill towards the cemetery, the mango forest on both sides becomes thicker, the trees younger. To the right there seems to be nothing but forest. Only locals know that beneath the trees is *agbadɔme*, a place for depositing gifts to restless spiritual elements of the dead. It may only be entered in the company of a traditional priest and with the proper amount of libation. When one knows what to look for, the piles of gifts that are scattered across this part of the forest become apparent. To the left, one can see weathered headstones in between the trees. They mark graves from missionary times on a patch of land that the Evangelical Presbyterian Church claimed for its members. The old graves have been left to disappear, though solid headstones and stone crosses remain. Here, the rocky path ends and small provisional paths through high grass lead onto a field of graves. If burial sites are not built as tombs with a solid cover, there are almost no indications as to which surface area covers a grave. Makeshift paths appear and disappear without any clear indications where to walk, leaving it up to visitors to navigate the cemetery grounds. During visits with funeral guests and locals, it is perfectly

Figure 3.1 Women sit on a cemented tomb during an interment at a cemetery in Peki. © Isabel Bredenbröker

appropriate to stand or sit on the pile of a grave while an interment is taking place, or to rest on a grave during a dig.

If one must reach the more remote parts of the cemetery, there is no other practical solution than to walk criss-cross, stepping on graves along the way. The provisional dirt tracks that one can follow seem to have flattened

some graves completely, just circumnavigating the metal sign that represented it but leaving little ground for the grave itself. Diggers, visitors and funeral guests alike move around the cemetery freely, feeling no inhibition in touching or resting on any surface. Tim Ingold describes the possibility of free movement and being in a constant state of wayfaring, of creating lines rather than following them, as a quality of aliveness that differentiates the wayfarer from the one in transition (2008, 2011). Through this kind of movement people can 'know' the world, rather than adopting a given conception of it (Ingold 2008: 89). Transport, as opposed to wayfaring, is movement between two destinations, which Ingold associates with the colonial project and the overwriting of local pathways (84). The usage of space and movement in the cemetery demonstrates that the living are empowered, by virtue of 'being alive', to move about freely in the spaces of the dead. In contrast, the bodies of the dead are transported to the cemetery and sought to be contained here, preferably in a cemented tomb with subterranean concrete enforcement. This is their final location, but on the way, there are multiple stopovers through which dead bodies are moved, each serving to exercise power and gain control over the dead. In doing so, however, as the mechanisms of controlling the dead reveal, the living are in turn also being controlled and their agency in some ways contained. This happens in negotiation processes over the moral status of a deceased with other community members, but also in instances where the dead execute unforeseen and uncontrolled agency over the living.

Michel Foucault begins his lecture series on the punitive society (2018), held at the Collège de France during 1972–73, by assessing the function of the distinction between societies that cremate their dead versus societies that bury them.[1] Foucault suggests that, instead of looking at ways of containing the dead, one of which is the cemetery as the prime 'Western' idea of a death-containing place, one should pay attention to ways of containing the living. Referring to Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, he acknowledges that both the dead and the living may similarly be considered possibly dangerous and worth containing. While Foucault's intellectual project is dedicated to understanding the conditions under which abject living bodies are contained, the dead are far from being disconnected from matters of the living. Rather, their containment can become as important as containing people in punitive institutions, camps or prisons. As Annika Lems and Jelena Tošić suggest, anthropological approaches to understanding the mobility and containment of living people are valuable analytical tools for thinking beyond binary states (2020). Doing so may help us understand how 'the interplay of movement and stasis has become particularly important in the current global political climate, where the mobilities of people and groups deemed troublesome are violently cut short or obstructed in ways that keep them "stuck" in continuous loops of motion' (3). In relation to dead bodies, a similar approach can help us understand how the agency of the living is being controlled and altered by controlling the movements and situatedness

of the dead. In accordance with the secondary burial sequence described by Robert Hertz, in which altering and containing the bodies and the spiritual elements of the dead serves to regain social control over this threatening process, this chapter will begin to investigate how ideas of movement and containment are relevant in Peki's funerary context, starting with the cemetery as a place of burial in the sense of an arrival. In doing so, accounts of burying the dead according to 'good' and 'bad' death sequences in Peki will help to flesh out what impact the materiality of places, things and bodies has on gaining social control over the dead body. The concept of social credit as a means of evaluating moral states and movement is introduced. By implication, it reveals the articulation of the social body that emerges through work for the dead. The ethnography highlights how the instrumentalization or expression of political intentions is realized by means of funerary events.

Part II of this book looks at containment and presents a sequence of funerary events that usually take place in response to 'good' death. These events involve preparations on the part of the family of the deceased, such as acquiring relevant objects, commissioning services and finding a grave plot, identifying financial responsibilities and preparing for hosting guests, the communally shared digging of a grave, the washing and retrieval of the body at the local morgue, the lying in state at the family house and subsequently a (Christian) service, which is usually also held at the house rather than in church and, finally, the burial at the cemetery. There are alternative sequences of events for a bad death that require additional measures on top of this sequence, including different kinds of places and movement. The 'bad' death sequence and other alternative sequences will be addressed in Part III.

A Funeral Invitation

In mid-December 2016, I receive an invitation to the funeral of Alfred Yao Akyea, my friend and research assistant Collins' half-brother. The funeral is going to be held in the Peki-Avetile family compound where Collins lives with his four-year-old son, and Alfred Yao will be buried in the Avetile cemetery. Before a funeral can go ahead, families need to raise money and decide which family members will be expected to carry the main financial load. Depending on the life of the deceased and what I will call their 'social credit rating', relatives may either obtain the support of family members or face allegations and penalty fees before being allowed to lease a grave in a public cemetery. Due to the relationship between the deceased and the community, a 'rating' relies on different kinds of assessments from community members and institutions such as traditional authorities and churches. Depending on the degree of negative 'social credit' (in the form of negative assessments) that the community and traditional authorities associate with the deceased, penalty payments and other obstacles that need to be overcome for a successful burial may be severe. At the same time, the

evaluation of a person's social and moral standing is usually reflected in the way the funeral is organized, equipped and held. In addition, the cause of death can influence the size and costs of a funeral, as well as the decision about who is deemed responsible for covering these costs. Alfred Yao died a regular death, meaning that his soul may not be angry, lost or malicious and that no extra measures that apply in the case of a bad death need to be taken. However, I am told that he has not been a particularly active community member and he has died at the age of fifty, a little too early for a proper 'good' death. Therefore, the family must balance two opposing concerns: keeping face by means of hosting a representative funeral, organizing it in such a way that it produces a 'good' death for Alfred Yao's and their own sake, and economizing on expenditure to save resources by not wasting them on an inactive and now deceased member of their family. The head of the family, known as Big Yao, will be hosting the event. Big Yao is not called Big Yao for no reason: he owns a cocoa plantation in Togo that is run by one of his wives and has married a total of six wives, resulting in nineteen children. Several daughters and sons, aunts and two wives live in the compound, some with their partners or children.

Big Yao's son Alfred Yao died on 6 October 2016, apparently following an extended period of bad health, at a hospital in Accra. For most of his life, he had been living in Ho, the regional capital of the Volta Region, as well as in Accra. At the time of his death, he was working as a lorry driver. Alfred Yao had divorced his wife in Accra prior to his death, leaving behind his daughter Priscilla, who, at the time of his death, was attending college in Cape Coast. He also left an infant daughter behind. Now, his body has been returned to the morgue in Peki. As his family's origin and the home of his ancestors, Peki is considered the place in which Alfred Yao should be buried. By the time of his burial, Alfred Yao will have been kept at the morgue for over three months. Since such lengthy storage is only possible at very low temperatures and with the help of embalming methods, his body has been frozen and is now waiting to be thawed and laid in state. Financially, three months is a significant amount of time, which not all families can afford, as the morgue is paid at a daily rate. The temporal extension towards the funeral has given Big Yao the chance to prepare things properly without rushing into the event. This is desirable for him because even though Alfred Yao may not have been a well-known or particularly well-respected community member, Big Yao is. His own and his family's standing in the eyes of the community depend on proper conduct during the funeral. In Ghana, the lengthy storage of bodies at a morgue is very common and not restricted by law.[2] This increasingly long duration bears strong similarities to Hertz's model of primary deposition before the secondary burial (Hertz 1907). But instead of letting the body undergo physical decay and change until it has been altered (as in most of Hertz's examples from Papua New Guinea and Borneo), contemporary Ghanaians want the body to be preserved. Throughout the next funerary steps, the body is not supposed to change

or decompose. Rather, the living seek to contain and control it at all times, which requires temporal extension and ideally an enduring material presence of the dead beyond funerary events. This control is then sought to have a controlling effect on the transformation of a deceased person's immaterial elements. While preparations are being made, time passes for the living but is frozen for the dead, as are their bodies. Depending on the money that a family can invest in keeping the body at the morgue, they may be able to buy time for raising more money, invite guests from afar who may bring significant donations or, on a more practical level, assemble all the necessary services and things that are required for the funeral. During this time, the unmaking of the social person of the deceased, in line with the Hertzian model, can start. Returning to Alfred Gell's art nexus model, the dead in Peki can at that point be regarded as in the process of becoming indices: they become imprinted with various new qualities and properties that they should have as ideal ancestral persons or they come to bear the marks of conflict and faultiness which then need to be resolved (Gell 1998). Moral evaluations, spiritual state(s) and material properties are invested in them by a diverse group of community members and social institutions. These processes are indexical of ideal relations that the living want to establish with the dead in the making of good death, crafting them as art-like subjects. Besides creating a durable body, the creation of the dead as indices also entails using what is perceived as durable and morally appropriate materials, among them synthetics, which act on the index-in-the-making by extending their properties onto the dead. But how are assessments of material and personal qualities by the living (as recipients and artists in the Gellian sense) made, and what does a social context in which material qualities are assessed contribute to this?

The Dead as Indices: Durability and Good Death

When responding to death, people in Peki employ a variety of things and materials. Some appear to be long-lasting and permanent, synthetic, new and commodified. This chapter will talk particularly about plastic and cement[3] as synthetic materials that are supposed to convey durability. These stand in contrast to other things that are organic, ephemeral, changing or personalized, such as human bodies, custom-made baskets or used clothing. De-personalized commodities, like packaged soaps and new branded underwear, are employed in combination with personal 'inalienable possessions' (Weiner 1992) like the contents of a deceased's wardrobe. Both sets of tendential material qualities serve to further the process of containing the dead and ideally owning them. Things and materials can serve as effective agents in the process of producing durability for the dead: an extended existence in time, as well as material, physical and spiritual control. Local perspectives on material tendencies in funerary contexts, as in everyday life, imbue commodified and synthetic materials with the same agential

qualities that the Hertzian sequence of unmaking and remaking a person in death provides for those who participate in it. Different to Hertz though, it is not the control of a quite noticeable degenerative transformation of the body, but the highlighting of tendential properties of staying the same while changing in bodies and synthetic materials, which express controlled transformation of the dead in Peki.

In line with Alfred Gell's art nexus model,[4] objects and materials that are deployed in the funerary cycle in Peki form part of a nexus of relations that are collectively intended to control the dead body's transformation (here: preservation and idealization) and the dead's spiritual transformation alongside the changing relations of the surviving. Local perspectives on what qualities materials have and what their effects are can be regarded as prototypes in the Gellian sense, meaning shared perceptions of what materials mean, do and are. These perceptions and those perceiving them, in turn, imbue materials with agency. Synthetics, from a commonly abducted local perspective, are morally good and durable in the context of funerals and commemoration. By seemingly making things last, they have an agency of their own, literally taking the workload of effecting this intended state from people's shoulders. A memorable example of this underlying perspective on synthetics presented itself to me in an everyday situation when purchasing food from a street vendor in Accra. I refused to accept a plastic bag with my purchase, wanting to avoid unnecessary waste, especially considering that I lived just around the corner. It is common in Ghana to hand over small loose food items from street vendors in black plastic sachets. Even hot and liquid foods like porridge or soup are usually bought in plastic sachets and can be sucked directly from them, after biting off a corner of the sachet. The vendor was perplexed by my refusal to accept the plastic bag and insisted: 'But why not? You are lazy!' I gathered that instead of wanting to insult me as lazy, what they had tried to express was that I deserved the assistance that the sachet could give me in safely transporting my food home. According to the vendor's comment, the plastic bag was in fact actively doing work for me while also working to clear laziness of its bad rap. This perspective on synthetics is in accordance with the way Webb Keane describes semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003, 2018) – as socially shared preconceptions of what materials mean and do. Thinking along the lines of Keane's model, locally preferred tendential properties of synthetic materials must be found to be embodied in the material world and are then chosen from a bundle of possible properties and highlighted (Keane 2018: 414). In funerary contexts, these properties become indexically imprinted on the dead and are hence transferred onto them. Taking the role of agents in the production of containment, various synthetic materials and other things serve to subject the dead to human control in an agent-patient relationship (Gell 1998). Applying the art nexus model to social processes that aim to refashion the dead into durable and contained entities, the dead are sought to be turned into indices of the various agentic forces, perspectives and intentions that

are at play. The ideal result, for relatives and most community members, is that of a 'good' death and a benevolent ancestor. Moral and temporal evaluations of select material tendencies, following Adam Drazin (2015), can transfer the temporal and moral tendencies that are locally seen as preferred onto the dead, as I have also written elsewhere (2024b). This means that the agency of the material world is, in those instances, in line with the wishes and intentions of community members. The cemented grave or the new undershirt in plastic packaging is, at the same time, an agent in the making of 'good' death, as much as it is also proof that 'good' death has been achieved. Since the highlighted qualities of these things are, however, tendential, a different perspective may also present different aspects of a material substance, thing or body. Hence, the agency of materials is partially disconnected from human intentions, in line with Küchler and Carroll's reconceptualization of Gellian intentionality (2021: 13). Instead, the agency that the material may have depends on circumstantial and chance events, which may or may not coincide with the outcomes desired by the living. Locally, materials that seem to resist transformation are preferred to those prone to organic decomposition, which the dead body, for example, would undergo. But since all matter will inevitably transform, as Adam Drazin points out (2015), the kinds of transformations that bodies, spirits, things and materials undergo are pitted against one another in the funerary cycle in order to produce containment – or to benefit from those elements of the dead that cannot be contained.

Chrono-Geography and Constraints: Controlling the Temporal Agency of the Dead

By means of materially and ontologically transferring a contained kind of durability onto the dead, an alternative social time for the dead is sought to be produced, one which will pose no danger. Gell defines social time as 'an enormous equilibrium system in which the activity mix and activity timings adopted by each individual are adjusted to neighbouring individuals, occupying cells in a matrix which includes all the individuals in the system' (1992: 202). Instead of remaining a threat to the living, the time of the dead becomes a temporal medium of control whereby the dead are yet again made to serve the various aims and purposes of the living within social time. In the course of funerary events, Alfred Yao's body is expected to eventually move from the morgue to the family compound for a lying in state before being buried in Avetile cemetery. The morgue, a decorated room or a cemetery provide material and temporal suspension. However, for the dead body that is being transported through them, tendencies of stability or containment in a place only acquire significance in combination with processual movement. Places that rely on a relatively fixed territory, architectural features and immobile elements engender movement and stability at the same time. On the one hand, a distinct place with a set of boundaries,

rules, uses and markers of identification seems to provide a stable, reliable institution. Yet, as Victor Buchli suggests with reference to Alfred Gell, built form is not a 'primarily self-evident enduring and stable material entity' (2013: 7). Rather, it conveys a sense of 'momentary stoppage' to the flows and competing material registers of built form (6). The applicability of Buchli's idea can easily be extended from 'the house' to human interventions in the environment: built form as the organization of space and the making of place. Matching the flows between registers that Buchli refers to, there is a mobile aspect to place and its material manifestations: things and people navigate places through movements in space and time. In the case of moving Alfred Yao's body through different places, the manipulation of his body, the effects of places on this process, and the rules that condition the temporal-spatial movement of the body are crucial.

Alfred Gell's concept of chrono-geography serves to illustrate and conceptually understand the temporal and spatial connections between moving bodies, objects and seemingly stable places that have become obvious in the previous paragraph (1992: 190–205). In his *Anthropology of Time*, Gell describes the relationships between places, time, distinct sets of rules and the constraints that are placed on bodies and social agents (1992). Through a cartographic model of chrono-geography, Gell conceives of the population 'as a network of individual 'paths' in time and space' which may create 'bundles' where they cross and 'stations' in popular places such as buildings (193). Adding to ideas from human geography, Gell conceives of time and space as co-dependent. This co-dependence is expressed in terms of mobility (or restrictions on it) and affects human life and agency in a very real, material way. Restrictions on movement – what Gell calls constraints – may be primarily spatial, temporal or social in nature. Yet, they have a general effect on how time and space are experienced, how they can be accessed and conceptualized: they affect human agency in the world. Alfred Yao's body is allowed to rest in the morgue for months because his family can pay the morgue fees, which are calculated based on the number of days a body is kept here. Similarly, another person's body may only stay in the morgue for a short time because relatives cannot afford to pay the accumulating fees. A body may also be held in cases where relatives are unable to settle their dead relative's social debts or pay the allotment fee for the grave. Whatever happens to the bodies of the dead in these instances ultimately reflects back on their living relatives. This means that it directly affects relative's lives and relations within the community, possibly in a way that limits their agency on a socio-political level.

The morgue preserves bodies by means of an electro-fuelled cooling technology which arrived in Ghana in the 1940s (see Parker 2021: 321). However, use of the facilities is dependent on money and the different regulations of institutions. Thus, whether primarily material or social, all these factors may pose possible constraints to movement or arrest and result in an altered temporality for the deceased. Ultimately, when the body is safely

contained, this altered temporality becomes the temporality of the dead, within which the latter have certain abilities to act, move and communicate with the living. This may occur in ways that are controlled by the living if the produced temporality stems from having reached a state of arrest, corresponding to 'good' death. The time and space of the living and of the dead can merge again at dedicated points of contact once they have been properly separated. By using the term 'constraints', Gell points to factors that may be social, material or temporal and which may restrict human movement in space-time. He regards all these factors as having direct material consequences – such as limitations or effects on movement. In the funerary cycle in Peki, certain places like the cemetery or the morgue, but also to an extent the family house, impose such constraints and therefore stoppages. They do so by means of physical boundaries and walls, social rules and regulations, payments, fees and price differences, hence qualitatively providing material states of containment. In real terms, this can mean that, if a family cannot pay for extended time at the morgue, the funeral will have to happen as quickly as possible, not allowing them much preparation in advance. They are then likely to have fewer guests, collect less money, offer the deceased less assistance in the process of making- and remaking their social person and finally, may bury them in a grave that is not as sturdy and long-lasting. Not being able to build a durable grave in the cemetery may result in a grave that quickly becomes hard to find, to the point of being unrecognizable. As a result, this family may not only gain very little prestige among the community, but they also fail to contain their deceased family member in the best possible way. This will reduce the deceased's chances of continuing to exist as an ancestral presence from which family members may benefit.

Social Credit Evaluations

Apart from the monetary and regulatory considerations that come with funerary preparations, the social standing of the deceased and their nuclear family in the community is important. As mentioned earlier, the opinions of family members and traditional political authorities may result in additional constraints being placed on moving and containing the deceased. In the case of Alfred Yao's funeral in Peki, for example, evaluations of his social standing have a direct effect on the way that the funeral is being organized. His funeral is going to be different from that of a resident community member because, as Big Yao says, 'nobody here knows him'. Alfred has been out of town for too long to be considered a socially active citizen of Peki. For that reason, there is only one banner announcing Alfred Yao's death and his grave is located at the 'poor' end of the cemetery. The banner does not make an emphatic statement with regards to the 'good' or 'bad' nature of the death, merely using the headline 'Obituary' and listing Alfred Yao's age. However, it is strategically well placed at the palace of the Avetile chief, who is family, and the palace is conveniently close to Big Yao's family house. Even though

people might not know Alfred, they are very likely to know Big Yao because he is active in town, or they may have ties with other family members residing in the family compound. For the funeral, family members will come to visit from Togo, some visitors will come from the maternal family's side, who for the most part live in Accra but are from a nearby town. Big Yao also expects colleagues and friends of the deceased from Accra. By the looks of it, this funeral will be a well-attended event for a relatively unknown family member. Big Yao has funds that he himself is investing in the funeral, whereas other families may have to collect contributions from many of their members before being able to purchase things. However, this may also be the result of Alfred Yao's estrangement from the community, due to which people are less likely to offer support. A month before the funeral, Big Yao has paid for things such as mattresses for guests who will stay in the house, a coffin, the undertaker, drinks and food, 'spinners' (Ghanaian English for DJs) as well as other expenses such as the morgue. Food and drinks will be bought locally and have already been ordered. The coffin was made in Peki and the undertaker is Lucy Atta, a family member from Avetile with whom I worked throughout my research. Among the things that Big Yao has bought in Accra are Styrofoam containers for take-away food gifts that the family will offer to guests, a suit that the deceased will be dressed in for his lying in state and a digitally printed obituary banner on PVC, produced under supervision of the maternal side of the family who are based in the city. The fact that there will be food as well as drinks for guests and sympathizers constitutes a significant upgrading of the festivities. Food means extra expense and, if provided, it is a gesture of heightened hospitality towards guests. It is coincidentally also a generous gesture towards Alfred Yao, who will thereby receive heightened funerary honours. However, these expenses are most likely to reflect positively on Big Yao, rather than equipping Alfred with the public acknowledgement and honour that would qualify him to become an ancestor. Usually, as I am told by different interlocutors, food and drinks figure as the largest single expense in the total bill. This money will be spent and in effect lost to the living, despite collections made during and after the funeral. As expense, the 'loss' of money follows a 'ritual' logic that may be considered as a 'gift to the gods', rather than following the logic of economic calculation (Gregory 1980). Throughout my research, all families have reported that a funeral means a guaranteed loss of money. And while this seems to be handled differently in neighbouring Guan and Akwamu communities in the Eastern region, who publicly collect donations until a family has at least covered its costs, this is not considered appropriate in Peki. As Marleen de Witte's study of funerals and expenses in the Akan-dominated Central Region around Kumasi shows, gifts, consumption and expenses at funerals are also made much more explicit there (Witte 2001, 2003). In Peki, families are expected to accept and participate in the ritual expense of money, material goods and labour, quietly and without expecting to be repaid. This costly investment in the funerary economy

adds value to it and removes it from worldly logics of economizing. Work and investment for the dead follow this different logic, altering the ways in which people in Peki invest their time and resources into labour and the production of goods and infrastructures.

For receiving the 'go ahead' to bury, families need official approval that all the debt that the deceased and their children owe to the community has been settled. Debt towards the community can be accrued in many ways, and ultimately there may be many judges with many different opinions on whether debt remains and how it must be settled. Church members can cover their right to a burial service by having paid their tithe, but this usually does not cover the price for a grave: in Peki, apart from the Evangelical Presbyterian Church cemetery, churches do not have their own cemeteries. If, after death, a person is found to have been an inactive member of the community, this may result in a demand for a penalty payment, which the family is supposed to make towards the communal account or individual community members. In a community of many, there are many different opinions, some of which may carry more weight than others, such as the opinions of politicians, traditional or family authorities. Nonetheless, rumours and accusations often spread behind the backs of those representing official positions and may find voices in ways that are hard to contain. It can therefore be difficult for relatives to prepare for and prevent accusations. The question of debts owed to the community posthumously is a delicate affair, since they could have accrued from an inactive social life, actual monetary debts, or a dubious moral stance. In cases in which the deceased is perceived to have been 'lazy' regarding their responsibility for contributing to the communal welfare – be it in the eyes of the palace or of other community members – permission to bury may be postponed until these debts have been settled by the family members. Close relatives are being held accountable for their deceased relative's shortcomings, on top of being judged themselves on this occasion. A settlement can either be reached by paying a sum of money or by negotiating the debt, possibly with the result of reducing or cancelling it. As these negotiations and settlements are different in each case, it is hard to say whether a monetary debt can be paid back in other forms. Looking at this through the lens of Gell's art nexus model, the final manifestation of the dead in the form of a grave (with all the implications that it carries) becomes an indexical proof of what the negotiations achieved, transferring those results onto the re-made person of the deceased. A well-established grave also helps to establish that the deceased died a 'good' death, sometimes different to what the cause of death and ensuing negotiation processes initially indicated.

The Politics of Grave-Digging

It is mid-January in Peki. The weather has changed from oppressive heat to the Harmattan season, which brings a cloud of throat-tingling dust from the Sahara to West African skies, covering the sun and keeping the heat at bay

in exchange for burning eyes, coughs and chilly nights. Funerals in town have been suspended over the Christian festive days. With one exception, no funerals have been held for three weeks now. For most places in southern Ghana, such a long time without the sounds of ambulance sirens that announce the arrival of a hearse, without mournful songs and brass bands is quite unusual. This weekend though, the town is preparing for many funerals that will be held simultaneously. Preparations for the lying in state and burial start with the digging of graves. Alfred Yao's grave will be dug in the Avetile cemetery, where, early on a Wednesday morning, Collins and I are waiting for a group of grave diggers. At seven, just after sunrise, the air is fresh and the sun still enjoyable, making it the perfect time for physical labour. In the schedule regulating the flow of communal labour, Wednesday is the day that is reserved for the digging of graves. While we wait, Collins sits on an elongated pile of soil that elevates him from the ground like a makeshift bench: a grave at the 'poor' or 'local' end of the Avetile cemetery. In this part of the cemetery, people are buried in soil, topped off with soil, whereas at the 'rich' end, the dead find their last resting place in tombs: a cemented grave chamber, topped off with a cemented slate and different kinds of headstones. For 'poor' graves, we do not require the assistance of a cement worker who takes care of 'laying blocks' (Ghanaian English) inside the grave, as would have happened had the family bought the more expensive grave plot that allows cementation. Instead, the graves we are going to dig will be the work of our own hands and no materials apart from pickaxes will be required. After a while, several young men appear, carrying a gallon of palm wine and a calabash from which everyone will drink as the work progresses.

Grave-digging is a particular kind of communal labour in Peki. While it is also shared labour that takes place on a dedicated weekday, grave digging only calls for a specific group of people to participate. The families of the deceased are obliged to provide food and drinks; clan members of all deceased who will be buried this weekend are supposed to provide their labour. This means that relatives of a bereaved will only achieve a decent turnout of participants if they and the deceased are considered worthy of this investment. The labour of community members and relatives cannot be purchased – if this becomes necessary, relatives must pay an individual who will treat the digging as a job, possibly working on their own or with employees. This is where the difference between grave-digging and regular community labour lies. While structurally similar, this kind of work serves as a reflection on the community's estimation of a deceased and their relatives. Family members and other community members mingle in the process. Community labour, on the other hand, does not rely on people's moral estimation, but serves to build one's reputation as a good community member. Responsibility does not just lie on individual families but on everyone. Digging is heavy physical labour and, as such, it is considered work for young and healthy men. All young men who have a clan member's funeral coming up are expected to participate and aid in the digging of

graves for the same weekend. Today, there are three more graves to be dug in this part of the cemetery. Before the young men who are present here today can dig their pickaxes into the earth, a request for a grave had to be made to Samuel,[5] the cemetery overseer. In response to the request, Samuel then allocates a plot of land in the cemetery. Today, Samuel is present as a representative of the palace before the digging starts. He indicates the plots for the graves. They are very close to each other, but since the red soil is thick, moist, and clay-like, a small barrier will remain between the excavated plots after the holes have been dug. Two pickaxes are passed around between the men. Some of them eye me with a shy smile and a semi-frown. People perceived as female are usually not present when graves are dug. It is a male job, an occasion for banter and catching up. I kneel and watch as the digging slowly eats into the ground. The soil is heavy and requires a lot of energetic axe-lifting and beating, again and again. Everyone gives it a go for a few minutes and then passes the tool on to the next person so that nobody exhausts themselves too much.

Land Lease, Costs and Administration: The Case of Cementing Graves

In January, Samuel has occupied the voluntary position of cemetery overseer for just a month. He is rewarded by those needing his services in the form of 'tokens' (Ghanaian English) – 'Castle Bridge' bottles, the local gin. Relatives must be given an official 'go ahead' by Samuel before being allowed to bury their family member. This involves making a down payment for a plot in the cemetery. For Samuel, the most important detail that determines the process is whether the family requests a grave that will be cemented or just a regular grave. This decision determines the location of the grave and the fee to be paid for it. While a regular grave only costs twenty Cedi, a cemented grave comes with a price tag of 500 Cedi. This does not include any part of the ensuing cement work and materials, which relatives must source and pay for in addition. Payments for leases of plots in this cemetery are administered by the Peki-Avetile town chief's palace.[6] The palace keeps the income from the cemetery in an account at the Peki branch of the Ghana Commercial Bank, the only bank with a cash machine in town. This money is meant for communal purposes. In reaction to rumours and allegations that there was insufficient accountability regarding the bookkeeping for that account, a group of young people started to boycott communal labour, including cleaning work at Avetile cemetery. The cemetery and its physical condition have thus become a location at which to express criticism of political leadership, whether based on solid grounds or on hearsay. In Avetile, the cemetery is generating most of the money that is paid into the communal funds. Cemented graves, with their higher prices, are a much more promising generator of income for communal financial resources than the 'poor' graves. The price for a burial plot, the price for different types of grave and the cost

Figure 3.2 Newly cemented graves that are under construction at the 'rich' part of the cemetery in Peki-Avetile, 2017. © André Luiz Ruio Ferreira Burmann

Figure 3.3 Freshly built and yet undecorated concrete cover in the simplified shape of a bed with headrest decorated with a plastic grave wreath. © Isabel Bredenbröker

of settling a deceased's balance – monetary as well as in the form of labour and engaging in negotiations – are mostly payable to the town's palace, alongside other negotiation partners from the community. This means that for the relatives of the deceased, as well as for those representing communal claims in Avetile, there is quite a bit at stake.

According to Samuel, the price of a plot for a cemented grave was recently increased as a political attempt to stop people from cementing graves. The reason given was that other, so-called 'local' graves, could at some point in the future be re-used, because they were going to disappear sooner or later, while the cement was nearly impossible to break up, effectively rendering the land unfit for reuse. Because of the value of land to the living, it is undesirable to leave plots of land permanently unusable. At the same time, more and more people tend to cement their relative's graves if they can afford to do so, which will cost them more money but also generate more money for the communal account. The practice of cementing graves reveals a clash of interests. However, the priority seems to be a safely contained dead body in the ground, for which many people are happy to pay an elevated price. Therefore, the increase in price as determined by the palace does not seem to function as a discouragement. Instead, people go the extra mile and gain moral credit from the community and authorities for their proper conduct as well as for contributing to the public account. Judging by the number of cemented graves in Avetile cemetery, these seem to be the preferred option. Cementing graves is not a new practice in Peki and must have existed for at least several decades. Samuel attributes it to the arrival of German missionaries. In fact, missionaries and colonial actors introduced the cemetery as a place of burial, changing the practice from burying the dead under the house or elsewhere in the compound to burying them away from the living (see Parker 2021). They also introduced the tomb as a sealed place of burial.[7] These days, community members need a permit to bury their relatives next to their family home and it is generally considered illegal. Cemented graves on the grounds of compounds, either dating from before the restrictions or built today are still a very common sight. Once home burials became illegal, so various interlocutors confirm, a fine of 10,000 Cedi[8] was introduced as a penalty for illegal home burials. In special circumstances, home burials can still be arranged with a representative of the public health office at the district assembly – at a price tag of 5,000 Cedi. Approval depends on the assessment of an Environmental Health Office worker, who determines whether the intended location of the grave is a safe place to bury regarding sanitation. This new law and fine make it impossible for poorer families to pursue a home burial. The safety and closeness of the family house are now replaced with the relatively safe, durable but costly option of a cemented grave in the town cemetery. Here, state laws, local traditional authorities, moral assessments by community members, fines and sanitation protocols determine how people may bury their dead. There are ways around these limitations, but only for those who can pay the elevated prices.

The Temporality of Graves

Materially, the difference between the 'poor' and the 'rich' part of the cemetery is obvious at first glance. In the 'poor' part, most graves are marked with a metal sign stating the name of the deceased, their age, date of death

Figure 3.4 Poor grave at the cemetery in Peki-Avetile, decorated with a metal sign and lorry tyres, 2016. © Isabel Bredenbröker

and R.I.P. written in white enamel. Additionally, cassava plants and various objects linked to the life of the deceased may be placed on the graves. In the 'rich' part, graves in the making are hidden under a firm concrete cover with temporary markers.

The finished high-end variety of a grave is topped with a three-step concrete cover and finished with tiles or can be an elevated concrete slate covered with terrazzo stones. Some graves have plaques on their slates, while others come complete with an erect headstone made of concrete and tiles or are made from granite with an etched inscription. Some graves have figural heads on them, while others feature small round photographs on the headstones. Yet, seeing the cemetery in use over time, whether by grave diggers, mourners or funeral guests, made these obvious differences appear in a more distinct light. The most important difference, already evident from the choice of materials and the development of the graves over time, is that some graves are built to last, while others will disappear.[9] In local terms, the decision between ending up in a cemented grave that will be a construction site for some time, extending the work for the dead even further, or being buried in a soil grave, is a matter of wealth and status. Hence, the reconstruction of the deceased's persona is extended beyond the work on their body and continued in the materiality of the grave. Similar to Heather Horst's observations of the usage of the house form and building materials in a Jamaican cemetery (2004), ideal graves in Peki are built from modern materials and constructed durably. Differently to Horst's reading of the Jamaican graves as materializations of personhood, which are left to decay in order to achieve ancestor status, 'rich' graves in Peki are not regarded as decaying but rather as unchanging. While the dead must transform to become ancestors, this transformation should not be one of decay but rather one of preservation and fixation. Yet, rich graves are not seen to require much care post-installation. Instead, they may eventually be replaced by an even better, updated and more representative construction.

Establishing graves takes time and cannot be done right after the funeral – resources must be gathered, the work must be done, and time must pass. While I was told that a grave needs time to 'sink' or 'rest' until a heavy cover can be constructed over it, I was also told that a grave with 'laid blocks' underneath does not need that time. Still, the habit of giving the process time remains. Although the more permanent and stable material constitution of the cemented graves would allow it to fast-forward in time, it is important to gain a period of waiting and preparation, just as during the time in which the body is deposited at the morgue. In the case of a cemented grave however, this time is not waiting time associated with the uncertainty of change – everything remains under control, and the time needed for preparations can be used to benefit the living. Interpreting this with Hertz's secondary burial model in mind, the grave could be seen to take over the role of the body. Yet, instead of degenerating, it is in a process of becoming. In the case of the 'poor' graves, not much is going to happen after the burial

and decoration or after the grave is closed. Since no heavy cover will be put on the grave, the process ends here unless people visit to add new decoration or gifts. In short, material differences between graves produce and reveal the degree to which the deceased is successfully contained in time and space. Families have overcome various possible constraints in the process of burying their relatives, and a cemented grave proves that this has been done in the most successful way. Such a 'rich grave' will continue to be a site of transformation until its final form has been established, extending the work for the dead past the actual burial. Materials like concrete help to stop the process of material degeneration, which the body now undergoes in a sealed and hidden chamber. Instead, concrete replaces decay with permanence. As the construction of a grave extends post-funerary, so do the constraints on this work. Constructing a cemented grave is an endeavour that families must have the means to embark on. Until completion, such a grave may look like any other construction site: unfinished concrete surfaces, a headstone that is covered in plastic and Sellotape, or unfinished tiling work. In that respect, it resembles the construction of local churches. It is very common for a congregation to start using its church building while it is still in the raw building stage. Yet, the construction site already functions as a sacred space for meeting and holding services. Over time, the church building is pieced together and completed with the help of the church members in the form of labour and money. Building materials for graves, such as cement, tiles and terrazzo stones, or an inscribed headstone from Accra made of imported granite, cost money and might require work that must be paid for. The process in which a grave is finished takes up to a year, sometimes longer. On the first anniversary of the death, the 'one-year' celebration, family members and friends gather at the gravesite early in the morning, after a very early church service. They are accompanied by a pastor, to sing songs and pray. For this occasion, the grave should be completed. This is also an opportunity to lay a new grave wreath at the finished grave and install a new metal sign.

Cement is locally imbued with attributes of durability and moral appropriateness, while allowing for changes of pace in the construction process. Hence, it can be seen to act as a navigational element on a 'time-map'. As such, it makes the imagined durational present for the dead explicit in the world of the living (Gell 1992: 242–60). Based on the understanding of time as always containing within itself the experience of the past and the anticipation of a future which is again modelled with the past and the present in mind, Gell sees the human ability to navigate time as relying on mapping strategies. The subjective, immediate experience of time (for Gell, A-series time) cannot operate without 'retentions' and 'protentions' (projecting forward and backward in time, based on assumptions and experience), involving the past and the future. Consequently, this produces 'horizons of a temporally extended present' before which time is conceptualized as fundamentally dynamic (223). B-series time describes this

navigational time, which is claimed to be 'ontologically real time' (233). This is the temporal modus in which humans form representations, taking the form of maps. These maps, however, must always be re-translated into A-series time to become usable. Gell remarks that, by virtue of having to be 'potentially applicable to all coordinates and vice versa' (235), they must be non-indexical, meaning they do not reflect an immediate experience of time. After all, humans are unable to experience real, four-dimensional time: 'Everything begins and ends in the "real" world, but that is not "our" world. Our world is a shifting play of images and maps that locate and generate these images' (241). A time-map may therefore represent a network of possible worlds. The time and place of the dead can be seen as one possible world, anchored in the world of the living by means of material things and representations. Concrete, and the way in which it is perceived as a temporal and social agent in the construction of graves, comes to form part of the time-maps that are carved out for the dead. In the enduring presence which encompasses them, abstractly and concretely, the living may navigate their whereabouts and movements as they see fit. The possibly uncontained elements of the dead, however, may also be present invisibly, which means harder to contain temporally and materially. It is therefore in the interplay between visible and invisible elements of graves where this other temporal level of existence is sought to be reached.

Visibility and Invisibility

While a grave's permanent cover – realized in concrete, granite, tiles or terrazzo – is a visible marker of social distinction and permanence to onlookers, the concrete 'blocks'[10] underneath the soil are invisible. As an invisible material intervention, the underground cement is less conspicuous than the shiny headstones and begs the question: what purpose does this cemented chamber serve, other than providing a stable base for the top? What does it protect, or what does it protect from? To what end are the dead sought to be contained in this way? Krzysztof Pomian sees grave goods and funeral objects as parts of a 'collection' which oscillate between the visible and the invisible (2006). Funeral objects may be afforded special protection, displayed, but taken out of the economic circuit. What exchange value, he asks, do these objects then retain if they have lost their use value? Pomian attributes these characteristics to what he terms 'replacement models': the frequently recurring practice of offering imitations of things which, he thinks, were not provided out of economic considerations. In other words, making fakes often consumes more energy than donating the real thing. Instead, according to Pomian, donations of replacement models are directed by the 'belief that funeral objects were not to be used but perpetually gazed upon and admired' (164), not always by living onlookers, but certainly by those in the next world despite their condition. Worldly economizing and logics of usefulness are thus decoupled from the objects in their given

contexts and are no longer applicable to their purpose. Rather, it was and is common to give up sight of offerings to the dead completely in exchange for 'the benevolent neutrality, if not actual protection of the dead' (170). Acting as 'go-betweens' between the visible and the invisible world, with the possibility of opening channels in both directions, these objects are perfectly effective when hidden from human sight, if not even more so. Pomian's concluding remarks sound all too familiar in relation to Gell's thoughts on chrono-geography and time-mapping. The invisible, Pomian finds, is both spatially and temporally distant:

> In addition, it is beyond all physical space and every expanse or else in a space structured totally differently. It is situated in a time of its own or outside any passing of time, in eternity itself. It can sometimes have a corporeity or materiality other than that of the elements of the visible world, and sometimes be a sort of pure antimateriality. At times it will be an autonomy *vis-à-vis* certain or even all the restrictions placed on the visible world, at others it will be an obeying of laws differently from our own. (172–73)

Attempting to affect these invisible worlds, material things in the 'real' world may be used as recipients for intended effects that otherwise remain outside human reach and control. David Freedberg (2001) discusses instances in European and non-European cultural history in which images or representational forms, such as wax figures and effigies in different shapes, forms and materials, have been treated as alive and as 'chained' in order to prevent them from escaping or from negatively affecting those who are depicted, through the workings of witchcraft. In his intertwined history of anthropology and photography, Chris Pinney recounts the same practice of injuring or destroying an image to transfer suffering. Pinney situates this practice in the context of a kind of Tylorian and Frazerian 'contagious magic' (2014: 63) where the image as a Peircean index is 'really affected by the object it signifies through a contiguity, or as Frazer would have put it, contagion' (66). Freedberg also defines the characteristics of being alive as possession of sight and movement when discussing the agential power of images (33). Following these thoughts, funerary events can therefore also be seen as a continuation of life post-mortem in which abilities such as sight and movement are performed by the living for the dead. The dead – possibly still in possession of sight and movement, in a form which escapes the replacement of these vital functions – are sealed and contained safely under concrete to gain control over how they may employ these abilities. They are transferred into a state in which their new 'life after death', possibly as ancestral spirits, may safely continue. Apart from 'bad' deaths, there are other events that may unsettle the dead in Peki, leading to unwanted appearances and threats from the dead in the world of the living. These narrations, which orally circulate as ghost stories, undermine the successful creation of the dead as indices of fixity, containment and moral propriety. As uncontrollable whispers and gossip, these stories and elements of other invisible worlds are equally hard

to control. They present a strategy to counteract efforts at containing the dead and may serve to unsettle the establishment of secure power positions.

Ghost Stories and Grave-Robbers

Throughout my stay, I overheard people talking about grave-robbers or looters. These narratives were usually not told in the sense of a traceable story, but as rumours: abstract stories, stories from further away, stories from the past or stories that people had been told by others. According to anthropologist Setha M. Low, the materiality of places and bodies is a key factor in the making and understanding of 'embodied space as the location where human experience and consciousness takes on spatial form', offering 'a useful framework for understanding the creation of place through spatial orientation and movement' (2009: 28). This means that constraints of immaterial nature (such as rules, stories or other factors that impose conditions on the movement of dead bodies in the funerary cycle) also affect the movement which is felt and embodied as an experience of place. In response to the debate over the use of the geographical terms 'space' and 'place' in anthropology and human geography (Agnew 2005; Massey 2012), Low argues that space and place are essentially always embodied, co-produced by social construction and material parts, and made through discourse and language: 'Social relationships are the basis of social space, yet these relationships necessitate materiality, in the form of embodied space and language, to work as a medium of discussion or analytic device' (2009: 34). In ghost stories, the fear of grave-robbers was a permanent concern in preparing a grave for a relative. The concrete chamber and build therefore also served to protect the grave from outside interventions: guaranteed containment, keeping all material things associated with the dead out of circulation. But what kinds of things would someone want from a grave? It is common practice in Peki to leave no valuables in the coffin with the deceased to discourage looters (and to avoid losing them). Rather than protecting the grave from the theft of materially valuable items, it appeared that any type of theft, particularly of bones or objects intimately connected to the deceased, was something that relatives wanted to prevent – for their own sake as much as for the sakes of the deceased.

There were several types of stories that floated around – like those of people dying after taking things from a cemetery or grave that did not belong to them. There were also stories of people digging out corpses to use their body parts for 'black magic': *vdun* or (colloquially) *juju*[11] rituals with ill intentions. One of the first things I learned on a guided visit to a Peki cemetery was never to remove anything from the premises, not even a stone. 'There was a Muslim man', I was told, 'who found flowers on the street, they must have fallen from a passing car that was transporting a coffin. He took these flowers to his room and kept them for himself. The ghost of the deceased to whom the flowers belonged appeared to him during the night,

seeking his flowers and claiming them back. The next day, the people who lost the flowers came to look for them, passing through the community, asking alongside the road. Word got around that that man had found them and taken them for himself. When they found his house, they learned that the man had died that very night'. It is notable that a Muslim community member is targeted here as a wrongdoer and punished for stealing the property of the dead. Muslims do not share the funerary practices of Christian community members and only possibly those of traditional believers. They also do not use wreaths to commemorate their dead. In Peki, they are treated as second-rate members of the town community on many occasions, and it is very common to hear negative statements about them. The story picks up on this bias against Muslim community members and reinforces it, thus politicizing the world of the dead. In other stories, deceased people returned to seek belongings of theirs that others still held without proper claim to them. Deceased people showed up in forms that rendered them unrecognizable, like strangers, and visited families or were seen shopping at the market. In all cases, what ghost stories implied was that the dead were not properly contained, the work of the relatives in attempting to produce a 'good' and containing death for them therefore futile. Ghost stories have a direct political impact, whether through negative comments about certain community groups, or just by virtue of charging the work for the dead with a sense of danger in cases of wrongdoing, possibly enabling the dead to exert uncontrolled agency as ghosts or wandering spirits. Another tricky aspect of such a 'sighting' is that in the case of a claimed 'good' death and burial, rumours of the deceased appearing to people will serve to destabilize this status, putting pressure on relatives. These simple yet powerful stories may therefore be compared to the kind of social mythology that Ernst Kantorowicz identifies as being at work in the creation of transferrable royal power beyond death (2016 [1957]). Hence, stories, material things and substances relating to graves are equally formative for their functions, for what they make manifest and what they do. Set in a different narrative time and place, ghost stories manage to bring the worlds of the living and dead into contact. Through this narrative act, they charge material things and places that are represented in the story with new qualities and potentials that are directly played out in the world of the living.

Gifts Wrapped in Plastic: Grave Wreaths

Mirrored in the story recounted above, as a kind of ghost double, material objects used in funerary rituals suddenly reveal themselves as imbued with special qualities. The grave wreath (called 'flowers' in Ghanaian English), which plays the central role in one of the stories, is usually intended to pacify the spirits of the departed. As gifts, the wreaths materially produce and reflect the process of creating temporal durability and layers of separation in the sequence of containing the dead. Wreaths consist of cardboard,

printed, reflective and transparent cellophane foil, plastic flowers, and gift ribbons, which sparkle, glimmer, shimmer and reflect the light. Cardboard, which forms the basis of the wreaths and is recycled from used boxes, is arguably the least durable material within the composition, prone to changing shape upon contact with water. The cardboard core is hidden from sight and wrapped up in several layers of foil and plastic, the last of which is clear cellophane foil. The foil does not shroud the wreath but leaves the designed surface with its vivid texture and glittery finishes visible. The pattern and shiny materials retain their decorative function from behind the foil. While red, black and white are the standard funeral colours, other seemingly happier varieties, such as light blue, yellow or pink, are also available. The synthetic decorative materials used for these wreaths are new and commodified parts of the otherwise handcrafted ensemble. Wreaths can vary in shape and size, but they follow a prototypical design which makes them universally recognizable. Because the materials used are not connected to the deceased's social person in life, they perform the function of separating the previously living person from the deceased. The artificiality of the final ensemble marks wreaths as the 'perfect' gift for another world, which is otherwise of no use for the living.

In Peki, wreaths are sold directly by makers, usually people with stalls or small shops, as well as by coffin-makers. While making a wreath is not a skill that demands professional training or education, it still requires practice, patience and nimble hands. One small shop in Avetile is run by a young man, Kofi,[12] who has no formal job qualifications. He trained himself in making wreaths by looking at objects in shops, studying how they are made, and copying the technique. By mid-week, he starts the production of new wreaths for the weekend on a table opposite his shop, in the shade of a front porch. After cutting a base in a decorative shape – for example in the form of a heart, a cross or a diamond – Kofi glues the cardboard together and wraps it in foil. He continues to fold the ribbon in tiny, repetitive movements and attaches each loop to the cardboard with a stapler. As someone whose fingers have become used to these movements, the process takes him about an hour for one object.

As a technique of 'material action' (Harris and Douny 2016: 17), wrapping can produce objects and bodies which 'acquire meanings that become embedded in their materiality through both the transformative processes of specific materials and their relationship with the place, bodies and objects with which they are in contact' (32). From bodies wrapped in used and new clothes, and whole rooms temporarily dressed in fabric to a preference for using plastic foil wrapping, be it around factory-made goods and handmade goods, wrapping techniques and materials are used throughout the mortuary cycle in Peki. In local funerary contexts, plastic foil, coated paper or cellophane foil as wrapping materials elevate the value of objects that are wrapped in them and make them truly appropriate for interaction with the dead. They function as protective seals, increasing the object's durability,

Figure 3.5 Kofi makes a grave wreath. © Isabel Bredenbröker

as well as being markers of newness and Western commodity status, which represents the expenditure of money as a sign of status. Newness or protection can be conveyed according to context. In sealed and cemented graves, concrete serves as a durable material seal that protects both: the bodily remains from forgery and the living from the anger of the deceased's spirit. Concrete is almost impossible to remove, unlike the plastic wrapping of

Figure 3.6 Grave wreath that was purchased in Peki in 2018. © Isabel Bredenbröker

wreaths. However, while wrapping is removed to use some objects – such as soap wrapping and plastic foil around new underwear, both of which are employed in the washing and dressing of dead bodies – others, such as layers of clothing on the body and foil around the wreaths, remain an integral part of the composition. This particularity makes these latter types of wrapping more like the concrete seal of the graves: they are intended to remain where they are and often continue to be contained in further layers of materials – the body in the coffin and the grave under cement, the wreath often enclosed within the grave.

In addition to its protective function, the foil wrapping underlines the wreaths' status as gifts which are not supposed to be opened by the living. With Pomian's remarks on visibility and invisibility in mind (2006), the wrapping adds another layer of meaning: the wreath is not intended for use but supposed to be visible to either the living or the dead – or both. Being a decorative object per se, with no use-value other than that of being looked at, the wrapping ensures that the object remains unused for any other purposes, the wrapping here functioning like a seal. By burying wreaths with the coffin, as is common practice in Peki, they receive another layer of coating or wrapping – that of soil or cement. From here on, the use value of the wreath as something to be looked at is reduced to one audience only: the dead. Since wreaths are included in graves while also being displayed on top of the grave, they can serve two functions at the same time: dedication to the dead as their exclusive property and visual adornment of a grave for the eyes

of the living. These functions are defined depending on whether wreaths are placed above or below ground. The objects contain the potential to be both, connecting the world of the living to the world of the dead, while materially contributing to imagining a world in which time is arrested. Included in the grave, preserved and taken out of use and circulation, grave wreaths are connected to an enduring present time for the dead. They provide material anchors on time-maps that leave authority over the dead with the living.

Synthetic Transformations: Artificiality

In the Peki funerary cycle as well as in Ghanaian social life, synthetic materials like plastics or cement are usually not seen as intruding commodities or foreign materials of little value. Instead, they gain their intrinsic, locally perceived value as materials which communicate respect, simplify everyday tasks and help to produce an extended presence for the dead. The moral implications of synthetic materials, such as the ribbons and foils on the wreath, are in line with a local perspective that highlights some material 'tendencies' (Drazin 2015), while remaining ignorant of others. Plastic foil and ribbon on wreaths, in the perspective of interlocutors from the Peki community, do not change. They are durable and resist transformation. In contrast to the 'artificial' variety of wreaths, organic varieties made of

Figure 3.7 Grave wreaths in an advanced state of transformation at the cemetery in Peki-Avetile in 2016. © Isabel Bredenbröker

real plant material are locally evaluated as morally less 'correct'. When visiting the community cemetery for the Peki towns of Blengo, Tsame and Apeviope, I noticed wreaths on graves that had been made from branches and leaves on a base structure of palm-tree leaves, woven into a thick circular braid. These kinds of 'natural' plant wreaths were, however, an exception and did not pass as appropriate but were rather berated as 'not proper' or 'not correct'. The fact that they dry out and change – in colour, form and texture – is seen as much worse than the kind of deterioration which foil-and-ribbon wreaths undergo. These will, if left on a grave, also bleach out, tear, lose their shape and collect dirt. In this latter case however, the synthetic materials and the wrapping add value that cannot be matched by similar objects made of locally sourced organic materials. As this comparative evaluation of different wreath types shows, local perspectives on synthetic changes and transformations do not register them as actual – they are virtually erased from their perception in the sense of a semiotic ideology attached to these materials (Keane 2003, 2018).

As Adam Drazin notes, anthropology has worked to deconstruct categories such as artificial versus natural or, with respect to materials, the raw versus the cultured. In line with that thought, plastics and associated synthetic materials in the Peki funerary context are more productively read when they are perceived as elements that shape the community's social makeup, not conceptualized as primarily exterior, foreign or imposed material components. This integration of an initially exterior belief system and valuation into local processes is comparable to the acculturation of Christianity in Ghana. Comparable to such cultural exports stemming from imperial times, plastics and other synthetic materials can also be said to have colonized the world materially, particularly due to their initial plasticity and mouldability, which allows for the cheap mass production of a large variety of forms. Yet, locally these materials are valued, and attributed with selective tendencies, in a way that purposefully conveys people's agendas and aims instead of just alienating them. Yet, most of these materials and products made of them are, of course, entangled in the global capitalist flow of commodities and pose one of the biggest challenges to humanity at the moment, given their disastrous effects on the environment and the ongoing search for the best recycling practice (Pathak and Nichter 2019; Alexander and Reno 2020). Given the preference for highlighting synthetic materials' brilliance, durability and inorganic ways of transforming (compared to human bodies), in Peki such materials are actively integrated into the making of a body politic in which the dead are permanently established and contained by the living. While dead bodies cannot magically be transformed into plastic or concrete,[13] these materials can surround the dead, attach to them and take their place in the world of the living. Rather than representing inauthenticity or cheapness – common moral evaluations of plastic and synthetic materials in the 'Western' world – in Peki they are positively formative of 'more than human' bodies and relations (Fisher

2015), which transfer their properties onto the dead. In their 'artificiality', which here probably comes closest to meaning that they are manufactured within the global commodity market, materials that have the local attributions of being morally good, durational and de-personalized also exert a social function by means of their aesthetics. Yet, artificiality in the context of socially making the dead into new persons also, and primarily, means fashioning the dead in the form of art-like indices. As Eduardo de la Fuente deducts from his application of Simmel's aesthetic theory – in particular Simmel's sociology of sociability – the latter relies on the fiction of an 'as if' setting. This marks a kind of social artificiality, a necessary stylization which helps to create a 'barrier that stops external existence from rushing in and distorting sociable interaction' (2008: 349). La Fuente develops Simmel's theory, which claims the existence of a relationship between social and aesthetic forms, by attributing both with the functions of ordering tools. Crossing between the social and aesthetic form, a kind of artificiality, such as that attributed to synthetic materials and plastics, may therefore also be instrumental in establishing boundaries. It may help in creating a different reality and time which do not play by the rules of human flesh and organic matter.

Material and Immaterial Protective Functions: Creating a Temporality for the Dead

As illustrated through the ghost story in which a stolen grave wreath brought about death, wreaths can function as objects of transmission for contact between worlds and temporal spheres. They place those who handle them improperly in danger of losing their lives while ideally pacifying the spirits of the dead, to the advantage of living donors. Wreaths are tokens in an exchange between the living and the dead. According to a more worldly logic, a wreath is also a commodity, something that families will not produce themselves but which they will buy from a shop. As far as gifts to the deceased go, this kind of gift is also valued in material and economic terms, since it is made from materials that must be purchased (except for the cardboard, which can be salvaged from leftover materials). It is also made specifically for the occasion and would seem out of place anywhere outside a shop or a graveyard. According to the use value of wreaths, which only applies to the dead, not to the living, the appropriation of a found wreath does not seem to make much sense. However, different stories and accounts of how people died through the actions of the uncontrolled dead shared the same quality: an element of implausibility and wonder. Ghost stories are often narrated like accounts of dreams and apparitions, for example tales of how traditional priests received their spiritual calling. In that respect, they seem to reflect the implausibility of death as an event that cannot fully be grasped. They also serve as a warning to intruders and as a means of protection. Warnings and protection are directed both ways: towards the

living who are tempted to take things from the dead, and towards the dead who are reminded, by means of plastic, concrete and protective stories, to keep away from the living unless they are addressed. By virtue of their narrative temporality, such stories may be set in the past but claim a temporal applicability and relevance for a continuous present – they let past, present and future amalgamate, like the temporality of the dead, which becomes manageable for the living as a result of containing the dead. This way, stories help to co-ordinate the chrono-geographical stoppages and flows between the dead and the living. By means of their own logic, they serve to provide immaterial factors within a matrix of constraints that are played out in space and time. With real-world effects that have as much impact as material things, ghost stories protect in both directions, just as a concrete grave cover in the cemetery does materially. The cemetery is the place at which preparations in the week of burial start, and it is where the body ends up a few days later. On the way there, it does however still have to pass through other stations until it can arrive here, where it will be safely contained, with the hope that the same also applies to the invisible elements of the deceased. Alfred Yao, with whom this chapter started, will be buried on Saturday morning in the grave that was dug on Wednesday. Until then, he must be picked up from the morgue and laid in state. These further stages of transport demand successful negotiations of moral evaluation and the right material properties to help Alfred Yao stay on track between one world to another, temporally and spatially.

Notes

1. In Ghana, cremation is a practice usually limited to 'foreigners', such as people from South Asia.
2. By comparison, German law prescribes that a dead body must be transferred to an undertaker within thirty-six hours and should be buried within four days of the death unless an extension has been granted.
3. A detailed explanation on the category of synthetic materials and the role of cement is laid out in the Introduction of this book.
4. Outlined in detail in the Introduction.
5. Pseudonym.
6. Cemeteries in Peki are under different authorities, some of them being privately owned, some of them administered by clans or local chiefs.
7. An exception from this practice of burying in a marked grave at the cemetery are royal graves: chiefs were and still are buried in secret locations, their graves remaining almost unmarked to protect them.
8. A figure given by an official from the Kpeve Environmental Health Office Administration.
9. I have not seen any graves being dug up and re-used in Peki, but theoretically it may be possible that graves which have completely disappeared can be reused.
10. Locally produced building blocks made of concrete. Instead of buying those premade, people form such building blocks which are used for all kinds of purposes locally. These are also employed in the construction of the subterranean grave chamber of tombs.

11. These terms are often used as derogative labels for traditional religious practice, which in this colloquial way of speaking is linked to negative intentions first and foremost.
12. Pseudonym.
13. Except for through plasticization, as invented by Gunther von Hagen and displayed in the popular exhibit Körperwelten, which travelled around the globe and now has a permanent exhibition space in Berlin right underneath the famous TV tower.

4

From Morgue to Family Compound
Overcoming Socio-Material Constraints

Peki enjoys the luxury of having its own local morgue, an institution that many towns do not have direct access to. Being a state-owned and state-run institution, the morgue is part of the Peki Government Hospital complex in Peki-Tsame. For people in the Peki community, the proximity of the morgue makes it easy to transfer the body of a relative into town for their funeral, or to bring their dead who return from outside of Peki here to keep them close-by while funeral preparations are going on. It is common practice to regularly visit a dead relative at the morgue, to see the body and cry, rather than to forget about the frozen dead while body and spirit remain in a state of limbo. This, too, is easy with the morgue close-by. The Peki morgue is also used by people from other communities in the vicinity. Less conveniently, these people must travel for up to two hours to the Peki morgue for transports, visits, transfers or to pick up bodies.

Until Alfred Yao's burial on the coming Saturday, the open grave that we have dug with clan members and supporters will wait in the Avetile cemetery. Other preparations must now be made for the funeral, such as washing and picking up Alfred's body from the morgue, dressing him and presenting the deceased to mourners. The lying in state, at which the dead body can be viewed on Friday nights before being buried on the following Saturday, usually takes place in the family compound or at the house of a local relative. For the duration of an evening or night, this house is the centre of attention and a temporary resting place for the dead body. On its journey, the body travels from the morgue, a state-owned institution, to the family house before then continuing to the cemetery. This chapter accompanies Alfred Yao on his way to being buried, completing the 'good death' sequence. Returning to Gell's idea of mapping and navigating time and space by means of chrono-geography, it shows how constraints are made and overcome by means of rules, the materiality of spaces, and social

practice. In turn, the dead continue onwards on their path towards control, in the process of making the dead as ideal indices.

Rubbing Shoulders with the Dead: Payments and Constraints to Movement

On the weekend of Alfred Yao's funeral, I have an early Friday morning appointment at the Peki morgue with Lucy Atta, undertaker and relative of the deceased. My friend and assistant Collins, Alfred Yao's half-brother, has announced that he is not attending the washing at the morgue with me, possibly because this is a job mainly reserved for older female relatives. So, I arrive on my own. I have visited the morgue several times already and am prepared for the presence of dead bodies. Upon my arrival, I am told that I am late for the washing. I find Lucy in a corner behind the entrance door, sitting on Alfred Yao's body and working on his face. On Fridays, the morgue is an overwhelmingly busy place. Different parties arrive in the morning and throughout the day to wash their relatives and transport them, sometimes to towns further away, more often to a house in Peki. If the body travels to town, it must be picked up before six in the evening, which generally applies to all bodies, no matter their destination. Specifically, dead bodies may also not enter Peki before 6 p.m., meaning before sunset, in accordance with traditional beliefs as determined by the Peki Traditional Council. This leads to a culmination of pick-ups from Peki as dusk draws closer to avoid having to wait with the body outside town. Alfred Yao's body is now undergoing cosmetic interventions such as gluing his lips together with superglue and modelling his nose into a perfect shape with cotton wool. Bodily openings are sealed, and the face is adjusted to fit the expression of a person 'at rest'. Alfred Yao's daughter Yawa,[1] a student from Cape Coast, and I loiter in the courtyard in front of the morgue, trying to stay out of the sun and kneeling within the fine line of shade that is insufficiently provided by a wall which fences the morgue off from the regular hospital grounds. The inside of the morgue is too crowded to remain there for long, so we keep going in and back out again, as do most other people. While Lucy is working on the body which is lying on the floor next to the door, new parties arrive in a constant flow and the two washing tables are permanently in use. As is usually the case on Fridays, people who belong to the accompanying delegations rub shoulders with both the living and the dead. It is not unusual to look up and see a stiff body lifted above your head as it is passed from the cooling chamber to the washing table.

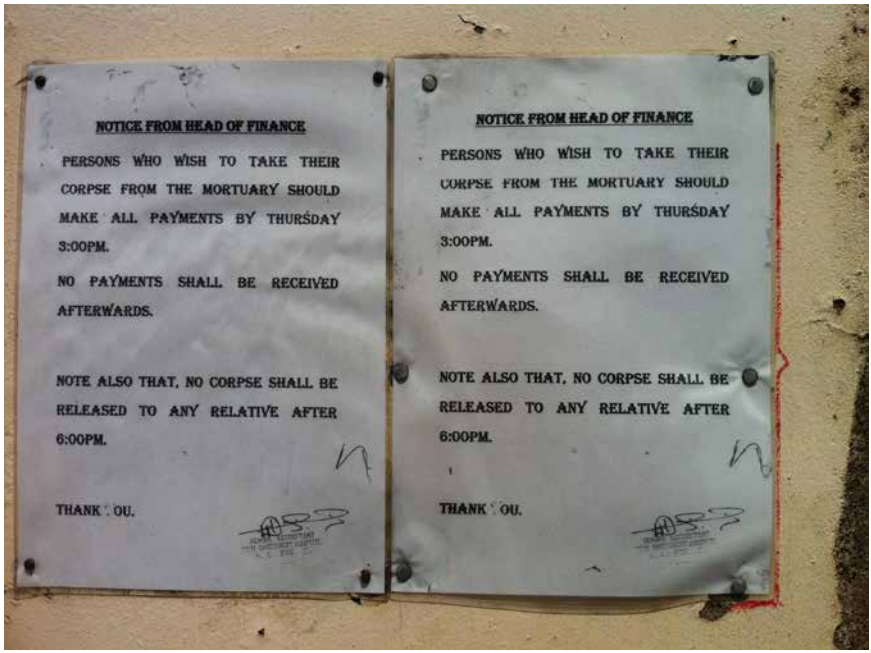
As a public institution, the morgue subjects visitors, undertakers and the dead bodies stored here, as well as morgue employees, to a set of rules and regulations which impose constraints on the proceedings of storing, washing and picking up bodies. As I have written elsewhere, these rules also extend to include cleaning processes in town beyond the dead body (Bredenbröker 2020a). Alfred Gell describes the correlation between socio-institutional

regulations and more immediately perceivable spatio-temporal constraints as working in the same way: 'The framework of institutional (normative, regulatory) constraints on activity allocations represent socially codified expectations about potentially real events and cause-and-effect relationships between these events . . . We may take it, then, that physical constraints and institutional constraints are really the same kind of thing; i.e. constraints on the bringing about of certain desired states-of-affairs, which are regarded as physical possibilities, even if they are not so in reality' (1992: 192–93). The wall that surrounds the morgue prominently features an official announcement, consisting of typewritten photocopies with a protective foil: 'Notice from the head of finance: Persons who wish to take their corpse from the mortuary should make all payments by Thursday 3:00 pm. No payments shall be received afterwards. Note also that no corpse shall be released to any relative after 6:00 pm. Thank you'. Possibly to underline the seriousness of the message, the paper has been posted to the wall twice. As official documents, both papers are signed and stamped at the bottom. Fees must be paid to the hospital clerk and payment must be verified with a receipt from the hospital. Hovering over the wall with these two sheets of paper is a large, brightly coloured billboard, announcing that the Peki morgue is sponsored by an energy drink company. The text on this sign refers to the 'Peki Hospital Mortuary Notice' regarding payment: 'Note that you are not to pay money / item to the mortuary staff. Any client who pays any amount of money / item to any staff at the mortuary without obtaining an official receipt does so at his / her own risk'. These somewhat conflicting messages of official instructions, strict regulations and energy drink advertisements ('Lucozade: Fast Acting Glucose Energy') already imply a blurry set of boundaries and influences at play here.

State money and private sponsorship seem to go hand in hand, as they claim authority over the regulation of monetary flows and the movements of bodies. However, these signs are written in English, not Ewe, meaning that the recipient of these messages must be able to read English, which cannot be commonly assumed. One may also just as well decide to ignore the rules laid out there if these messages are not enforced by state representatives acting upon them or by the material infrastructure of the morgue. And while there is usually a representative of the Public Health Office present on Fridays, the staff in the morgue, the flows of people, dead and alive, as well as the technology that is used, come to play more direct, more active roles in the making of ground rules and constraints at the morgue.

Material and Institutional Infrastructure

The morgue building is tucked away at the back of the Peki Government Hospital complex, which is surrounded by a concrete wall, a gate and a guard. The morgue itself is surrounded by a second, interior wall. The hospital complex consists of a larger set of buildings, the morgue being a



Figures 4.1 and 4.2 Signs with rules at the Peki morgue in 2017. © Isabel Bredenbröker

small but sturdy concrete house with an external cooling chamber, which can only be accessed from its yard. This cooling chamber is furnished with simple shelves on which bodies are stored next to one another and it has capacity for several dozen people – in periods of extreme demand, the floor has also been used, so I am told. The morgue building itself is adjacent. It has an entrance area, a thawing and storage area, a separate washing room and an office. There is a new metal washing table with an integrated tap and sink in the entrance area, to the right-hand side of the door in the main building. The two wings of the wooden door always stand wide open, coincidentally creating spaces with more privacy behind them. Used soap bars and foam sponges of different sizes lie on the vertically opened glass lamella of the window leading out into the yard. A room to the left of the washing table is used for storing thawing bodies that are about to be picked up. Here, there are a few metal cooling units for individual bodies in the wall. The first time that I visited the morgue with Lucy happened to be on a Thursday afternoon and I was faced with a pile of bodies on top of one another, insufficiently covered with several pieces of fabric. On other days of the week, this room is empty. Because so many bodies get picked up on Fridays, the staff store everybody who will be buried that weekend in this room for easy and quick access. Bodies are naked, apart from a set of white underwear and a white identificatory wristband as well as the occasional piece of fabric as a makeshift necklace for easier identification, with arms tucked into the side of the undergarments. A small alcove in the entrance room is used to store washed and packaged bodies that are waiting to be picked up in the evening. To the right of the entrance area, an open door leads to another room with an older washing table made of terrazzo stone. A large plastic water storage container stands in the corner of the room, providing immediate water supply, especially for times when the tap water is cut off. A large bucket filled with water is placed at the head of the table with a calabash bowl floating on the water's surface. Another door at the foot of the terrazzo table leads to the director's office. She is an impressive older lady who reigns over this compact kingdom of the dead and she also owns the town's only traditional *kente* weaving workshop. Her office at the morgue is situated at the back and on weekdays she can usually be found here. The desk features several thick books in which she registers the arrival of bodies, the names and kin of the deceased, as well as payments and checkout. Official process sheets on the wall give information about how to react in case of mass casualties or infectious diseases, how to pick up a body and whom to give the mandatory bottle of local gin to. 'Castle Bridge' gin is expected to be given by relatives as a token, despite the official announcement on the outside not to give 'money or items' to the staff without receipt. Since the pouring of libations in the form of gin is a way of pacifying spirits, the gift of a 'token' bottle of gin is a kind of payment in a currency that ultimately serves to appease the dead and other spirits. Bottles of gin can either be used for such purposes or passed on should an occasion

require it. A bench along the wall awaits parties of visitors who may come to inquire about their relatives. They might also come to deliver a body or discuss the picking up of a corpse. Apart from these sporadic visits, the morgue is a quiet place during the week. The main event, during which the place overflows with people and activity, is the washing of bodies on Friday mornings.

As a building equipped with a specific technology – deep-freeze chambers – the morgue provides a service that Ghanaians now very much rely on, although it is still not necessarily the case that this technology is always available everywhere. In the steamy Ghanaian heat, it is easily understood that a technology that provides not just cooling but freezing conditions means making an effort to change environmental conditions dramatically, even if this only occurs in an enclosed space like the morgue. As infrastructure, it requires investment and maintenance. There must be a steady and reliable supply of water and electrical energy. In Ghana, however, blackouts and water shortages that leave the taps dry are frequent and to be expected. Hence, an emergency generator supplies the morgue with energy during 'lights out' and there is a water tank to fall back on. The morgue gains in importance as the single institution in town with a reliable emergency generator. It can be seen to 'waste' money and energy, as it requires both in constant supply. Following Chris Gregory (1980), this kind of wastefulness may again be considered a ritual gift to the 'gods', in this case, the dead. From the veranda of my house in Peki-Afeviofe, I had a good view of the hospital, which was slightly elevated at the foot of the hill on the opposite side of the valley. During nights without electricity, the hospital with its prominent mobile network antenna was the only place in town glowing in the dark. While this emergency energy provided light and electricity for the patients, nurses and doctors, it also supplied the morgue, ensuring that the cooling chambers always remained below zero. Being relatively independent of the arbitrariness and manipulations of the general energy supply (given that the generator functions, and petrol is supplied) means that the morgue and hospital are in a better position than private households or businesses in Peki. And while the state is paying for the emergency measures, it might, in conjunction with energy companies and weather conditions, also be partially responsible for some of the blackouts in the town. As a result, the morgue is in some ways less subject to possible intentional manipulations to the energy supply, for example in the form of forced rationing or blackouts timed to coincide with moments that could provoke trouble in town. There were a few instances of Friday-night lying in states when the lights went out around 6.30 pm – possibly intentionally as it appeared to me – just when the bodies had arrived in town. One of these instances was the public lying in state ceremony for the victim of a stabbing in Peki-Dzake, an event that, so it was feared, would be accompanied by violence and youth misbehaviour. Without electricity, the crowd that had gathered dispersed quickly in the dark. State intervention prioritizes recipients of electricity and water,

whether that means cutting connections or making sure they continue. It is state money that gives the morgue and hospital a more secure position: funds are channelled into a generator which is not part of the shared infrastructure, meaning that other community members cannot benefit from it directly. Hence, the morgue and the dead stored here are tied to the fates of the sick who are being treated in hospital, and prioritized over the living in receiving water and electricity.

Matters of health, life and death in the hospital-morgue complex are technically the concern of the state, and all movements within both institutions are synchronized by slow bureaucratic processes and a lot of back and forth with payment slips, files and folders, as well as waiting at different doors and talking to one person at a time in a prescribed order. I experienced this myself as a patient on different occasions. For the living, the hospital and its administrative body can be a difficult and time-consuming place. Whereas the sick must wait for hours to get treatment, the director of the morgue is always on call and can respond to a death immediately, day and night. Resources are often much more readily available for the dead, and the aesthetics and forms of infrastructure are sometimes re-purposed in surprisingly different functions. A striking example is the many privately run 'ambulance cars' which serve as hearses – and only as hearses. The aesthetics of a Western infrastructural tool which was designed to provide emergency help for the sick and wounded is here appropriated to be used exclusively for the dead. The living, however, must take a taxi or other private means of transportation to the hospital in cases of emergency.

Washing the Body: Unmaking the Social Person in Death

During the Friday morning washings at the morgue, many people flood the restricted space inside the morgue. To make the washing a smooth and not overly painful process for relatives in what is an extremely crowded and hectic environment, certain preparations must be made in advance. It is the task of some of the kin delegates, including the *tɔvi* or 'godparent'[2] to prepare and bring along a bucket with items for the washing. It is common to bring a new plastic bucket with washing equipment as a gift to the deceased. This bucket usually contains soap for the body (new and wrapped, the commodified version of what locals make themselves and sell as loose soap, often in 'traditional' medicine contexts), a small face towel, new white cotton undershirts, pants, and gloves in unopened plastic packaging, an additional tank-top for men, a sponge, a liquid all-purpose antibacterial sanitizer, and a new mat onto which the deceased is laid in their body bag. The mat is used to carry the body, like a hammock. It is usually *not* a Ghanaian straw-mat (which are made from local reed and produced at the mouth of the Volta, in the Keta region), but rather an imported variety, which is wrapped in the same transparent cellophane as is used for the grave wreaths, often printed with festive patterns like small red glitter

hearts or jubilant 'happy birthday' slogans. The wrappings of commodity items gifted to the dead, such as branded and packaged white underwear, communicate newness as a sign of respect for the dead body. They signal that efforts have been made and money has been spent to purchase new items for them. These items come from China and feature a Chinese model printed on the packaging. This new, packaged white underwear from a different cultural context hence appears as free from associations with previous use or the former life of the deceased. The plastic wrapping and the branding, just as that on the soaps in the washing bucket, are somehow authoritatively put in place pre-acquisition and dissociate the objects from connections to the lives of the deceased. Instead, they evoke a vacuum of associations. The layers that follow on the body – several sets of pre-owned clothing and then a new outfit made for the lying in state – add a deeply personal aspect as well as one of display and representation. In comparison to the grave wreaths, there is a significant difference: while the wreaths remain wrapped and are intended for visual decoration only, the objects used at the morgue and for the dressing, which come into direct contact with the dead body, are intended for use. Their newness actively contributes to the process of cleaning the body of social ties and remaking the deceased as a containable part of the body politic. Like the grave wreaths, the status of newness and the materiality of the 'seals' – the plastic wrappings, but also the super-glue – carry moral implications of respect for the deceased, as is generally the case with regards to synthetic materials. However, not all objects that are used to clean the body and prepare it are new and wrapped. The undertakers also bring their own complementary equipment, some of which is more expensive and only required in small doses. Lucy usually carries a bag of cosmetics to paint the face, a bottle of Florida Water perfume and a mix of antibacterial liquids which she mixes herself from different branded products. These items are needed during the washing and in the process of dressing the body – either directly at the morgue or in the house. The *tɔvi* is traditionally expected to take the bucket and all the things that were used for a washing back to their house and integrate them into the household. Things like the soap, sponge or towel, which are returned to the *tɔvi*, have come into contact with the dead body. Most people object to this practice for hygienic reasons. Yet, it is usually impossible to avoid taking things back altogether. I was told that in most cases, the re-use of these things was limited to the plastic bucket, as a compromise. On other occasions and in other locations of the Ghanaian south, I was told that unused traditional (natural fibre) sponges and soaps had been given to relatives. This, of course, requires additional expense, something that not everyone can afford.

What is of general importance regarding the items for a washing is specifically their newness and being either branded and wrapped or otherwise clearly marked as 'new'. These qualities are, for instance, communicated via the plastic underwear packaging or the soap wrappers. A durable synthetic

Figures 4.3 and 4.4 Underwear and white gloves for dressing a deceased purchased by the anthropologist in Peki in 2018. © Isabel Bredenbröker

material like plastic, even if only used as wrapping, appears to make an object preferable to an organic material that can be acquired locally from a local producer. Packaged white underwear with Chinese branding on it has become a product that is primarily bought for the dead, even though it could also be worn by living people.

Other items, like the colourful sponge made of knotted synthetic fibres, which is included in the bucket and used during the washing, are household staples that people use to wash their own bodies and faces as well as their dishes. The traditional variety of natural fibre sponges used back in the day still exists, though I have never seen it in use during the washings. The natural fibre sponge for the dead differs from other natural fibre sponges that are supposed to be used by the living. It is made from finer fibres. In terms of choice of objects, some things seem to belong exclusively to the dead, some to both the living and the dead. The organic, degradable varieties are no longer actively chosen for use on the dead in Peki, and especially not as items in the bucket. A transfer to synthetic materials, as seen in the example of the sponge, or an appropriation of foreign cultural imagery as seen in the packaged underwear, indicate a shift in values conveyed by specific materials. New things, new materials, durability and plastic packaging are necessary for an appropriate washing bucket. Their introduction into a semi-regulated environment gives relatives a degree of agency over making their dead relative's death a 'good' death. Their durable and new qualities also work towards alienating the deceased further from the living and moving them towards a state of containment – like the concrete covers of graves. Instead of adding items that have a personal value, the items in the bucket and their lack of connection to the lives of the deceased help to unmake the deceased's social person. Following Hertz's secondary burial model, they open the deceased's status of social personhood up to a process of remaking. In short, these objects and their synthetic components have the cleaning effect that the washing is supposed to achieve. It is during the washing where things made of synthetics and wrapped in synthetic serve to control and remake the dead, indexically imprinting their attributed properties onto the dead as indices. Through the durability and moral appropriateness of the items and materials used, the bodies and spiritual elements of the dead become chrono-geographically navigable and can be sent to the appropriate location in space and time, affecting their commemoration on earth and their existence in other worlds.

The choice and use of items in the bucket imply a change in what is perceived to be the boundary between life and death. This change, however, conveys its own peculiar logic, integrating some things that are everyday essentials into the practice of washing the dead, while singling out other things that could be (and in some contexts outside of Ghana certainly are) made for the living as only good for dressing the dead. These observations make sense in the light of Webb Keane's concepts of qualisigns and semiotic ideologies (Keane 2003, 2005, 2018), meaning a socially shared selective process of attributing meaning to things, while highlighting some of their potential qualities and ignoring others. The interpretation of material things, following Keane, is thus based on a perspectival attribution of meanings, morals, functions and properties. In the case of washing materials, the decision as to which items are 'appropriate' for the bucket is made by the

family. Yet, the selective process is a social practice shared by local people who have lost a relative. It is socially translated but not actually regulated or defined. The morgue, with its own catalogue of rules, does not prescribe a washing. However, it is understood that bodies (dead and alive) are washed before they travel. This washing is commonly undertaken by relatives and undertakers. Although morgue employees do stand in to perform washings, this is not at all ideal and may be an expression of disrespect or neglect on the part of living relatives. In that matter, the morgue serves as a state-owned location in which the washing is largely a private practice. However, albeit private, a washing does not happen in a closed or 'private' room. On Friday mornings, the groups that arrive create an accidental kind of public. Everyone is here with a purpose and all who are present are in each other's space, sharing the experience. While the crowds can be overwhelming, particularly in a tight space with many dead bodies around, the presence of family members and strangers alike is also a consolation, making the washing and picking up a lively and social event rather than a glum and solitary experience. After Lucy has finished preparing Alfred Yao's face, he is wrapped in a piece of *kente* cloth and zipped up in the mandatory white body bag that the morgue sells for fifty Cedi, a relatively high price. According to official regulations, a body cannot leave the morgue if it is not contained in this standardized body bag. Bodies that are ready for pick-up remain in the body bag in the front room of the morgue, marked with a black pen stating the person's name to avoid bodies being accidentally mixed up. All bodies that are washed, wrapped and ready to go are stored on the floor and in corners of the morgue until their relatives come back to pick them up for the lying in state. For now, Alfred Yao's body remains in the morgue, wrapped up, lying on its mat, waiting for sunset. Conclusively, the morgue is a station of transit for dead bodies through which they may pass, quickly or slowly, depending on whether their relatives can pay for extending their stay or whether they must keep it relatively short.[3] Its regulatory constraints are manifested as social constraints through payments, and religious and moral regulations. They are also enforced through the physical constraints created by walls, space and cooling technologies. These help to achieve control over the dead and the living alike, while aiding in indexically imprinting ideal qualities onto the dead. Leaving the morgue, at last, means acquiring controlled mobility and coming closer to the state of 'good' death.

Transport and Lying in State: More Constraints

After their washing at the morgue, the naked bodies of the dead are wrapped up in old and new clothing, continuously adding new layers that separate these bodies from the world of the living. Initially, bodies are dressed in multiple layers of their own clothing, stuffed with additional padding material to increase their volume, and carefully augmented with

a final display outfit. In the final representation during a lying in state, only the face of the deceased will be left uncovered. This Friday evening, Alfred Yao's body will be laid in state in the hallway of the Avetile family compound. Lucy has already decorated the room. The door at the back is covered by a veil of brightly coloured fabric, visually closing the room off and creating a secondary, inner room that did not exist before. The only sign of there being a throughway behind the fabric is the deep humming of a freezer and the occasional person lifting the fabric and slipping underneath it. On the other side, the hallway continues towards the living room and is closed off with a temporary curtain. The decoration is basic, mainly consisting of fabric covering the ceiling and the floor. In the afternoon, I am taken to the neighbouring house of the maternal family. The women of the family and female guests who have arrived sit together and make *kenkey* dumplings, skilfully folding the fermented corn dough that has been prepared into a dry corn leaf. The food will be served after the funeral during a buffet and will feed the family and their guests over the next couple of days. In the evening, Collins and I stay in town and wait for the body to arrive. The arrival of a body requires a procedure in which the maternal and paternal families with their representatives and elders meet at an agreed place on the road in town to exchange drinks, pour libations to the ancestors and verify that the body is in fact the correct one. Plastic chairs are normally put out at the spot near the road where the paternal clan meets on such occasions. In this case, however, both the maternal and paternal sides happen to be from Alfred Yao's clan, which makes the choice of a meeting place easy. Representatives of both families sit facing each other. A linguist, the traditional spokesperson and mediator, sits on his small wooden stool between them. When the body arrives in the back of a pick-up truck, a symbolic pair of parents go to check on it and verify that this body is the body of Alfred Yao, not someone else. Such symbolic roles take the pressure off close relatives who then do not have to face the dead body in a premature state. Due to the high volume of stored bodies in morgues, all of which are naked apart from very similar white underwear and wrapped in the same white body bags, mistakes and swaps are not uncommon and therefore widely feared. On the way to the house, a body's identity may be verified several times by different people in symbolic parental roles. Alfred Yao's momentary 'parents' let the body pass. The family delegations are now exchanging bottles of 'Castle Bridge' spirits and, as custom demands, the bottle contributed by the maternal side is accepted by the paternal side and then returned to the donors. Drinks are shared and libations poured by the linguist. While the body is taken into town, a brass band that has been hired for the occasion plays funeral music. The body travels through town, revisiting the houses of relatives and familiar places until it finally arrives at the family compound and is carried into the house. Later, a DJ will play music and a traditional drumming ensemble will complete the picture.

Inside the fabric-clad room, Lucy and her team of two assistants are waiting to begin their work of decorating the body. Lucy has a collection of fabrics, decorative items, washing and cosmetic supplies, augmented by technology for special effects such as a smoke machine or a rotating disco-ball light, but she also brings in furniture, such as metal bedframes and wooden stands for coffins. These items are her capital. New apprentices must contribute items she needs if they want to become her students. Lucy goes on frequent shopping trips to Accra to find decorative items at a good price. The decorated lying in state room functions as a stage for the dead body and is reminiscent of a patchwork or an assemblage. Different components are temporarily brought in and given a new function. Things that are professionally installed, such as a wooden scaffolding on which the pieces of fabric are attached, might be cobbled together from bits and pieces to be economical and to make it adjustable to individual rooms. Fabrics that are used for hangings are brought by the undertaker and can be re-used for another funeral or other decorative jobs after being washed. The body is dressed in a mixture of clothes that were owned by the deceased as well as in a representative outer layer of clothes, usually made or bought for the occasion. The undertaker contributes decorative items such as fashion jewellery, makeup, accessories, plastic flowers and welded flower stands or props like wigs and an imitation traditional crown to give the set a finished appearance. The coffin is a commodity that is delivered as another prop. In its more expensive varieties, it is even wrapped in plastic foil for delivery to keep dust and damage away until it is installed.

The Coffin: Appropriating 'Foreign' Aesthetics

Alfred Yao's coffin is already in place in the room, elevated on concrete blocks, which later also serve as support for his back. Concrete blocks are often kept lying around as flexible building materials for temporary usage. As a truck driver, Alfred will not be laid, but he will rather sit in state for the beginning of the evening, imitating his position behind the wheel. Coffins are likely to be made in Peki by local carpenters, but they could also be bought in Accra if the person buying them does not think the local models are of the desired quality or material. A friend who returned to Peki after thirty years of living in the United States wanted a simple, untreated mahogany coffin when his father died in 2016. This, from a local point of view, was perceived as a strange choice: a coffin is meant to shine and sparkle. Polished varnish, a voluminous body and golden handles are a common, sought-after look. To obtain an unusual, 'no-frills' coffin, he had to order it from a coffin-maker in Accra who also catered to more 'Westernized' tastes. 'Westernized', in this case, refers to a sense of simplicity in aesthetics and design, following the 'less is more' principle and associated with the vague imagination of a cultural 'West'. In Peki, minimalist aesthetic preferences, which differ from the local imagination of what 'Western' modernism means – kitsch, plastic,

and expressive designs – are slowly starting to appear, as can be seen in the homogenous, simplistic but expensive design of a recently opened private cemetery. Popular taste, however, demands the extra add-ons of 'imported' elements and voluminous shapes for a coffin to be properly representative.

Some carpenters in Peki specialize in making coffins, while some make them alongside other types of woodwork. In general, though, the coffin is a carpentry product that can be produced in a reasonable amount of time and sold at a relatively high price and for which there is a constant demand, meaning that it is particularly worthwhile for carpenters to make coffins. The timber is usually sourced locally and then processed in the carpentry workshops. On a walk through town, one encounters many workshops, large and small, along the main road and in the back streets, with a high concentration of them near the hospital and morgue complex. Most if not all carpentry workshops offer coffins. In conversation with several carpenters who had set up their workshops next to the hospital, I found that their work and the process of making a coffin bears similarity to the 'composite' way in which grave wreaths are crafted. The process of making a coffin out of wood is only the basis for what then becomes the coffin. To fulfil the standards of a proper Ghanaian coffin, other elements must be added: satin and padding as a covering material for the inside, metal hinges that allow

Figure 4.5 Collins Jamson, friend and research assistant to the anthropologist with dog Faustus pictured at a carpentry workshop selling coffins and grave wreaths in Peki in 2017. © Isabel Bredenbröker

Figure 4.6 A coffin wrapped in plastic is waiting for the lying in state in Peki in 2017. © Isabel Bredenbröker

the coffin to fold open on its four corners, shiny metal embellishments such as crosses and handles, and paint. Coffins may also be delivered wrapped in plastic, to protect these valuable aesthetic features for the final presentation.

A carpenter in Peki-Tsame, who was trained as a coffin-maker, describes the ornamentation and finishes for the coffin as a recent phenomenon and

as 'European'. The ornaments, he says, which are made of plastic or metal, are attractive, and people like them. But even though they are aesthetically associated with Europe, he says that he believes they are produced in Dubai. He himself takes frequent trips to Accra to buy new decorative elements. The decoration raises the price of the coffin, and he is aware that in some cases people take the decoration off before burying the coffin, so they do not have to pay for it, which he himself rejects for his business: 'Everything is for you to keep, you go and bury it'.

Another carpenter in Peki-Tsame recounts that, within the history of his business, the influx of new synthetic materials and plastics has led to a reduced demand for wooden carpentry items for everyday use, such as furniture. In reaction, the carpenter's strategy was to shift his business mainly to the production of coffins. A mattress can lie on the floor without a bedframe, so nobody bothers to buy a bed anymore, he says. Traditionally, handcrafted reed mats were and still are used to sleep on; bedframes were introduced as a missionary import, as were coffins. Mats were formerly used to bury people instead of coffins: the one-year-anniversary of a burial was called the 'rolling of the mat'. Today, bodies which are picked up from the morgue are still carried on a mat. Yet, instead of using the mats that are produced locally and from local materials, mats that are gifted to the dead and then used to transport them are imported and wrapped in cellophane foil. Aesthetically, this mirrors the use of decoration on the coffin. Added decorative elements produce a distinct look that is popular in southern Ghana – yet, they communicate the fiction of following aesthetics that have been copied and appropriated from Western contexts. Wood, the locally sourced base material, is covered by layers and elements that hide its materiality and imbue it with a sense of artificiality. Coffins, true to the Western idea, are still made of wood – but invisibly so. In addition, this carpenter buys his decorative materials from Accra, choosing, among other resources, from a catalogue of the London Casket Company's West African Division, a company selling coffins and coffin decorations which, according to their website, 'blend the true African culture with that of the western world' (The London Casket Company). The coffin, being covered with elements and layers that turn it into an artificial object, is an explicit composition: it repurposes aesthetics and materials that are viewed as 'Western', although they are probably produced elsewhere in the world and ultimately are defining for a uniquely Ghanaian funerary aesthetic.

Following Eduardo de la Fuente's (2008) elaborations on Georg Simmel's aesthetic theory, the combination of social and aesthetic form in specific situations may go beyond mere analogy. The artificial forms and elements of the coffin, which are sought after and looked at by a large public of relatives and funeralgoers in Peki, do not only come to stand for the refashioning of the deceased in the face of the community. This aesthetics, as conveyed by the form and material of the coffins, contributes just as much as the public that views it and establishes whether it is morally good and appropriate.

The coffin, in the context of Hertz's secondary burial model, is a manifestation of the social body. The composition of the coffin shows that a sense of artificiality, which Simmel also identifies as a necessary stylization in his study of sociability (la Fuente 2008), is an integral quality of this social body, as it is made manifest and re-made in the course of funerals in Peki. The fabric of the social body is imbued with this quality of artificiality by incorporating the dead as indices of controlled and morally appropriate relations. This process is represented and maintained by synthetic and commodified elements which create the conspicuous look of the coffin, hiding the core which remains wooden and perishable. The dead, as social material that can be transformed, allow the living to refashion the social body in an ideal, imaginative way. This ideal vision aims for, and functions by means of, an appropriation of 'foreign' aesthetic elements. These are directly associated with artificial qualities such as shiny and reflective surfaces and fabrics as well as with durable qualities. Varnish, glossy handles, golden crosses and satin come to stand for a spatio-temporal distinction from the world of the living – a world and time in which these things, although buried in the ground, are seen as durable. They retain their ideal properties, hence representing social durability. The body itself becomes encased in layers that, again and again, produce this quality of artificiality, while carefully incorporating elements that are reminders of social ties.

Dressing the Body

Alfred Yao rests on the floor. The body bag is placed on a mat, zipped open, his body visible, while the undertaking team goes through a pile of clothing that has been given to them by the family. These clothes belonged to Alfred Yao and it is important that he takes some of them with him in the coffin, as he might need them where he is going. At the same time, they are also needed to prepare the body. Before dressing, Alfred Yao's body undergoes an extensive stretching procedure. The team of three push and bend his body with surprising force to make him flexible enough to sit up straight. This takes about thirty minutes or more. During the process, Alfred Yao looks like he might still be alive, or as if Lucy and her helpers are trying to reanimate him, as if he is being led by the hands with his eyes closed. Finally, he is sat down in the coffin and, in a last effort to help him to assume a good posture even in death, his arms are pulled forward. The team who are doing the work complain and sweat, as it is hard physical labour, though they are used to the work and share occasional laughs while they go through the motions. As mentioned earlier, a dead person in Peki will usually be buried wearing several layers of their own clothing. The decorated bodily features of the deceased are almost erased by a thick layer of clothing underneath the top layer, and the body is physically enlarged by a lot of added material. Alfred Yao will be changed into two different outfits as the night progresses. For now, these clothes are not needed as Alfred Yao will wear a loose

wrapper of *kente* fabric first. In all cases where I saw a coffin and a body being prepared, a generous stuffing of clothes from the deceased's personal wardrobe was used to fill the coffin, as a supplementary pillow (which is covered with satin so the clothes themselves are not directly visible). In some cases, a selection of clothing was brought to the undertaker in a suitcase or a bag. Sometimes, the clothing to be placed on the body was selected by a family member in consultation with the undertaker. In one case, before a female elder's body was washed at the morgue, the responsible family member(s), friends and relatives of the deceased gathered in her room and, in a painstaking and somewhat secretive selection process, handpicked some clothes and other objects that were to be included, of which some would be taken to the morgue. These personal, used and worn clothes cannot be replaced by any other clothing items, and they acquire their value precisely because they have been owned and used by the deceased before. However, while reminders of personal connections are intentionally added in the process of dressing the body, the used clothes are hidden between a layer of new underwear and another of representative costumes, which are either purpose-made or bought. They are not put on display, but hidden from view, dedicated to the deceased only, not to the living, and secreted safely between layers of more representative clothes. This is similar to the use of grave wreaths that are included in the grave and wrapped, serving a purpose in a spatio-temporal sphere that is invisible and cannot be experienced by the living. Not all the clothes and jewellery that the deceased owned can be placed in the coffin. In the Peki community, a suitcase of clothing and other smaller personal belongings is traditionally packed up, left untouched and opened for distribution by the *tɔvi* at the one-year anniversary of the funeral. The *tɔvi* may then take the items which are lying on top for themselves, and they have the job of administering the distribution to a group of relatives who are present. While I could not witness such a distribution process, I was told that these events were more public in the past and have recently become a private family affair. However, it is likely that not all family members can be present at the one-year celebration, limiting the number of possible recipients. In the end, Alfred is dressed in the costume of a king, an outfit for which a piece of family *kente* with sparkly threads is wrapped around him, leaving one shoulder uncovered, as is the custom. A crown from Lucy's collection of decorative accessories, made of metal and black velvet is placed on his head, his hands and feet are hidden. Before the curtain is raised to let people in, two young women come in to confirm that the job has been done to the family's satisfaction. Now, people flood in from the busy compound yard. They stand and speak to Alfred, circle around the coffin, wail and keep watch. Some mourners place small gifts such as photographs of the deceased in the coffin. Outside, a popular *bobobo* drumming group is playing and people stay around, listen to the drums and dance.

When I return early the next morning, I am just in time to see the pastor, who has arrived to give a short private Bible reading and a blessing to

Alfred Yao in the presence of family members. Alfred is now wearing a formal suit with a long fake gold chain and white gloves, which work in similar ways to the decorative and aesthetic elements of the coffin: the body becomes statue-like and artificial. The props with which the body is dressed, just like the crown that Alfred wore initially, are decorative items brought by an undertaker. They may be reused in another funeral, another job. It is common practice to leave no parts of the body uncovered, apart from the face. Guests who arrive come in and say their last goodbyes to Alfred Yao. When the coffin is closed, his *tɔvi* are present. Then the coffin is taken outside, and soon a lengthy Christian funeral service led by a voluntary preacher begins, after which the body is taken to the cemetery and buried without much ado. Guests and close family remain at the house, where a sister who is a chef has prepared 'Western-style' food: roast chicken and coleslaw. Guests are given the food in modern Styrofoam takeaway containers, allowing them to eat at the house or take the food home with them, as they choose. 'Sympathizers' (as mourners are commonly called in Ghanaian English) arrive to share their condolences and partake in a bite to eat (if they donate something to the family). Food and drinks are handed out under the watchful eye of several female family members: it's a costly part of the funeral and not a serve-yourself affair. The *kenkey* dumplings that have been prepared by women of the family in the afternoon are not given out as gifts during the official hosting part of the funeral but serve to feed guests and family members who remain in the house for the next couple of days. The Styrofoam containers and chicken with coleslaw can also be considered to mark a preference for durable, synthetic materials and Western-style aesthetics – here in the form of a dish. The food boxes made of yet another synthetic material will make quite an impression, as they are a significant upgrade from the regular plastic sachets that are generally used for take-away food. Paired with a meal that is not the usual everyday food, they serve to establish the 'good' death of Alfred Yao, while the *kenkey* as ordinary everyday food feed people long-term, yet inconspicuously.

Home Liberties, Home Constraints: Points of Touch

The family house has a more liberal catalogue of rules than the morgue, a catalogue drawn up by the head of family and its residents. During the lying in state, it becomes a place where the living and the dead can meet and celebrate being together for a short while. The family compound offers a stable site for such an encounter, supported by the social institution of the family, which is inextricably tied to the building and the town community. Still, the meeting happens in a newly created, temporary space and in the presence of a decorated, temporary body for the deceased, to facilitate the touching of boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead. The room for the lying in state pops up in the house, unexpectedly, and confuses the floorplan of the house. It introduces walls where there were none before,

hiding the room that is normally used by the living, as bedroom, storage, entrance or something else. Instead, it provides the magic and comfort of a room clad in fabric – fabric which decorates, separates and yet remains permeable to sounds, air and movement. Whether curtains or hangings, these pieces of fabric can be brushed aside, if need be, the boundaries of the room suspended or rearranged for a moment. When momentary boundaries are reimposed and the dividing curtains are drawn, the undertaker and her team have a closed-off space to do their work, uninterrupted. They are in an interim place between the world of the living and that of the dead, while being fully in control of the space. After a family member has inspected their work, the room is opened for mourners. The body of the deceased can be kept in the house without any visible regulations as to how it is treated. The morgue requires a deep freeze, locking the body behind institutional doors and transporting it in a body bag. At the family house, it can be touched, talked to and dressed in different outfits. Since those elements of the deceased as a social person that tied them to the world of the living have already been unmade during the washing and by means of decorative objects in this space, the living can touch the body and interact with it. It is, however, very common to see people make a warding-off gesture, arm stretched out, telling the spirit of the deceased not to come too close. This spirit, an element of which is believed still to be loosely attached to the body at this stage, may have some potential for harm. According to traditional belief, the spirit of the deceased, including of those who died a 'good' death, usually stays around for up to forty days (coinciding with the Christian belief regarding the period between Jesus' death and resurrection), before it withdraws from the world of the living. Hence, while the body and the spirit are becoming detached from the living and contained in a funerary setting, this is the last chance for intimate interaction with the deceased, after the body has been released from the morgue and before it disappears into the grave. And while interaction and touch are invited, allowed and sought, these are not enjoyed in an entirely carefree manner but always with the next step, the containment of the deceased, in mind.

In accompanying and helping Lucy, I found that touching the body and protecting both the living and the dead from physical contact seem to be a matter of great importance and of moral, spiritual and financial calculation. At the morgue as well as in the home, those who work with the body, touching and moving it, wear protective plastic gowns and single-use rubber gloves. In August 2018, over a year after Alfred Yao's funeral, I help dressing a body at a family home, standing in for a co-worker of Lucy's. While I have previously refrained from becoming actively involved in processes that include the touching of bodies, I now have an active role to play. As someone having this kind of tangible encounter for the very first time, I am particularly aware of the need to protect my skin from direct touch, though Lucy and her assistant only do so to a certain degree. They wear protective gloves and gowns during work but, when the body had been moved into the

coffin and most of the skin had been covered with three layers of clothing plus a suit as the final outfit, they and relatives who attended the dressing use their bare hands to make the finishing touches. Afterwards, the gowns are folded up and packed away, to be re-used during the next job. As objects made from plastic and commonly intended for single use, gowns and gloves clearly serve a different function: they are used to mark the professional roles of those who are participating. But instead of enforcing a physical separation between living and dead bodies, they create a heightened awareness of possible touch and interaction. The process of dressing a body requires resolute physical involvement. In preparation for putting an arm of the body through the sleeve of a jacket, I am asked to bend and stretch the arm repeatedly, a task for which I must push with all my weight and power. This kind of interaction, the need to apply pressure, immediately creates a different sense of 'being in touch' with the body. Instead of it being a body that cannot be touched or looked at, it becomes a human being without any force of its own (or even possessing a certain type of negative energy, a resistance to movement). As such, this lifeless person needs help getting dressed. During the actual time the body is on display, during which guests can come and visit it, people lay their hands on a dead person's forehead, touch their clothes or stroke their hair. Often, a bucket of water and soap is placed outside at the guest's disposal, where the washing of hands also includes the arms. In a beautiful act of helping me to practically understand the work of an undertaker, Lucy's assistant washes my hands with a soft local soap after we are done with the night's work, as if to show me how to wash my hands the right way. Here, I too become a passive body receiving treatment.

Sanitary issues with respect to touching a dead body are treated differently from guest to guest and family to family. These concerns seem to come second to worries about keeping the spirit of the deceased at bay. Guests, on the other hand, can also be a possible threat to the family and the deceased, should they intend to use negative spiritual forces on the deceased's body and spirit. However, in the fabric-clad room, there are usually people present who witness other people's behaviour towards the deceased. In anticipation, people may be hidden behind the curtains, invisible yet attentive, to prevent uninvited uses of sorcery. Apart from relatives on watch, the display itself is also set out to protect the deceased. The feet and hands of the deceased are always covered in new white socks and gloves and may then be hidden under a decorative sheet. This act of protecting the dead and the living from too much proximity marks the end of the dressing phase and the beginning of an official representational phase in which the body has reached its final state of being presentable. The face remains visible as a reminder of the person's identity, such as also marked on posters and banners which prominently feature a person's face. Feet and hands carry the marks of life – scars, calluses, deformations and nails. While, even more so in death, these become deeply personal body parts which tell the story of

how a person lived, what kind of work they did, how they moved and how they took care of their own body; this information is much too private for an official viewing. As a gesture of mutual respect, the new white underwear, socks and gloves return privacy to the dead body, which, if uncovered, gives all this private information away readily and unfiltered. Depending on the location where the body is laid in state – this could be a room in the house or a pavilion in the yard – the environment may feel slightly different. In cases where pavilions are used, a red carpet, part of the undertaker's equipment, will cover the ground. In both cases, the pavilion outside and the fabric-clad room inside create a sense of being in a theatrical setting. Everything is somehow transformed, not a part of everyday life.

As with the washing and preparation at the morgue, a combination of new, 'imported' or synthetic objects and materials – some of which might be re-used as part of the undertaker's decoration – and old, previous possessions of the deceased and various building materials that are quickly put to a momentarily different use, play important roles in the process of lying in state. It is vital that some items are brought to the scene in a new and packaged state, like the coffin or underwear and white gloves, while others need to be previous possessions of the deceased or may just be added for decorative purposes und re-used in similar contexts later. Most of the undertaker's decorative items and props are of a durable or artificial quality, even though the items themselves can be used multiple times. Lucy, noticeably, did not decorate the room with strictly traditional objects, materials or patterns. Rather, she used welded metal holders for plastic flowers (the holders being made by local metal-workers), *kente* printed cotton fabric (often a Chinese import) rather than real *kente* (which, if used at all, would be contributed by the family and usually taken back into their possession after the ceremony), and synthetic satin fabrics that have a particular shiny look and feel to them. The combination of these different kinds of objects and materials is a common denominator that presents itself in the morgue, family house and cemetery, the three locations that the dead body travels through. The qualities of 'durable' synthetic things that Lucy uses here, their aesthetics, their flexibility towards being repurposed and the interplay with belongings of the deceased leave them charged with possibilities. It is these new and somewhat 'alienating' materials and things that help to remove traces of personhood, while links to a previous life (through personal clothing and gifts) may be maintained for the sake of pacifying the deceased. The deceased are made (un)familiar through a combination of personal and synthetic materials that physically and symbolically separate them. However, the objects that transport personal ties will be hidden away from view, layered under official costumes or stuffed into the coffin under a satin sheet as the filling for a headrest.

The ability of the living to decide flexibly when touch between the living and the dead is appropriate, what parts of a dead body may be seen in what circumstances and by whom, imbues the dead body with the potential to be

transformed. Through the decorative work that is carried out on the body at the family house, it enters a new stage of official representation and acquires a sense of dignity in death. Within this process, all aspects of the dead body come to play a role and can be recognized when it is the right moment for them. The washing pays careful attention to all parts of the body, its marks and signs that tell of the deceased's life. In its dressed-up state, the body has become a new person, the dead person, who has undergone an assisted process of revelation, transformation and guise. The face, which is highlighted with makeup, lipstick and eyeliner by the undertaker, takes the central part in the final stage of transformation. It will, as the marker of personal identity, stand in correspondence with the face(s) displayed on funeral banners, but this time with closed eyes and a closed mouth. Touch, on the level of bringing the presence of the dead into the community of the living, is regulated by representatives of the Peki Traditional Area council. Chiefs and elders have put a ban on dead bodies entering the town before dusk at 6 pm. Some bodies, such as suicide victims, are not allowed to be laid in state at all. Accident victims may be presented like any other deceased, an event which used to be taboo in the traditional context. These regulations relate directly to spiritual beliefs and mark a border, a time that is dedicated to shared space and the presence of the dead in the houses of the living. Here, constraints and liberties with regards to including the dead in the world of the living before finally containing them are imposed entirely by the family. However, a body may only reach a house after the hurdles of negotiating debts, leasing a grave, preparing the funeral and releasing the body from the morgue have been overcome. Alfred Yao's burial at the Avetile cemetery on Saturday afternoon is a quick affair. The family members who accompany the coffin are gone for about forty minutes. From several other interments that I have seen on the poor parts of different Peki cemeteries, I know that a pastor or the person who held the service is usually present, a few last words are said, and the grave is closed with soil. From then on, a poor grave will receive only minor adjustments, if at all, and the cemetery returns to its usual quietness.

Completing the Good Death Sequence

This chapter has traced the successive sequences that orchestrate the work for the dead, which laboriously moves the dead body from one place to another. Illustrating the 'good' death sequence, the narrative closely follows the funeral of Alfred Yao as its central ethnographic case study and demonstrates how the dead, both physically and spiritually, are moved towards an ideal state of being contained. Since the dead body itself would still transform – uncontrollably – if it were not attended to, containment in death leads to a sense of immobility and finality: it produces the qualities that death is supposed have, which are by no means natural. The body as corpse becomes the patient in a defined sequence of procedures and, in its

controlled transformation, allows for a Hertzian 'social making of death' or control over death to be realized. The places, materials, objects and activities that are essential to this sequence finally allow the socially constructed and materially demonstrated containment of the body and spirit in death. They serve as material anchors and go-betweens on 'time-maps' with which the living attempt to achieve such containment while maintaining contact with the spatio-temporal world of the dead. Once these anchors have been successfully established, movement and an altered state of existence may then become possible for the dead, for example, as ancestors. In their function as ancestors, the dead stand in a personal relationship with their family members and may be interacted with if desired – they are, to a degree, owned by the living. Ancestors also have some of the abilities of the living, such as the ability to listen and possibly answer, to move around if called upon or to see parts of the world of the living, as well as to receive the gifts that have been dedicated to them. Yet, these 'living' properties of ancestors are contained and controlled, as opposed to those of ghosts, wandering spirits and possibly malicious spiritual elements, who are always at risk of causing harm with these faculties. The transition from life to a different state is reflected in the places that the dead body travels through, contrasted by the seemingly stable characteristics of these places, for example buildings, graves or the state of being frozen. In Peki, materials that are attributed with durable qualities, as well as things which are new or marked as 'Western-style' commodities, serve this purpose particularly well, aiding in the unmaking and re-making of the social person in death. It is the concern of the living to contain dead bodies at the different instances of transition, for variable durations of time, until a final containment at the 'last resting place' and a corresponding allocation of the deceased's spiritual components in their designated place has been achieved. In this process, the manipulation of the material world, in both its immobile and mobile forms, presents a way of changing the rules for the living and the dead. Such rules may first present themselves as the constraints of place and social or institutional regulations, such as an official note signed by the hospital director on the wall of the morgue. For this making and unmaking of containment in places related to death, mobile flows of bodies and things are essential.

The combination of static and mobile elements allows for a manipulation of rules that are 'in place'. They also allow for a manipulation of time, as noted by Gell (1992). Creative processes of dealing with constraints transforms the temporality of the dead into a social time that becomes navigable for the living and serves their intentions. In relation to the movement and arrest of bodies in different places throughout the funerary cycle in Peki, time and location are manipulated, resulting in an altered temporal state of the deceased. To that avail, synthetic materials and their tendential qualities play a decisive part. The dead, if attended to in the prescribed ways, can be expected to move within the limitations of space-time that have been given to them. In the making of death as a state of containment, places in the

world of the living play crucial roles in achieving such a manipulation of space-time. When the mobility of the dead has been successfully controlled, finality or immobility in death allows for a socially navigable time in which the deceased can be included in the society of the living as ancestors: cosmological entities with a new and approved status of personhood. Cementing or otherwise containing the dead relies on material manifestations which shape places, as this chapter has shown. Synthetic material's durable properties create a body politic into which selected dead members of the community are durationally incorporated, literally cemented into the ground. This kind of durable manifestation supports the altered temporality of the dead: all pasts are equally made present and can hence be included in the social temporality of the living. Yet, these pasts and presents are also crucial in the making of futures, as heated negotiations about the moral status of a deceased show. The outcome determines how families are seen in the community, how financial relations are recognized and whose ideas will be taken seriously. Another aspect of futurity relates to the prevention of unintended harm or change. Since the dead may not always adhere to the limitations imposed on them by the living but may also transgress boundaries with the world of the living, appearing as the ghosts told of in stories, measures may be taken to prevent these kinds of uncontrolled movements. Dead bodies, spirits in tow, are moved and looked out for. Finally, they are supposed to become contained, too. Here, the physical fixation of the material body is supposed to affect the containment of the deceased's spiritual components. In doing so, the dead's 'living' time, which, according to Gell's model, is inseparably intertwined with movements and the arrest of the body, is also ultimately suspended, rendering it manipulable by the living. What can be said about all the places in town that have to do with death and funerary activities is that they are at the same time tied to Ghanaian law and financial regulations, as well as to those represented by local traditional authorities. This becomes evident, for example, in the negotiation with traditional governance authorities over being allowed to bury and lease a grave site, or in the regulation of when and how to pick up a dead body from the morgue. Commemorative practices are rich sites of political and social negotiation. They invoke loyalty and liabilities to kin and may be tied to claims of land ownership or obligations towards the community, such as participation in community labour. They facilitate the practicalities of everyday life. In these matters, local authorities successfully compete with the state, making their relevance in Peki known by structuring funerary events and imposing constraints on the process.

At the morgue or at a public town cemetery, different regimes of regulations and interests can be represented, contested and altered by individual actors. Engagement with the dead body and with the environments in which it is contained, administered, washed, decorated, presented and buried marks points of transition. These do not appear in a neat, uni-directional line, although sequences intend a course of action in a prescribed temporal

order. In fact, as this chapter has shown, while the living attempt to control the passage of the dead, the deceased's bodies and spirits are, to a degree, also allowed some movement, whether in their intended state as ancestors or during the funerary process. There are intended instances when dead bodies and the living touch. These interactions occur as movement controlled by the living, but it remains necessary to transport the dead onwards successfully, containing them while possibly imbuing them with the agency of ancestors or wandering spirits. Having control over the material environment, material change, and evaluations of the material is, as Hertz has shown, a way to reclaim control over apparently uncontrollable processes, such as death. From what I observed in Peki, the questions of control or authority over interpretations and practices relating to the material environment and the dead body are ultimately tied to questions of power and the pursuit of personal or collective intentions. Yet, with many different actors and agendas involved – since 'the social' is much more diverse than the Hertzian approach suggests – these agendas are always subject to negotiations, often not in direct 'verbal' form, but rather by means of practices and socially shared evaluations. Individual actors may choose, highlight and interpret qualities of the material for specific reasons. However, they may equally be restricted by materials when their power over these matters declines or the material world stubbornly gets in the way of human intentions. Such processes of interpretation, interaction and negotiation can be represented through the art nexus model, where human intentions, the realm of the material and agency are connected in a nexus of relations, rendering the dead indices of ideal social relations (Gell 1998). However, this ideal outcome is always at risk of being challenged when other perspectives take agency in the process. Here, 'bad' death and the incontrollable elements that it unleashes serves as the counterpart to the conservative efforts of the 'good' death sequence. Part III of this book will outline the sequence for 'bad' deaths as well as several alternative sequences, including all those relations that are less than ideal or out of control but still inscribe themselves into the indexical position of the dead, albeit with different results.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. See Chapter 1 for a detailed description of this kin role.
3. There have been governmental policy change interventions in the past with the aim of encouraging people to bury their relatives quicker and free up space in morgues. Among them was a defined maximum stay time after which the price for each day went up. This apparently motivated people to move their deceased relatives from morgue to morgue when that threshold of maximum days was reached. I have not witnessed anything like this during my fieldwork in Peki, nor been told that people had to move a relative due to external regulations.

Part III

TRANSFORMATIONS

'Bad' Death (*Ametsiava*) and Beyond

5

'Bad' Death
Normalizing the Accident

The previous part of this book discussed the 'good' death sequence as a means for containing and controlling the dead. This part looks at the 'bad' death sequence and ways in which it may help to normalize deaths that are out of the ordinary, turning them into 'good' deaths at last. Simultaneously, 'bad' deaths may also be instrumental for challenging the social status quo. Adam Drazin's thoughts on the life and death of materials serve as a point of departure when thinking about the challenging functions of materials in the face of human finitude: 'In the extreme, materials have no births and deaths but emergences and re-emergences in reconfigurations of matter. They have no absolute death but become different. They can be unreliable – while forms endure, the materials comprising them decay. They challenge social mores, boundaries and hierarchies' (2015: 27). This chapter presents ethnographic material that shows how the 'bad' death sequence challenges social categories and orders. Events performed in the 'bad' death sequence are particularly potent when considering moral values and temporal potentials attributed to materials and places that play a role in it. Hence, materials and the ways in which they are seen to transform or resist transformation contribute to this challenging function.

Through responses to 'bad' death via the 'good' death sequence and beyond, problematic deviations from the socially established norm in death are sought to be re-incorporated into the realm of the normal. In other words, 'bad' death is sought to be made 'good' and hence loses the potential to threaten individual lives and established power relations at large. Practices responding to 'bad' death may, however, also be employed to challenge authority by means of both established and innovative practices that respond to 'bad' death, thereby introducing change into the social organization of the Peki community. Those who died 'bad' deaths are always fluctuating between containment, which serves to maintain the status quo, and unexpected interventions of lingering spirits. The latter

may be self-motivated or reflect the covered intentions of other community members. Equally, excessive behaviour during events in the 'bad' death sequence may challenge social norms and established ideas of what is 'good' and proper. Continuing the discussion of local preferences and moral attributions around synthetic materials and the dead, a look at the 'bad' death sequence reveals analogies between the transformational properties of materials, dead bodies and spirits, as they are either integrated into a body politic owned by the living or appear as agents of change. The latter may happen in accordance with intentions of some community members, or as uncontrollable agential forces that escape efforts to contain them. In the context of Alfred Gell's art nexus model, an understanding of the relations and agential potentials in materials, social entities (institutions, the dead and the living) and their temporalities reveals how a diverse social group engages with political states of control and the uncontrollable via the dead. Returning to Alfred Gell's idea of chrono-geography, which already provided a conceptual frame for the negotiations of rules and movement in the 'good' death sequence, this chapter shows how dynamic space-time maps, which provide access to a controllable and navigable time of the dead, are established in cases where aberrations from a norm occur. Picking up again on what Catherine Malabou (2012a) has called 'the accident' in a neurological as well as a larger social context of plastically changing form, such accidents are here concretely linked to external causes of death. They have not come about as a slow progression of internal and external developments but rather can be attributed to the actions of others, whether those are humans, spirits or other entities. Agency and the identification of it in relation to death is therefore doubly important, before and after the accidental death. Like in the 'good' death sequence, the body of the deceased remains at the centre of events in the 'bad' death sequence, offering itself as indexical location for the intended transformation of the dead into contained entities. And while synthetic materials have played a central role in the 'good' death sequence, the 'bad' death sequence features a combination of naturally occurring or organically deteriorating materials with synthetic materials.

The Body and 'Bad' Death: Reversed Indexicality

Usually, the 'bad' death sequence relies on all the elements that were also part of the 'good' death sequence, adding to it and altering some parts. This was not always the case. Historically, bodies were denied entry to the town of Peki and the houses of the living in cases of bad death (Spieth 1911; Parker 2021). They were also not buried in town but are said to have been left outside of town to be eaten by animals. These days, such bodies can return and be buried in town if properly attended to, although there are cases like suicide or murder in which bodies are laid in state in a public place rather than at a family home. Funerals of those who died bad deaths often attract particularly large crowds, owing to the irregular cause of death, which is

a reason to be openly mournful and angry. Large numbers of mourners may possibly also reflect the deceased's status as an important, well-liked or particularly active community member. Both factors – popularity and outrage – played a role at George's funeral, which took place in February 2017 at Peki Avetile. George Yaw Bobi, a 41-year-old mason from Avetile, died in an accident between a tricycle and a lorry which was used by Chinese construction workers carrying out repairs on the main road. While George's sudden and accidental death at a young age qualified as bad, a fact that was openly communicated, for instance, through his funeral banner, this did not keep people away from the funeral celebration. Quite the opposite, the funeral was attended by many guests and mourners in mournful red dress code.[1] Community members attributed the lively attendance to the fact that George died quite young, knowing people his age who were mobile and active, and that he had been well known and liked in the community. This funeral was not just well attended, it was also videotaped professionally, marking it as an event that should be commemorated. In response to the tragic event of the death, family, colleagues and friends had gathered a crowd of people at the morgue to accompany the body on the way from the morgue to the family house for the lying in state on Friday evening. Everyone was dressed in extravagant costumes, T-shirts commemorating the deceased and mournful black and red colours. People followed the hearse, which had the emblematic look of an ambulance car, from the gates of the hospital to the family house and re-enacted the many different activities that George had attended to during his lifetime. They played soccer on the lawn next to the street – George had been the manager of the local soccer team Bright Star FC. They carried masonry equipment such as metal pans, measuring tapes and spades around, loudly scraping these tools across the asphalt. A tricycle also featured in the parade, driving rapidly, and performing dangerous stunts, which were mirrored by other bicycle and motorbike riders that drove through the crowd, all defying death by showing off their fearlessness in the face of possible accidents. Repeatedly, smaller groups gathered and ran towards other people, creating a moment of confusion and rapid movement. Emotions ran high throughout the parade, while the body was driving alongside the mourners, safely contained in the hearse.

Different levels of commotion can occur around the bodies of people who died 'bad' deaths and this kind of upheaval is not always welcomed by family members. Such was the case during Kekeli's[2] transport from the morgue in July 2018. Kekeli, a young man from Blengo, died in a car crash off the main road. In preparation for the funeral, there were rumours in town that his body had been secretly picked up from the morgue and hidden by his family, to avoid its possible abduction by young people who would be accompanying it from the morgue. Indeed, the family feared that the body would be taken on a wild and uncontrollable tour across town, revisiting the places and houses he used to frequent and possibly pointing out his cause of death, if attributable to ill intentions of community members.

While the words witchcraft or magic were not used by my interlocutors when I spoke to people about causes of 'bad' death, such allegations are common in Ghana and may lead to social exclusion if a person is found to be a witch. In Peki, rather than the ill doings of the living mediated via the dead, it was usually the effects of lingering spirits of the dead that could be attributed to accidents or other kinds of 'bad' deaths, making it highly desirable to deal with those in a way that could prevent future misfortunes. Interlocutors did however point out that these dead may potentially be summoned, by means of pouring libation, and could then be used against someone else in the community. They may even be persuaded to kill someone, the initial intention and hidden cause hereby then lying with the person who summoned the spirit. Additionally, spirits can come to possess living community members too, as I have witnessed during funeral celebrations for people who died 'bad' deaths. Being possessed in those contexts is not unusual as the dead person is 'close' and may want to communicate. However, possessions may also potentially take place at other times, something which is to be avoided. Burying these deceased in the same way as people in the 'good' death sequence, but with additional efforts, might help to appease the dead. But it may not completely eradicate the danger of them being (ab)used for such ill-intended aims. As a result of removing Kekeli's body from the reach of the young mourners, which could also just have been achieved by claiming it was not at the morgue, his family was faced with an angry group of young people at their house, who, singing loudly, asked for the body to be released. The case of an accidental death creates an opportunity and necessity for people to gather and act out, transgressing rules of normal behaviour to respond properly to the kind of death the community member suffered. Considering that the spirit of a person who died a 'bad' death is assumed to be angry and confused, this behaviour partially also enacts the deceased's emotions, possibly helping to prevent that they act on these feelings themselves, which may prevent further harm against the community.

Transgressive behaviour of more acceptable kinds could also be seen during the parade that accompanied the transport of George's body into town. His funeral banner played a prominent role in the parade and was handed around for people to wear like a cape or skin, representing the deceased. The banner is a large-scale obituary image, digitally colour-printed on PVC, a sturdy plastic sheet material. It carries basic information about the deceased, such as one or two photos of them, their name, age and a headline indicating whether the death is a 'good' or a 'bad' one. As a durable, colourfully designed object, which is light and very flexible, the banner has taken on a new purpose in the parade. Initially used to create awareness of the event of a death and to persuade people to attend when displayed in a public space, the banner now serves as a physical representation of the deceased and possibly a representation of the deceased as ancestor. It is better suited for this purpose than George's actual body, which,

at this point, is subject to constraints such as the need to be transported apart from people. Whereas the body is safely contained in the ambulance car, wrapped in a body bag and a mat, the banner can be floated from participant to participant, as if George were part of the crowd. It can be donned as a costume, momentarily turning the wearer into George and it can be touched without any risk or constraints. Later at the house, people frequently stroke the image with their bare hands and clean it with tissues. Returning to David Freedberg's conception of the 'chained' images that come to stand as representatives of people, the banner, in place of George, is momentarily set free as part of the parade (Freedberg 2001, see also Bredenbröker 2024a). While earlier, George's banner had been tied down, attached to poles and walls, it is now released, and George's likeness can be included in the lively events of the night.

At this point, however, it has already become clear that the banner is much more than a two-dimensional image. Rather, due to the synthetic PVC material, the colourful print and the imaginative digital design with photos of the deceased, it serves as an index of the deceased that can be both patient and agent, returning to the terminology of Gell's art nexus model. That way, it helps to create a two-way channel between the mourners and the deceased. The banner can represent the person in a new kind of mobile, yet bodily way which is preferable and much more useful than the corpse at this stage because it can be manipulated more creatively by mourners. All actions and touches which the image undergoes are directed at the deceased, channelling the mourners' acts towards the deceased. George is alive in the form of a banner, dancing and receiving care and, unlike a living human, he can lend his identity to mourners who may wrap themselves in the banner. Like the king's effigies described by Ernst Kantorowicz (2016 [1957]), this parade centres around the living image rather than the dead body, which is kept at bay by the shrill sound of the ambulance car sirens. As I have written elsewhere, banners therefore serve the function of 'image-objects': images whose materiality comes to shape what actions they are capable of and how they can be included in social practices (Bredenbröker 2024). Funeral banners combine the moral attributions and selective material properties that exist in relation to the PVC and other synthetic materials with the image and personhood of a deceased who is depicted by the image. The banner also plays a role beyond the parade. Made for 'good' and 'bad' causes of death alike, the display in town over an extended period of time achieves a proximity of the dead to the living, which makes ancestor status, normally unavailable to those who died bad deaths, more possible by means of taking up space. The use of these banners, which rely on printing technologies only available in bigger cities and usually monopolized by Chinese companies, is another example of how a synthetic material and associated technologies have come to take a central place in the commemoration of the dead.

Cement, as another synthetic material, also featured prominently in George's picking-up parade and came to represent George as a person in

his line of work: masonry. Since many bodies were being picked up from the morgue at the same time as George, cars and mourners blocked the narrow dirt road that connects the hospital to the overland road. People in the parade of mourners repeatedly stopped the hearse to perform acts of mourning, such as mixing concrete, in front of it. The parade progressed very slowly towards town, dutifully entering it only after dusk. In town, the roads were blocked by other ambulance cars and mourners. A brass band joined the march, adding background music to the loud singing that had started. People were dancing and singing in the street, beating their chests while continuing to re-enact masonry work, for example by demonstrating how to make concrete bricks. Meanwhile, the banner was still being handed around, and people were reaching out to polish the face of the deceased on the banner with a cloth or with their bare hands: George could be cared for and attended to, even amid the chaos. After several identity checks to make sure the body really was George's, the car reached the house, where George was propped up in the costume of a public speaker, reminiscent of a preacher. Standing up, he was holding a microphone and looking at an open book. He also wore a 'soccer-scarf' with the logo of a political party, the NPP (New Patriotic Party),[3] who won the presidential election two months before the funeral took place. George died on 15 December 2016, only a few days after the election: the results were announced on 9 December. In tune with this decorative political statement, the room's wall were covered in red, white and blue satin, the NPP's colours. Even in death, George represented specific values and performed important functions in social life: political participation, education and good faith. His professional work as a mason and his voluntary involvement in soccer were taken over for him by the mourners and performed throughout the festivities. The 'bad' cause of his death did not seem to diminish these positive factors, nor did it make it problematic to associate George with a political party or other social institutions. Rather, despite the 'bad' cause of death, all efforts were made to present George as a good community member and person, worthy of transforming his 'bad' death into a 'good' one.

Over the course of the night, people visited George's body, spoke to him and wept. Outside, a traditional drumming group joined the brass band. After a while, George was changed into a black-tie suit with several gold chains and laid into his coffin. The stream of visitors continued. In the morning, people began to add their 'hankies' – white cloth tissues that are often waved in church services as a sign of participation – to the coffin, sliding them under George's pillow as they said their goodbyes, stroking his chest and the surface of his clothes one last time. Then, the body was taken to another family house where a lengthy service with several preachers, dedications from his children and a reading of his biography took place. The biography went through George's history of formal education and professional training, listing every degree, school and work that made him who he was at the time of his death, according to his eulogist. George was a

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 Mourners re-enact activities such as soccer and masonry while picking up the body of George. A mourner riding on a bicycle wears the funeral banner as a cape. © Isabel Bredenbröker

respected community member, hardworking, following a positively productive profession – building. The funeral ended with a last opportunity to visit George's body. At this stage, the coffin had been closed but the upper half of the lid was left open, the face of the deceased now removed from mourners touches by a transparent plastic sheet inserted into the coffin. At the end of the service, guests paraded around the coffin, paying their last respects. George was buried in Avetile cemetery in a cemented grave. All these events were recorded and published for relatives in the video documentary of the funeral produced by a local photographer, Prince. When I re-visited the grave in April 2017, I found a large, shiny black tile, supported by a raw concrete slate, as temporary headstone. The plaque was engraved with a flower and a cross and featured a colour photograph of George, while also listing his dates of birth and death and his age. The grave's cement coating had been covered with soil. Next to the high-end temporary headstone lay a grave wreath made of gift ribbon and plastic foil, which had begun to tear and had collected dust. The arrangement was topped off by a spirit-level, which was missing the liquid-and-glass core that renders it a fully functioning tool.

As is common in Peki, the dead are given objects that are broken. That way, no living person will be tempted to steal them, while for the dead, the functionality and meaning of the object remains the same. Interlocutors told me that 'they do not see it'. Yet, returning to Krzysztof Pomian's theory of hiding and displaying grave goods, the dead can be said to see the object and have a use for it in a different realm than that of those who are alive (2006). Intentionally breaking things or making objects that remain unfinished is an essential part of the gift economy for the dead and a practice that has occurred throughout time and space in different cultural settings, as Pomian notes. Changing things from having practical functions to being mere representations of these functions does not just create broken tools, it creates tools that serve the dead and may be owned by them, while remaining materially present in the world of the living as 'go-betweens'. The living are protected by these objects since they should pacify, not incite anger or malevolent activities from the side of the dead, possibly leading to accidents and other sorts of unintended interventions from the beyond. At the moment of my visit, the grave was still under construction – likely to become developed with steps and a fixed headstone, just like the graves that surround the plot. Yet, for the moment, the temporary decoration already showed a high degree of relative's engagement in the construction process. The headstone-tile could not have been produced in Peki due to lack of engraving and printing facilities nearby, meaning that this elaborate decoration took an extra effort to produce and was more costly, while providing maximum material durability in the process of transforming the grave. The grave was in the best possible shape, even early in the construction process, and a large group of mourners had confirmed George's value as an active community member. Yet, one major problem remained: his 'bad' cause of death meant

that George's spirit could, despite all the effort, be confused, angry or lost, which might cause problems for the living. Therefore, additional measures had to be taken to fully contain his spiritual elements, alongside his well-contained body. As a point of comparison, Kekeli, the other accident victim, was buried in a 'poor' grave at the Peki Blengo public cemetery. His body was less well-contained, despite equally large crowds with Kekeli T-shirts who had turned his funeral into a large and successful event. Like for George, an additional picking-up and containment ceremony also had to take place for Kekeli's spiritual elements. Both of their spirits were collected from the sites of their deaths and added to their graves, with the intention of pacifying and settling them. Compared to the descriptions Spieth gives on beliefs and activities related to 'bad' death in the past (1911: 233–40),[4] the ways in which Kekeli and George were buried are quite reminiscent of practices he describes. Yet, their bodies are included in regular cemeteries, not left outside town. The combination of practices from the 'good' death sequence with additional measures from the 'bad' death sequence aims at equalizing the accident and at establishing those dead in the same way as other deceased who died 'good' deaths. Yet, among community members certain apprehensions will remain that these dead are never really at rest. So, while efforts to normalize 'bad' death are being made and in many ways succeed – by drawing huge crowds and attracting attention – the subversive power of those dead cannot be fully neutralized. In Gellian terminology, one could here speak of a kind of reversed indexicality, meaning that while the actions and intentions of the living are set on turning 'bad' death into 'good' death, also materially, there may be a potentially different cause of death, such as murder by a lost spirit which may or may not be initiated by a living community member. This and the intentions behind it continue to have a lasting effect on the person who died, meaning that these 'hidden' processes push back against efforts to control and neutralize those dead. Hence, there are several processes of imprinting intentions and properties onto the dead as indices at play here. Ultimately, these powers remain in an unresolved tension. However, there are further efforts that the living can undertake to minimize the risk that the spirits of those who died 'bad' deaths are potentially going to cause harm. An important part of that is the collection of spirits from accident sites.

Picking up a Spirit and Depositing It: *Luʊɔkɔkɔ*

A week after George's burial in February 2017, a delegation of traditional soldiers (the *asafo*), family members and elders boarded the back of a truck to conduct a *luʊɔkɔkɔ* for his spirit – that is, collecting his lost spiritual element[5] from the site of his deadly accident (*luʊɔ* = high, *kɔkɔ* = soul). The *asafo* are dignitaries and, as such, lend the occasion increased relevance. If called in because of their roles as the traditional royal army, they come dressed in uniform: impressive long shirts (*batakari*) and gowns, weapons

and headbands.[6] The car left Avetile at dawn around 5.30 am and headed down the overland road towards the site where the accident had happened. I was in the car with an all-male group of *asafo*. No other non-male persons were present, although I had been told that all community members may attend if they were interested. The picking-up of George's spirit was clearly a much more private affair than his funeral celebration and burial.

By contrast, the collection of Kekeli's spirit in July 2018 – very close to the spot where George had died, on the same road – drew a much larger group of people, including women in leading roles. In this case, Kekeli's fiancée played an active role in carrying out the ritual and a traditional female priest performed the collection of the spirit as the religious authority. For Kekeli, many people had joined the group of *asafo* and a large group sang and drummed while the priest collected the spirit from the ground. First, she poured libations of 'Castle Bridge' gin for the ancestors. Then, having determined the right spot, she marked it with white 'lavender' powder, a branded body-powder that has become a staple in ritual ceremonies in Ghana, just like Florida Water perfume. Finally, she collected some soil with her bare hands and covered the place where it was taken from with leaves and a small piece of white fabric. The soil is not just representative of the spirit – at the moment of collection it temporarily becomes the spirit, no longer as weaker placeholder but as a substance with equal properties and value. Thinking with the art nexus model, the soil is, at the same time, agent and patient, being transported and looked after by the living while imbued with exceptional person-like qualities. Both elements are then sought to be indexically transferred onto the deceased, which may or may not happen according to the intentions of the living. Unlike the spiritual elements of the deceased that previously may have been invisible or immaterial, this 'soil-spirit' consists of concrete matter that can be handled. Soil, as organic matter, is deeply connected to the land the community lives on. Hence, there is a contrast here with the local preference for using synthetic, durable or new things in relation to death, which help in arresting time and cancelling personal connections. The spirit needs to have an ephemeral and locally connected material quality. Other than the body, it is not sought to be contained permanently in a fixed location. After its deposition, it will blend into the environment and disappear again, becoming part of the soil in or on top of the grave and finding its place in another temporal and spatial sphere while disappearing. The identification of soil as a material manifestation of the spirit is merely a temporal instance in which the spirit becomes something that can be handled, carried and deposited: then it returns to its previous and original immaterial state. The deposition of the spirit, like of other gifts, is also a gesture towards the deceased, who might come looking for this lost part of his spirit if it were not returned to him. Hence the danger associated with accident sites. In terms of serving as a material anchor on a time-map for the deceased, the soil-spirit does not operate at the level of absolute control and containment but stands for a temporality

which is and should be fleeting. It can be handled and contained for a short while by the living, but it must ultimately be reunited with the body and spirit to become indistinguishable from them. Kekeli's soil-spirit was not brought into contact with any of the synthetic or particularly eye-catching materials that are otherwise employed in dressing the deceased or building the grave. Instead, it was wrapped into a simple piece of new white cotton cloth. A woman from the group carried the cloth on her back like a baby. Parts of the sheet were ripped into strips and all members of the party were handed a white strip to wrap around their wrists until their arrival at the family house, thereby assisting in transporting the fragmented spirit. Then the group marched back into town, on foot, singing as they went. The event had a feeling of communality and support, of being in touch with Kekeli's spirit and of contributing to helping it find the right way.

For George, a small group of *asafo* performed the pouring of libation at the roadside and played a drum. The mood was less social, more solemn, even militant. Two men collected some soil, scraping it from the ground with their cutlasses, and tied it up in a white sheet, also carrying it like a baby and handing out strips of fabric. We drove back into town and the truck made its way uphill on an eroded dirt road to the family house of George's relatives. A banana leaf had already been placed outside the house to receive the soil-spirit. All the wristbands were untied and dropped onto it. The family awaited the party of spirit-bearers in a circle of chairs behind the house. Everyone drank from a bottle of spirits and a mixture of flour and water, which was handed around in a calabash. As with the alcohol, a sip of the water-flour mix was poured onto the ground for the ancestors. Comparatively, at Kekeli's family house the spirit was temporarily placed in a cardboard banana box. Now, mourners and family members sat and waited, some passing the time drinking and smoking – there was nothing else to do. Several hours later, in the afternoon, the priest returned to bury the spirit in Kekeli's grave at the Blengo cemetery. Accompanied by a small group of relatives who were singing and who assisted by digging a small hole on top of the grave, she gently placed the spirit in the earth, rocking it in her arms like a baby as she lowered the bundle of white fabric down. Now, the spirit has been returned to the body – so the hope. However, as a participant told me while we were walking back to the house, nothing good may ever be expected of those who have died a 'bad' death, even if everything had been done to satisfy them in their anger and confusion. Kekeli and George's spirits may still pose a threat to the living, for example, being called upon by someone who wants to use this anger to harm another person. The place where elements of such spirits are thought to reside, from then on, is also an actual place not too far from the houses of the living. The spirits of those who have died a bad death live at the *agbadɔme* sites – luggage cemeteries, where final gifts for restless spirits are placed in order to tie them to these places.

Luggage for Ghosts and Rubbish for Evil Spirits: *Agbadɔme* and *Bɔlla* Places

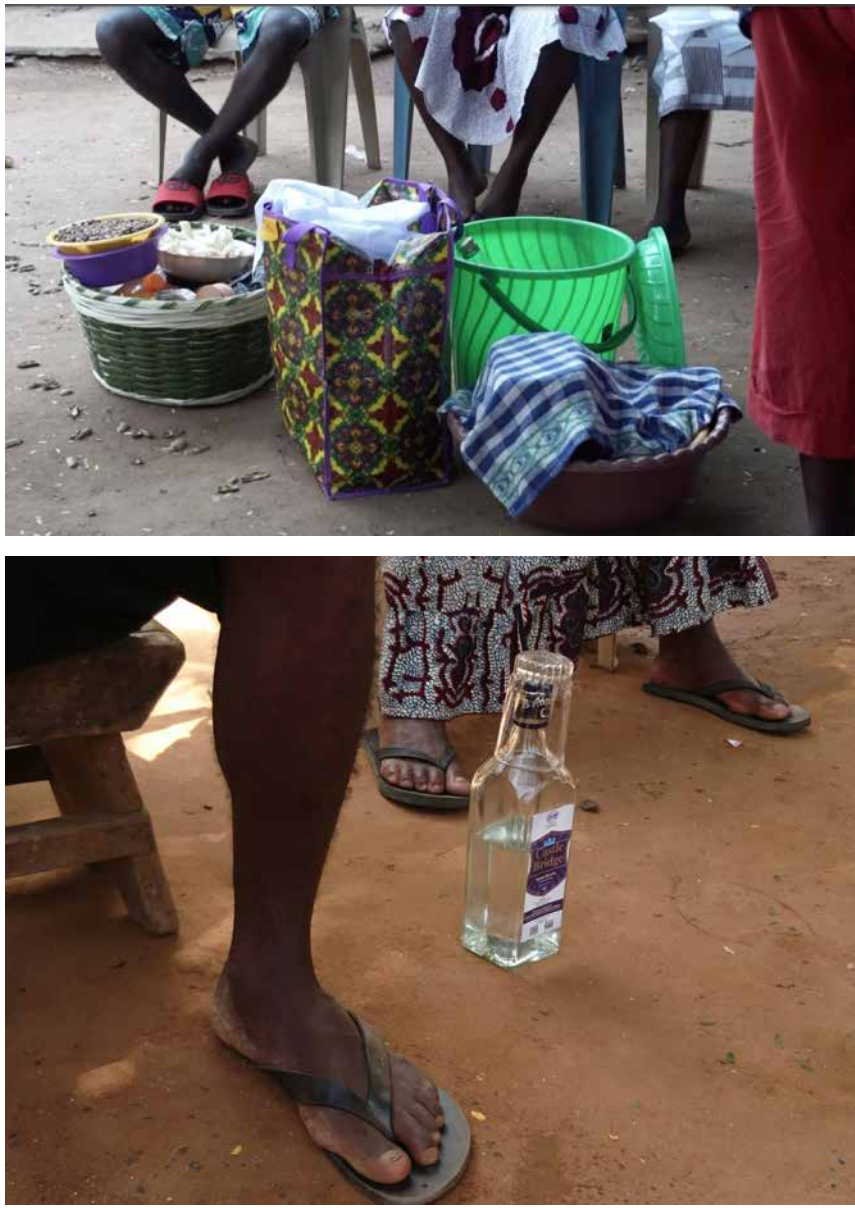
Adjoining Avetile cemetery, a portion of forest has been designated for depositing 'luggage' – gifts and travel equipment for the spirits of those who have died bad deaths. A narrow trail between an unmarked grave field and the forest next to it marks the boundary of *agbadɔme*, the luggage place or the luggage cemetery. In the evening of the same day on which George's spirit was collected, luggage was packed and left at the Avetile *agbadɔme* site. I was not present during the deposition, but when I visited the luggage place a few days later, I found parts of the white sheet, snippets of the wristbands and a few objects such as a wooden folding chair, a table, a basket containing kitchenware and a packed bag near the boundary of *agbadɔme*. They had been placed here to complete the process of packing and depositing the luggage for George's spirit. The assemblage encompassed things that may satisfy needs of the spirit that resemble those of the living, namely to eat, to wash, to get dressed and to sit. In addition, they also included materials that represented part of George's spirit. As such, the luggage is not just 'stuff' but a combination of the person's spiritual aspects and the things they need to exist, to be a person, even if not in a bodily manifest state. In August 2018, I was invited to be part of Kekeli's luggage preparation and deposition ceremony, a chance to follow the process in person rather than just re-visiting the deposited items. After Kekeli's spirit had been placed in his grave in the afternoon, the luggage was prepared at the house by the traditional priest who remained in charge of the ceremony.

The priest had packed up some of Kekeli's old clothes, cooking utensils and washing items in buckets and zipped plastic bags. At dusk, people at the house were exhausted from a day of waiting around, having passed the time socializing and singing. Finally they gathered, instructed by the priest, and several kinds of food were passed around for everyone to taste: dried maize, peanuts, bits of rice and *kenkey* dough. These foods were going to be part of the luggage. The communal tasting helps to make sure that whatever is being offered to Kekeli's spirit is safe for consumption. However, these food items do not make up a full meal. Rather, they are individual elements of what a living person might want to combine into a dish. Like all things offered to the dead, they are fragmental, rather than complete.

After the sun had set, the group lined up and walked – one person following in the footsteps of another – towards the Wudome *agbadɔme* site. The pieces of luggage were carried on people's heads. At the site, the priest repeatedly 'knocked', asking for a permission to enter and calling out to the spirits while pouring libation. Only after our coming had been properly announced could we proceed into the thicket and deposit the luggage. Ultimately, Kekeli's spirit and his body remain split in a way that has more effect than in cases of 'good' death burials. Even though all efforts have been made to contain and own the deceased, the spirit is recognized as an

Figure 5.3 The soil-spirit of Kekeli is placed in his grave by a traditional priest and female family members in 2018. © Isabel Bredenbröker

entity that has an afterlife of its own and that demands different things and a different place while it is possibly less likely to remain there. On the time-map that connects the space and time of the living and the dead, the spaces and temporalities of 'good' and 'bad' death show up as different layers of time, the latter being less reliable. Gifts, the soil-spirit and the *agbadɔme* site



Figures 5.4 and 5.5 Food is packed in plastic containers and a bottle of 'Castle Bridge' gin is placed on the floor during the tasting and packing of gifts for Kekeli that are sent to *agbadɔme*. © Isabel Bredenbröker

represent this time on a material and spatial scale in the 'real' world. Instead of cement and built structures, *agbadɔme* offers a less stable material site for the spirits of the dead, possibly reflecting their mobile nature. Instead of being made of concrete, the boundaries of *agbadɔme* consist of insider knowledge – only community members will know and be able to respect them. They rely on continued use of the sites and a transmission of awareness among community members. For now, it seems, Kekeli's spirit may remain here, hopefully satisfied with the offerings it has received. However, the boundary of this *agbadɔme* site is not as strong as the knocking and the libations may make it seem. *Agbadɔme* sites in Peki have transformed as the town and its funerary practices have developed. While they have changed quite drastically over time, the spirits remain in these places, even if luggage is no longer present or the status of the location changes, thus leaving spirits in limbo between worlds, with no material anchors to hold on to. To understand these transformations, we therefore need to grasp the constraints that an *agbadɔme* site imposes on the living and the dead. What were the purposes of these places, and what are they today? How are and were they allowed to be transformed, internally and with regards to their boundaries?

Agbadɔme was translated to me as 'centre of the clay bowl', a translation which is matched by an Ewe dictionary, although Ewe words may have several meanings, especially when combined (*agba* = bowl, but also meaning anything horizontal, a bier, honey comb or load; *dome* = middle, but also inheritance, *agbadɔ*) (Mawupenya Dzobo 2017). All over Ghana, clay mortars, consisting of big flat bowls and pestles, are staple cooking utensils in every household. A mortar is used to grind soft ingredients such as tomatoes, spinach, chili or ginger for local food supplements and dishes. Its centre is the deepest and smoothest point of the bowl, and ingredients are ground on the creased sides. I could not obtain an authoritative explanation of why the place carries this name. It is, however, notable that the centre of such clay bowls is a flat surface where ingredients that are supposed to be ground up are first beaten and crushed with the pestle. This is the place where the mixing and grinding of things begins, turning distinct ingredients into a paste or powder within which they are blended into a new unit. Different to the process of synthesizing, literally the homogenization of components, this kind of blending creates a unit in which individual ingredients still retain a degree of individual scent, taste and form. The spirits of those who have died badly may rest at *agbadɔme*, hoping that they will be amalgamated into the more anonymous body politic which already includes those who have died regular deaths. Since the spirits of those who have died bad deaths are separated from their bodies – although the hope is that both will eventually take the same route towards another world – a degree of individuality is retained at this point. In stories about *agbadɔme* places, I was often told that the spirits of the dead are thought to live here like regular people: making fire, cooking, looking after babies and family members, eating and bathing. The luggage objects that are left here for

them make this kind of life possible. Now the crushing needs to happen: the individual spirits need to dissolve.

Following Robert Hertz's model of secondary burial, the final celebration is postponed indefinitely for those who have died 'bad' deaths, even though the dead body has been buried. In the process of stripping the dead of their connections to the living and their subsequent re-appropriation as part of a manipulable body politic, those who died 'bad' deaths are not easily de-personalized. The split between the body and the spiritual elements makes it impossible to contain all in one place. Hence, individuality and memories of life stick to the spirit, making it hard to own or contain. Even following protocol and letting George's body travel through the same stages as Alfred Yao's is an insufficient means of achieving the same form of containment that the 'good' death sequence hopes to produce. *Agbadɔme* sites and the gifts that are offered are therefore important material anchors for containing spirits within the boundaries of these places. As a non-local, one may see nothing but forest or thicket at an *agbadɔme* site in Peki. Then, at second glance, unevenly distributed piles of dumped goods or rubbish stand out between the trees. Some things at the Avetile *agbadɔme* site have been grouped together close to the trail and are easier to make out, while others are further away. Most piles include either a wheeled suitcase or a filled zippable bag, as well as items like a plastic chair, a folded up wooden table, clay vases and containers of different sizes and shapes, plastic buckets, plastic cups and plates, woven baskets in an unfinished state, plastic bottles, yellow 'Kuffour gallon'[7] water containers and white pieces of cloth. Over a time of sitting in the tropical heat of the forest, clay pots grow moss, containers fill with dark water – an unwelcome breeding ground for mosquitoes – bags shrink and crumple, suitcases lie stretched out like dead cattle, objects scatter across the floor and the lightweight baskets start to decompose. As in previously described examples, these things gifted to the dead combine synthetic or durable materials and objects – such as plastic furniture, plastic household items, plastic bags or suitcases – with more ephemeral, handmade objects from organic materials, such as woven baskets and pottery. It is the combination of these two categories of things, with their different temporal implications and connections to the living, which satisfies the needs of the lost spirits. In terms of levels on a time-map, they make the controllable time of 'good' death and the more ephemeral and less containable time of 'bad' death available to spirits, with the possibility of switching over to the first, more desirable level.

Baskets are custom-made for their use as spirit luggage, exemplifying what Pomian defines as 'replacement models' (2006). If intended for that purpose, the maker will weave them loosely so that they are not fit to be used for carrying or storing things. In short, these baskets are unfinished and are of no interest to the living. This reduces the risk of them being stolen, and, like the broken spirit level on George's grave, they are now things that the dead can use in their world, while still having a material presence in the

real world. The dead, as I am told on different occasions, are not offended if they receive broken gifts. In fact, one may just tell them they function perfectly well, or remain silent about the actual state of gifted objects. In contrast to the washing at the morgue, however, no 'new' things are supposed to be included in the luggage. They previously served to remove personal attachments to the deceased and untie the social connections that the body still represents as an index of relations with the living. At this stage, new things are no longer useful. Just like functioning gift objects, they may attract thieves. Spirits of those who have died bad deaths have stubbornly retained elements of their individual lives; now it is too late to undo them.

Gifts presented as luggage consist of everyday objects, things previously owned by the dead, bits of food that do not make up a whole meal and dysfunctional things representing activities they pursued throughout their lives. As such, the composition of luggage items reflects the mix of traditional, handmade things and prefabricated commodities – like suitcases, zippable bags and plastic furniture – that shape the everyday lives of people in Peki. With the introduction of synthetic materials that are not prone to decompose and regenerate as organic materials would, luggage items now remain visible for much longer than may previously have been the case. Reflecting the presence of these things and materials in the everyday lives of people, such objects also make the presence of spirits more materially and temporally durable. The durability of synthetic materials as a tendency which is highlighted in relation to 'good' death (see Bredenbröker 2024b), does now, however become a problem. As much as 'bad' death is sought to be turned into 'good' death through sequential activities, there is always a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability that remains. Equally, things and materials that last may become associated with the uncontrolled agency of the dead, hence probably not working towards the intentions of the living. Whereas formerly baskets and pottery may have blended into the environment at some point, this process is now slowed down, meaning that the occupation of the place by spirits is becoming more present and longer-lived. Spirits do not blend in as easily anymore but rather stick around like plastic objects. This creates a problem for the living: the *agbadɔme* sites no longer serve the purpose of gradually dissolving spirits. One attempt to change this has been made by exploiting on the similarity between luggage objects and rubbish. Due to their exposure to the elements and their initial states as either broken or unfinished things, luggage items may look as if they have simply been discarded and dumped. This quality is temporally extended into a durational present by the fact that some of these gifts do not rot. This similarity to dysfunctional things or rubbish opens a space for renewed interpretation of the site as closed-off space with specific boundaries. On any visit to an *agbadɔme* site, whether accompanied or on my own, I obeyed the advice I had been given – not to enter into *agbadɔme*, but to stay on the outside unless told to do otherwise. Since spirits of the deceased to whom the luggage objects belong are thought to inhabit the space, entering their

Figure 5.6 Gifts for spirits at an *agbadɔme* site in Peki, 2017. © André Luiz Ruio Ferreira Burmann

territory without the appropriate precautions may lead to accidents or death on the part of the trespasser as well as possibly also extending to their social relations and families of people who died 'bad' deaths. Before entering an *agbadɔme* site, the pouring of a libation to the ancestors and spirits is essential, and the disturbance must be announced. Furthermore, those entering must have a good reason to do so, which usually is the deposition of luggage. Any other visits to these sites may only serve 'bad' intentions, such as asking the spirits for curses and inciting them to commit murder.

Older people in town, in particular, know many stories of spirits who have entered the places of the living and appeared to them. Elisabeth,[8] an elder from Wudome, who has seen the town pass through stages of modernization and change, told me of more recent incidents in which spirits have shown themselves, making their displeasure with an aspect of their funeral or death known. In one case, this was the spirit of a man who had been buried as a Christian though not subscribing to the Christian faith – meaning, his preferences had been ignored, which was a cause for anger. He showed himself to his brother 'face to face', asking for specific things that he had expected to receive as luggage. In another case, a man who was paid to cut a path into the thicket of the Wudome *agbadɔme* site so that luggage could be deposited there skipped the knocking and pouring of libations. Arriving unannounced, he collided with the spirit of a woman who was preparing *banku* dough (fermented maize dumplings) in a big pot over a fire. Without noticing, he knocked over the pot and burned the woman's spirit baby with the hot food. Shortly thereafter, the man died of a similar incident. Elisabeth said that the spirits themselves have no ill intentions towards the living. Still, as becomes obvious when listening to these

stories, interaction between spirits and the living may be dangerous. In the event described above, supposedly neither the person nor the spirit involved meant any harm. However, since the spirit's baby got hurt, revenge was imminent, challenging the spirit to react to what had happened. Therefore, demarcating the boundaries of the luggage sites serves to protect the living and the spirits. Like discussed previously in relation to ghost stories and the materiality of graves, physical demarcations and the limitations on movement between places serve to protect both worlds equally.

Even though *agbadɔme* places are obviously associated with danger, they are in different states of transition, their boundaries becoming less and less defined. These developments are particularly interesting since they show a blurring of categories, changing the constraints that *agbadɔme* sites impose on spirits, possibly to the advantage of the living, who may then re-use the land, while also exposing people to the risk of being hurt by spirits who are no longer properly contained.[9] The Avetile *agbadɔme* site appeared to have more clearly demarcated boundaries than the Wudome *agbadɔme* site. In Wudome, the *agbadɔme* site was in the process of becoming merged with a *bɔlla* site (dumping ground; *bɔlla* = rubbish). With the advent of synthetic materials – things that do not fully decompose or disappear when burned or deposited – the management of rubbish in town started to change. While formerly, so Elisabeth tells me, communal *bɔlla* sites were cleaned during community labour at least once a week, they are now no longer properly cared for and continue to accumulate rubbish. Previously, *bɔlla* was burned and the ground was subsequently swiped with palm leaves and twig brooms, to a degree where 'one could lay down there and rest after work without getting dirty'. Today, the state actors who might take responsibility for managing refuse, namely the contractor Zoomlion and the Environmental Health Office, do not have much presence in Peki's recycling process. Community members are, she says, no longer dedicated to participating in communal labour, which includes cleaning up *bɔlla* dumps. Elisabeth, in agreement with other interlocutors and friends of mine, recalls the practice of taking people who have had bad dreams or who feel affected by evil spirits to *bɔlla* sites. Even formerly, so Elisabeth told me, these sites used to be attributed with a cleaning function. *Bɔlla*, things that are discarded, attract malevolent spirits, who gather here to feast on them. As such, a *bɔlla* site is also a good place to get rid of spiritually 'bad' things. These days, just like in the past, people go and 'speak to the *bɔlla*' after having a bad dream or seeing other signs of potential misfortunes, with the hope that whatever negative energy touched them will remain there. In Wudome, the *bɔlla* site was beginning to spread into the space of the *agbadɔme* site, mixing two spiritual and material worlds, one of which is supposed to be cared for by the living, while the other is not supposed to be entered or touched. According to Elisabeth, the dead will not mind the presence of rubbish in their space, as it is a disorderly place anyway. What happens through this physical mixing of rubbish with luggage gifts, though, is that the spiritual

functions of these two places and their material furnishings collide with one another, with the effect that the availability of the *bɔlla* site to the living is slowly beginning to apply to the *agbadɔme* site as well. With each piece of *bɔlla* crossing the line between the two worlds, the living gain more rights to re-appropriate the *agbadɔme* place (see Bredenbröker 2024b). The only visible distinction between the two sites in Wudome is a thin red thread that dangles in mid-air, tied around a line of trees. Beneath this almost invisible thread, rubbish has rolled downhill, into the *agbadɔme* area.

So, who is attempting to make use of this reconstruction of boundaries, and for what purposes? I heard rumours that elders of the Wudome community were planning to re-use the land of this *agbadɔme* site to build a new palace for the town's chief. This would mean that land which had previously been blocked as unusable for the living could become a local centre of power for traditional governance authorities. A rubbish tip can simply be 'cleaned up' and repurposed, while a site where spirits reside cannot. Instead of being part of a different ritual economic sphere (Gregory 1980) or a devoted collection (Pomian 2006), the land as *bɔlla* place rather than *agbadɔme* site is losing its association with the dead by re-introducing it into a context of exchange and use for the living. The blending of the rubbish with the luggage cemetery may be a helpful process in making this happen, cleverly circumnavigating the problem that individual spirits in the *agbadɔme* sites are refusing to blend into the larger body politic. And even though traditional authorities are closer to acknowledging and interacting with lost spirits than decidedly Christian institutions are, this change of value seems to come in handy here. For better or worse, the blending function is now outsourced to the *bɔlla* and any kind of spiritual powers it has. As Michael Thompson notes, there exists a close association between rubbish and power (1979). Controlling the distinction between the two by means of attributing durability or transience means controlling larger social distinctions and regulations, ideally making one's own things last and others' fade away. After all, following Mary Douglas's iconic definition of dirt, the distinction between 'matter out of place' and matter that is in the right place is culturally and socially produced (2003).

In accordance with the spiritual properties of *bɔlla* sites, these are now also becoming available as places where people can safely deposit luggage for lost spirits. *Agbadɔme* luggage is supposed to be packed and deposited by traditional priests, who may charge a fee, which varies but might consist of animal sacrifices, alcoholic drinks and money. Undertakers, whose services are not technically consigned to a religion but generally attributed to Christian funerals, 'only' charge money for their work, which usually lowers costs and lessens spiritual risks in comparison to employing traditional priests and practitioners. Undertakers also avoid entering the *agbadɔme* sites at all. An undertaker[10] whom I accompanied many times during her work, is a member of a local Pentecostal church which represents a different regime of engaging with the dead as opposed to the E.P.

Figure 5.7 A rubbish dump is pictured where rubbish is spilling over into the territory of an adjacent *agbadɔme* site in Peki in 2017. A thread with a red piece of cloth dangling in mid-air demarcates the border of the dump. © Isabel Bredenbröker

Church or fully 'traditional' practitioners. She told me that she offers to include small luggage items in the coffin according to the wishes of family members, hiding them between the deceased's legs.[11] If families need to gift bigger objects, they either need to collect these things themselves and

deposit them at the *bɔlla* or *agbɔdome* site, or they need to find someone to do this for them. The man whom Elisabeth mentioned in her story, who entered *agbadɔme* unannounced, was such a contractor figure. He charged for depositing gifts there, though lacking traditional religious authority. As a Christian, the undertaker tells me, she herself refrains from so-called 'traditional' practices, including the pouring of libations or the interaction with lost spirits. Yet, no Christian community member would ever declare that these spirits do not exist. Rather, they co-exist and one may choose to stay away from them – unless it becomes unavoidable to engage with them, which then still calls for 'traditional' practices. The reduced stakes and costs of using service providers who are not religious experts and charge less might make the decision to include things in the coffin or simply dump them at a *bɔlla* site an attractive alternative solution for families who have lost someone to a 'bad' death. However, as I heard from a female member of George's family, things are not always as simple as they seem, and economic calculations made to save resources and simplify the process for the living may backfire. George's death had already been the second case of a 'bad' death in the family, the first one having been my interlocutor's own son. For her son's funeral, the picking-up of the spirit and deposition of luggage was reduced to placing the soil-spirit directly in the coffin. Now, a second bad death had occurred in the family, raising the possibility that the two were linked. To be on the safe side, the family therefore decided to return to the extended protocol for these rituals, properly depositing the luggage at the *agbadɔme* site rather than cutting the procedure short. This example shows that the erosion of *agbadɔme* boundaries does not always pay off for the living. The family members of a person who has died a bad death may be at increased risk if these boundaries become porous or are respected less. While a communal pile of rubbish does the job of de-stabilizing these borders, possibly to the benefit of the local authorities or at least fuelling rumours about them, this does not present a solution to the problem that spirits 'remain', as Elisabeth confirmed, 'in the spot where they were sent to live'. Building a palace on a previous *agbadɔme* site or even a *bɔlla* site might therefore be considered quite a daring calculation. In the sense that it may put community members at risk, it may even be read as a ruthless move. After all, arguments over land that are fought with ghosts cannot be negotiated in the same way as land disputes among the living. *Agbadɔme* sites may present themselves as apparent vacuums to the living, places that must remain untouched and untrodden, apart from the addition of luggage items that may remain here, changing the otherwise wild landscape. However, these sites do not represent a power vacuum – they are occupied by the powerful force of unruly spirits of the dead that have retained fragments of their individuality and are kept at bay by material anchors: a sense of place and luggage items. If attempts to re-appropriate *agbadɔme* places are made, either by an impersonal flow of communal rubbish, or by reclaiming the site to construct a palace, these are ultimately meant to change the

existing sequence for containing the spirits of 'bad' death victims, aiming to own these uncontainable dead or to expel them from the community.

Institutions with local governance responsibilities may be those that profit from the result and may in fact succeed in owning these spirits. Due to an apparent lack of the state's presence and of communal engagement, both of which fail in cleaning the *bɔlla* sites, there is an actual power vacuum in the world of the living that may be capitalized in relation to refuse management, and recycling (Bredenbröker 2024b). Stories about the return of spirits or the attribution of bad events in the community to the work of spirits remain powerful tools for challenging such power grabs. They serve to remind the living of the potential risks involved in handling the affairs of the dead. Without these spirits and without *agbadɔme* sites, the dead may in fact become all too well controlled by institutions in the form of local representatives of traditional and national governance, leaving no room for movement or for breaking out of these orders. After all, while it may be in the interests of the living to contain the dead, spirits who wander, who may suddenly appear or threaten, are potentially helpful partners for challenging the orders in which the living must exist. They may also remind them that certain morals, rules or processes should not be changed for the profit of some. *Agbadɔme* sites, in their intact state, achieve a fine balance of containing the uncontainable and possibly grinding it up into a 'paste', while offering an outlet for uncontrolled movement. They challenge orders which become too good at containing and owning the dead and are possible allies in resisting such orders, similar to Gillian Feeley-Harnik's interpretation of Malagasy work for the dead (1991). The erosion of *agbadɔme* places gives way to appropriating the dead's uncontainable powers and places. At the same time, changes around these places might be met with more uncontrolled movement as spirits react to the disappearance of what had previously been theirs.

Deaths by Suicide and Murder

Deaths by suicide or murder present special cases in the category of 'bad' death. During the time I spent in Peki, I witnessed how the community dealt with these 'unordinary' kinds of death. I found that those who died by murder and suicide received attention and were accorded ceremonial events despite attempts to punish the deceased for their involvement in the killing. Usually, those dead could nevertheless not hope for any material remainders such as a marked grave. In the case of a murderer, the self-administered justice from the community and the treatment of the murderer's body represented a maximum of hostility. In 2018, Kofi,[12] a *trotro* minibus driver, was buried after committing suicide by hanging. While I did not learn much about the other circumstances surrounding this death, nor about possible penalty payments that the family may or may not have had to pay (as Spieth recounts for Ewe communities a century ago), I was invited to attend the

parade following his coffin. Kofi was not granted any of the events that form part of the regular 'good' or 'bad' death sequences. Instead, his body was transported through Peki-Dzake during the day, in a coffin in the back of a minibus. Since Kofi was not allowed to have a lying in state or service, the only activity that remained for people to re-imbue him with a degree of morality was to accompany his coffin on the way to a grave on the outskirts of the Dzake cemetery. When I arrived, I met a parade of people who had gathered around the car, some of them representing the sports club of which Kofi had been an active member. Everyone was singing and dancing in the street around the car. Again, like during George's pick-up from the morgue, a car and a motorbike were driving around and performing stunts. I was invited to join a group of women who were dancing in front of the minibus. Even though some people were repeatedly overcome by Kofi's spirit, rolling on the floor and shouting, the occasion superficially seemed to be a happy one – it was essentially a street party during the day. In this context, otherwise possibly frivolous allusions to body parts and sexuality were accepted and seen as jokes among dancers.[13] The parade progressed very slowly and finally stopped after a participant made it known that Kofi's spirit had announced he was not ready to be taken to the grave yet. Therefore, the party could continue. As far as I was aware, no further ceremonies were performed for Kofi – all that remained was a moment of gathering and making the best of this occasion.

In 2017, rumours circulated through town: a person had murdered another person in their house, cutting their body open with a knife, after which they had fled into the bush. The murderer was described as a male Rastafarian, a minority group of people who are already of dubious moral status in the eyes of many Peki community members. This led to accusations towards those who were perceived as Rastafarians, putting them in danger of being punished for a crime they had not committed. Presenting another perspective, I was told that the person who had committed the murder was mentally ill and had developed Rasta hair simply because he was no longer able to look after his body. What happened next, according to different interlocutor's accounts, was a case of vigilantism. Two days after the killing, the murderer was caught by police in the nearby Eastern region community of Anum. Since police there did not have a car, they took a taxi to return the murderer to Peki. Having announced their coming, they were met by a mob of people at the entrance to town who demanded the murderer's release, threatening to trash the taxi. Hoping to save his car, the driver ordered everyone to get out. I was told that the group who identify as *asafo* (but may have been a larger group of all kinds of people who are not technically members of the traditional army) continued by tying the murderer to a branch, dragging him across the asphalt, kicking and beating him, until he was finally drenched in gasoline and set on fire. The person died at the scene and was eventually delivered to the morgue. These events were followed by investigations by state representatives and the inter-regional police. While

initially, I was told the story by community members in a way that framed the events as morally correct, the onset of external investigations and the condemnation of these events by E.P. Church representatives gave rise to the realization within the community that this might not have been a morally 'good' deed after all. Before this change of heart, I was shown videos of the killing and photographs of the murder victim that had been taken and circulated in the community via WhatsApp. Later, communal announcement centres in town instructed people to withhold information about the event and remain silent about what had happened, signalling a distrust in the state and its legal system when dealing with crime and seeking justice. Not wanting to put myself at risk made it difficult for me to further engage with this event at this point. However, during a visit to the morgue a month after this event, I learned that the body of the murderer was still being kept there. The morgue director explained that she had refused to mend the cuts and burns on this body, something she would normally do on bodies that arrive in a bad state. When I returned a year later, the body was still being held at the morgue. In conversation with representatives of the Environmental Health Office at Kpeve, I was told that they, as state representatives, would possibly, at some point, remove bodies that have not been picked up. In the case of this murderer, the morgue now served as a place in which the murderer's body remained for an indefinite amount of time, with nowhere to go and no one taking ownership of the body. Here, the morgue becomes the primary site of burial according to the Hertzian model, with no secondary burial to follow, only deposition. The murder victim was buried a few weeks after the incident. Again, there were rumours that the picking-up and lying in state might be accompanied by youth violence and unruly behaviour. In support of the bereaved family, people in Peki-Dzake, where the incident occurred, had donated and collected money for the festivities. The body, now a communal responsibility, was not being laid in state at a family house but at the Dzake community centre. I accompanied the body there from the entrance to Peki-Dzake, along with a large group of people who were trailing the car. Inside the community centre, the undertaker began her work while people outside waited. Not much later, the lights in town went out and everything was shrouded in darkness. It appeared as if this convenient power outage, a frequent and usual event in Ghana, might have been timed deliberately. In any case, it served the purpose of dispersing the crowd. The undertaker, declaring that she was unable to carry out her work in the darkness, was excused and the body remained at the community centre until the burial the following day. Here, as I have seen on several other occasions, a power outage coincided with lying in state festivities, which then lacked light and amplification for music, therefore becoming unattractive for guests. To my surprise, power outages on Friday nights, as in this case, were very successful at ending the course of events. If we were to assume that these outages had been timed deliberately, this could lead to the conclusion that the authorities who have their fingers on the supply

switch were keen to prevent any funeral-related events with the potential for creating turmoil in the community. Although the murder victim's ceremony had been financed collectively and was being arranged by the community, it seemed to be beneficial for the authorities to keep the event at the level of expressing condolences and the intention to help, rather than going through with it and risking things getting out of hand.

'Bad' Death and Containment

As the different examples and accounts in this chapter show, events in the 'bad' death sequence are primarily geared towards containing the spiritual elements of the deceased that remain beyond human control. This is particularly the case in relation to elements of the deceased's spirit, which separate themselves from the body and may move independently in the world of the living, possibly threatening the well-being of the community. Even though the bodies of deceased community members pass through the same sequence of events as those who have died normal deaths – sometimes even grander and with more funeral guests – this is no guarantee that their angry and confused spirits are contained alongside the body. The collection of spirits, their deposition in the grave as well as the deposition of ghost luggage at *agbadɔme* sites are therefore tools that actively help to contain what has been lost in the event of a 'bad' death. In the practices surrounding these events and in the choice of material things that will represent immaterial entities like spirits, communal actors and authorities negotiate who will come to own these uncontainable dead and who will get to capitalize on the power that they represent. The material similarity of spirit luggage and rubbish gives way to attempts at re-contextualizing places belonging to the spirits and making these available to the living, for example, to representatives of traditional local government. The problem of recycling and properly depositing of synthetic materials that have become rubbish is transferred to the materiality of the spirit luggage. Here, durable synthetic materials, which are otherwise preferred choices as for instance in the construction of graves, pose a challenge: these materials, and with them the spirits attached to them, are not transformed and integrated into the greater body politic over time. Instead, just like rubbish, which is not properly recyclable in Peki, they create problems for the living that call for unorthodox solutions, if the obvious solutions are not available. In this tug of war over owning or containing the spirits of the deceased, chance appearances of spirits and the threats they pose may also become accomplices for people when responding to authorities' strategic attempts to use these dead for their own purposes. Similarly potent are rumours and accusation of authorities possibly aiming to do something that may offend spirits. Where death becomes polluting, be it through the threat of roaming spirits or through the presence of unrecyclable synthetic materials that merge with those in the environment, the colonial aspect of synthetic materials is made obvious, following Max

Liboiron (2021). While the community may include concrete and plastics into the proper conduct of producing a 'good' death, something that then does not immediately strike as polluting since things are 'in place', following Mary Douglas (2003), the 'bad' death sequence and its uncontainable spiritual elements reveal the dark sides of these materials and the ways in which they may haunt at an entangled social and ecological level. Revealing the shortcomings of social institutions with relation to waste management, the ecological danger becomes more acutely recognizable when paired with spiritual elements of the restless dead. And ultimately, the synthesizing and homogenizing properties of these materials that are transferred onto the deceased in the 'good' dead sequence also do not look unchallengeable but may instead be criticized from perspectives that differ. They may be instrumental for achieving other aims, ecologically and socially. The abduction of specific properties and agencies, in line with Gell's art nexus model, is therefore a process that may present the living as the makers of the dead into art-like objects. This puts them in the position of agents who can employ the agential properties of materials, rules, environments and substances to achieve their own aims, following a prototypical idea of what morally 'good' death is. With the lingering insecurities and possibly uncontainable agencies of those who died 'bad' deaths, however, this intended way of relating to the dead also contains the possibility that relations are reversed, with the dead becoming the agents that seek to affect the living in negative ways. This becomes more pressing as the temporally durable features of synthetic materials attach themselves to such unruly spiritual elements and enable them to remain individualized, rather than blended or synthesized into the body politic. It therefore requires new strategies to regain agency from the dead, as becomes apparent in the struggle to regain the land of an *agbadɔme* site. Yet, this work always remains unfinished. Ghost, through stories and gossip, may be said to appear, make demands or cause accidents. While it is possible to channel the movement and location of dead bodies with rules, payments, plastic and concrete, this remains impossible for stories that flow through the air like spirits. Hence, the political potential of claiming those who have died bad deaths retains an unbreakable power, as long as those stories continue to be told.

Notes

1. The colour red in funeral attire is indicative of a 'bad' death. People at George's funeral were mostly wearing red items of clothing to indicate that it was a 'bad' death that was being mourned.
2. Pseudonym.
3. Most people in Peki vote for the NDC, so this is an unusually bold display of unpopular political allegiance on a dead body.
4. For detailed elaborations of Spieth's work on 'good' and 'bad' death around 1900 in Ewe communities as well as a comparative view in relation to contemporary life in Peki see Chapter 2.

5. See Chapter 1 for a detailed explanation of indigenous Ewe concepts of spiritual elements of the dead. I am using the phrasing 'spiritual element' here initially and 'spirit' later for better flow of reading because the personal entity of someone who died a bad death may split up into several parts, one of which is being dealt with here.
6. Generally, while not limited to participation by either gender, the majority of the *asafo* tend to be men.
7. Through their informal Ghanaian name, these are connected to the name of President Kuffour who was in power during a particularly bad period of water shortages.
8. Pseudonym.
9. Interlocutors spoke freely about spirits in conversations that I had with them, despite the more established branches of Christianity in Peki, such as represented by the E.P. Church, discouraging people from engaging in any activities or interpretations that relate to spirit. However, I found that people who were active members of the E.P. Church as well as church representatives did not negate the existence of various invisible agential entities, but rather just stated that as Christians people should avoid engaging with these entities.
10. Anonymised.
11. In the 1990s, the E.P. Church's membership book strictly forbade the inclusion of any items in the coffin, not even the bible, as I have been told in personal conversation with Birgit Meyer.
12. Pseudonym.
13. I was playfully mocked for having small breasts and no ass by the women I was dancing with.

6

Playing Tricks on Death
Alternative Strategies

No matter what moral evaluations one attributes to death, it remains unescapable. It may seem like efforts to control death are more successful in cases where death is made 'good'. Yet, this does not turn out to be true when looking at how the 'good' and the 'bad' death sequence are incorporated in beliefs, communal life and political economy in Peki. 'Bad' death retains a possibility of undesired agency on the part of the dead. Additional efforts taken in response by means of the 'bad' death sequence may help to regain control. However, there is no guarantee for success, due to the restless nature of the dead's lost spiritual elements. The 'good' death sequence, on the other hand, requires community members to negotiate demands made on them. Bereaved relatives must engage with these demands to prevent making more payments than necessary and to assure that their moral standing remains intact in the face of the community. Ultimately, both sequences pose risks for the bereaved. Thus, several ways of challenging and subverting the 'good' and 'bad' death sequences exist. The intention behind these alternative strategies is to achieve a better outcome for those who find themselves under the pressure of responding to a variety of demands at a time when they are first and foremost consumed by the emotional labour of mourning. These strategies are attempts to change the prescribed sequences of events and may be applied to cases of 'good' and 'bad' death alike.

This chapter ethnographically narrates alternative strategies and demonstrates how attributed tendencies of materials, combined with changes to social institutions, are made operable towards skilfully reclaiming agency in response to death. Reclaiming agency means, for instance, altering who gets to have the last word in imposing constraints or who gets to make the final call regarding the deceased's social credit, including measures the family must take. Alternative sequences and events may be geared towards reducing the costs of funerals. They may assist bereaved family members in taking ownership of their dead as distinct ancestors, rather than giving them

up to the anonymous body politic. They provide an opportunity for demonstrating social distinction, materially as well as spatially. Finally, the dead that are not fully controllable may again be made to serve those who want to achieve social change in the community, for the greater good or for their own personal gain. Thinking this through within Gell's art nexus model and the abduction of agency from different entities in the 'good' and 'bad' death sequence reveals that, depending on which perspective one follows, the roles are constantly shifting. Ultimately, while death cannot be reasoned with, the afterlives of people and materials are engaged in a constant process of perspectival re-interpretation. Synthetic materials, just like the dead, are always between states of morally 'good' containment and morally 'bad' uncontrolled agency. The abduction of temporal properties and the ways in which the dead's uncontrolled temporal aspects are sought to serve the purposes of the living reveal this constant process. They also demonstrate the connection of death-related practices to larger questions of distributing power. Connected to the field of power, a theme that runs through all these alternatives is that of internality and externality, of insiders and outsiders, local and foreign, the indigenous and the imported. These attributions may apply to people, materials, things and social institutions alike. As categories, like other moral attributions in connection to people and materials, they are not per se static properties that can be identified. Rather, they may equally be shaped in a 'plastic' way to fit the needs and existing relations of people. Ultimately, the study of such strategies and the way of dealing with the appointment of inside-outside roles leads back to thinking about acculturation and the resistance to colonial influences in their historic and contemporary form.

Mixing Traditional and Christian Funeral Arrangements: The Wake for Isaac

One of the oldest examples of appropriation and acculturation in southern Ghana is that of Christianity. In relation to death and funerals, Christian religious practice allows bereaved family members to decrease their expenses, compared to 'traditional' funerary practices. Christian funeral proceedings, usually defined by holding a Christian service, are often incorporated into funerals that may otherwise count as 'traditional'. This may become necessary when burying a person who has identified as a follower of 'traditional' religion or who has turned away from the Christian faith. Initially, in the process of missionization in Ghana, Christian funerals drew people to Christianity. They were much cheaper than a 'traditional' funeral and seemed to exclude the ensuing state of limbo around a deceased's agency, as the dead were supposed to safely rest with God until resurrection. Regarding expenses, even these days, a fully 'traditional' funeral means that a wake, rather than a lying in state, is carried out. Guests are provided with food and drinks, including extra gifts and expenses for chiefs who are invited

to visit after the burial. If followed to the letter, the cost of 'traditional' festivities is significantly higher than the cost of a Christian funeral. In the case of Isaac's[1] funeral in late December 2016, the family had only little money to pay for either of the two varieties of celebration. Isaac died at the beginning of December, and it was initially planned to bury him within four days to save money on the morgue. At the last minute, a group of friends jumped in and contributed some funds to extend the time. The burial was then scheduled just before Christmas, at a time when there was a seasonal break in the regular structure of funeral weekends. However, in the case of a 'traditional' funeral, the family could still go ahead and use this time in which no other funerals competed with that of Isaac. Since Isaac, a man in his fifties from Peki-Avetile, had turned from being a member of a Christian church towards following 'traditional' religion later in life, his family and friends felt that he needed to have a significant number of elements that are considered 'traditional' included in his funeral. Still, a Christian service was performed at the house by a volunteer preacher. This had the (surely intended but not explicitly framed as such) effect that the family could save money on otherwise mandatory gifts to chiefs and prevented having to offer food and drink to everyone. The result was a hybridized funeral, not fully traditional, yet also Christian enough to prevent extra expenses. 'Traditional' elements that were maintained included an all-night wake, the presence of a drumming group and the slaughtering of chickens, all carried out parallel to the Christian service, creating audible disruption and diverting attention from the proceedings of the service. The all-night wake gave mourners an extended period of time to say their last goodbyes, and it produced an interesting accumulation of objects in Isaac's coffin. As a funeral guest, I was impressed by the stark contrast between the coffin and the deceased at the beginning of the wake and at the end of it. The undertaker had installed the deceased, who was wearing a black-tie suit, in a standing position. He was placed inside his coffin, which was leaning vertically against the wall. When the mourners entered, they faced Isaac standing up, as if he were still alive and people could interact with him at eye-level. I left the wake around midnight, but people continued to drink and eat, though at the explicit invitation of family members only. Guests played cards as a re-enactment of Isaac's passion for card games and live music was played, as entertainment for the guests while also representing Isaac's life as a musician. He had been a member of a brass band and then of a traditional drumming group, both of which were present at the wake and the funeral.

When I returned the next morning around 9 am, expecting to be late for the funerary rites that would follow, I found the coffin, now in a horizontal position, covered in photographs, a deck of cards, handwritten notes, a stick for playing traditional drums and other small items. It looked as if Isaac, although dead, had had a wild night, partying with everybody and had now decided to get some rest in the mess that had been created. It is generally

hard to keep track of what ends up in a coffin since things may be slipped in without much ado and these moments can also take place in private or in the secrecy of the undertaker's working hours. On the morning of Isaac's burial day, objects that were visibly strewn across the body were smaller things that had been used previously in an act of commemoration of the deceased, such as the deck of cards or the (now broken) drumstick. The wake, with its generous amount of time for celebrating, mourning and commemorating made such inclusions possible and the deceased could depart with many tiny memorabilia and gifts. These were not just representative of his activities in life, but, more importantly, of the social connections that he had created through these activities. A wake and the gifts that are included in the coffin during the wake therefore endow the deceased with a greater wealth of material anchors that help to re-subjectivize them. They are references to personal aspects that had tied the deceased to the world of the living. Having successfully undone these ties in the process of moving, storing and washing the deceased, the wake, in comparison to the lying in state, gives people the chance to experience these connections one last time and leave a memory item with the deceased – without the risk of undoing the latter's transformation into a contained part of the body politic. The extra time that was granted for the all-night festivities has made the accumulation of personal gift-things possible. As material anchors on a time-map, following Gell, these allow the deceased a more visible and present association with his former social life and ties than would be possible during lying in states that do not allow a wake. While still aiming at a navigable time for the dead, this difference in sequence makes the time-map for Isaac a little less rigid while granting mourners more time at the funeral.

The Private Cemetery: *Porte du Paradis*

Another strategy for deconstructing the established routines and sequences is centred around the privatization of burial grounds, in competition with state-approved home burials and the race to build prestigious graves in Peki's public cemeteries. Outside Peki proper, but still within the boundaries of the traditional area, alongside the overland road, a big metal gate, framed by a shiny black arch bears the grand title of *Porte du Paradis – Memorial Gardens*. Behind the gate, a cemetery stretches far back towards the hillside, surrounded by a white wall. The silhouette of the Peki hills with forest shrouded in mist provides a scenic backdrop to what is an unusually strict design compared to the rest of town and particularly all other local cemeteries. A neat tile-covered path, decorated with a cross at the entrance, leads through the middle of the largely empty grave field. In contrast to most Ghanaian outdoor environments, which usually feature unkempt, fast-growing tropical plants and red soil, this cemetery is a large, clean-cut plot of lush green grass with real flowers, miniature palm trees and pine trees. Along the path, dark soil and pebbles cover the ground. A guardian's

Figure 6.1 The entrance to the newly opened private cemetery *Porte du Paradis* in Peki, 2017. © Isabel Bredenbröker

house to the right-hand side of the entrance shows that someone oversees maintenance here, making sure the grass is well watered and the garden looking nice and proper.

When I first visited the cemetery, I found the gate unlocked and no one around, leaving me at liberty to roam around. At other times the caretaker was present, plucking weeds along the path or napping in his office. Demarcating the cemetery's boundaries and rules, the gate and the wall are effective signs. They remind visitors that they are entering a cemetery and that it is a place which keeps the dead contained and cared for, while also potentially keeping unwanted visitors out. The development is a project of Fred Balasu, a Peki community member who owns a large construction company operating from Accra and Tema where his family spend most of their time. The company specializes in the construction of power plants and electricity lines, effectively dealing with big infrastructure projects in Ghana. As the head of this successful enterprise, Fred, whose parents and wife are from Peki, appears as an example of a local community member who 'has made it'. His Peki house, located outside the town, off the overland road, is a manifestation of his success. Everything is built in a 'modern' style, with real glass windows, a garden, a driveway, an electric doorbell and a swimming pool in the living room – highly unusual architectural features in the community. Now, Fred is trying to give something back to his hometown

and has gained public respect by philanthropic acts such as building a library in Peki-Tsame, donating mattresses to the hospital or building the Peki Senior High Technical School in Peki-Wudome.

According to Fred, the cemetery was not an economically motivated project. Instead, he regards it as one of his social interventions: projects that are also listed on his company's website. Fred voiced concern over the fact that people in the community obviously care a lot for the dead – even more than for the living – spending resources, time and energy on funerals, while effectively burying their dead inappropriately. He remembered that local cemeteries used to be a lot cleaner when he was young, with women taking care of community labour at cemeteries every Tuesday. While it is likely that there is an element of idealization involved when gazing back towards a better past, to Fred cemeteries have turned into places that look like bushland or farmland. They lack the serenity and tidiness of a garden, which he now hopes to bring back with his new cemetery. The social intervention aspect was mainly derived from a 'problem' he had observed in the community. Wealthy families, faced with the poor conditions of public cemeteries, preferred home burials. He disapproved of this practice. His own disapproval is supported by the fact that home burials have become a costly matter, requiring a payment of 5,000 Cedi for a permit from the Environmental Health Office. According to hearsay, he recounted, the community and the district assembly were putting a complete ban on home burials. The new cemetery, therefore, attempts to offer an alternative to home burials. It provides those who have the financial means and the right kind of taste with an infrastructure that allows them to care for their dead properly. Usually, having access to this kind of taste and money suggests that one lives outside of town, either abroad or in Accra. Pricewise, Fred initially offered the lease of a grave plot, including the construction of blocks and a concrete cover, plus constant maintenance, for an equivalent sum of 5,000 Cedi. However, having soon realized that maintenance and watering the grass are more expensive than he thought, the price was then raised to 7,000 Cedi, with additional purchase options: headstone plaques, the use of a casket-lowering device during the burial, or a plot in the 'VVIP' section of the cemetery, an elevated part in the back left corner. The private cemetery, already a place of social distinction, leaves space for further distinction within it.

In April 2016, the *Porte du Paradis* cemetery was a new project that had just opened its gates. When I spoke to Fred in January 2017, the first four people had been buried here, in a far corner of the grassy field near the back wall, almost impossible to spot from the gate. As a construction professional, building a cemetery was easy for Fred. He had the knowledge, the material supply, the money and the infrastructure to realize such a project. The cemetery was built over a period of just six months, an unusually quick turnover for Ghanaian construction projects, where houses are often built over a long time span, furthering construction whenever money and labour can be afforded and pausing when they are lacked. Fred said that he

himself drew the design, having received initial inspiration from a work trip to Manila, the Philippines. Here, he was surprised to find a pet cemetery which, in his eyes, was far superior to any cemetery for humans in Peki. A round of Google searches for 'cemetery management', to understand what a cemetery can look like and what it needs, completed the research. He then drew up a plan and bought a piece of land from private owners in Peki. Having found the land where the cemetery is now located, behind Wudome on the way to Peki-Agbate – a foreign investor-run farm producing crops for export that had been established by Germans as an agricultural experimentation facility during colonial times[2] – he identified it as an appropriate place for his project. However, after finalizing the contract for the purchase and taking his project proposal to the assembly of chiefs to make them aware that a new development was going to take place in the community, he faced unexpected resistance. After the former landowners learned that their property was going to be turned into a cemetery, they intervened, asking for more money or a reversal of the contract, and arguing that the cemetery was located too close to town – which, if one considers the practice of home burials and the locations of the existing cemeteries within the community, seems remarkable. 'When people hear about cemeteries or dead bodies, it is treated as a different thing', Fred said, 'people are uncomfortable'. In the end, the town chief who had to judge the case allowed the project to continue and the cemetery was built. Apart from sourcing materials in Accra, Fred said, he exclusively employed workers from Peki for construction and continues to do so for maintenance. His aim of demystifying the dead, reducing the widespread fear of the dead in the community, seems to have worked, he thought. Essentially looking like a park, the place has become a site that is used as a photo backdrop for wedding couples. The benefit that he wanted to achieve, in comparison to other local cemeteries, is also that it will be easy to locate a grave, especially for visitors from far away, and that graves can remain there indefinitely, to be found 'even in fifty years' time'.

Those who had been buried in this special location by mid-2017 were exclusively female and had all have received a Christian funeral. They were also all mothers whose children had taken the initiative and paid for the cemetery costs to honour the care their mothers gave them in life. Fred attributed this to the special position that mothers have in Ewe culture, and to polygamy (men are traditionally allowed to marry several wives) which can make fathers' relationships with and duties towards their children less direct and less binding. In death, therefore, mothers are likely to receive a bigger funeral than fathers, since they were often the ones who took the main share of responsibility for the children's upbringing. The latter therefore attempt to show their gratitude in the way the funeral and the grave are organized, especially if they can afford to bury their mothers in a special place like *Porte du Paradis*. Their graves are now of elevated status and will be distinguishable in the near and far future, making their legacy well-established. At the same time, children who do not live in Peki no longer

face the problem of having to arrange for grave building or maintenance – this is taken care of. The children of at least three women who are buried here either lived in Accra or abroad. A fifth person, whose family I meet shortly after speaking to Fred, was going to be buried in January 2017, also a mother of two. Her children worked in Accra at a ministry and a bank and had little time for mundane tasks in town, let alone participating in community labour. As may have become obvious at this point, the *Porte du Paradis* cemetery also offers an important solution to another social problem, one that Fred did not address directly. Clients who are wealthy enough to bury their relatives here often happen to live outside of town. This co-incidence of wealth and absence creates a special kind of friction in relation to the way the community organizes work and payments that are supposed to serve the greater good of all. No matter what kinds of lives their (now deceased) relatives may have led, it is likely that the former factors may very well attract demands for extra payments to settle debts of social credit. General public opinion is likely to frame community members living and working outside of town as more able to pay higher sums of money in response to these demands. However, the private cemetery is not dependent on the agreement of the traditional authorities for receiving a burial permit – the plot is purchased from Fred, not from representatives or the community and its traditional political representatives. Therefore, families are freed from having to respond to any claims made towards them in respect of possible moral debts. By putting down a large sum of money, they can not only distinguish themselves and their deceased relative, but they also manage to free themselves from moral responsibilities towards the community. The privatization of the afterlife therefore has benefits – for those who can afford it. The dead are now leased to a private cemetery owner, allowing them to be contained in a decoupled, unproblematic way. The materiality of the graves and of the cemetery is remarkably distinct from any other cemetery or grave design in Peki. Apart from the excessive presence of green lawn and real plants, which, especially in the dry season, are hard to maintain, construction elements such as metal, tiles, cement and paint are costly and require work if they are to be bought and installed by individual relatives. In a public cemetery where everyone takes care of their own grave design, no comparable sameness of graves or design will be achieved. At *Porte du Paradis*, the construction of the grave is taken care of and covered by the sum paid for the grave. This enables the cemetery management to make sure all graves get the same look. After covering the grave with a concrete slab, and thus properly preserving the deceased inside the tomb, this slab is covered with black soil and grass is sown over it. The only sign of the grave that marks its position is its headstone, which consists of engraved black tiles supported by a concrete core. Currently, all headstones look the same, although a 'plaque' is priced individually on the list of services offered at *Porte du Paradis*. Fred remarked that grave wreaths are also supposed to be included within the grave, for safety reasons. If everything is properly

sealed, so he mused, nothing can be stolen and the grave can be properly decorated, with the concrete slab serving as a base for further decoration. In any case, a high-ranking sense of equality can be produced by centrally managing and administering construction and burial.

Centralizing building and care tasks at this private cemetery implies that the temporality of grave construction, which normally takes up to a year, can be speeded up. As soon as the grave is cemented and closed, grass can be sown, which takes little time to grow, and a headstone can be installed. No heavy concrete build is required to mark the grave, effectively also saving time until the grave is finished. Therefore, the usual practice of extending the work for the dead on the grave is cut short and taken off the relatives' shoulders. Once a person has been buried at *Porte du Paradis*, there is nothing more to be done, apart from paying visits whenever one wishes. The sum of money used to pay for grave materials, construction and service does not only take over the otherwise messy, tedious and socially sticky work for the dead, it also extends the permanence and reliability of durable materials such as concrete, which now carry out the work for the dead, in place of living relatives. Used in public cemeteries as a means of distinguishing graves and creating the sense of a durable present tense, here materials like concrete and granite reveal their social context more clearly. After all, it is those with access to such kinds of commodified materials and with the necessary means to acquire them who benefit the most from what the materials already seem to be doing on their own: freezing time and making it work for the living, ideally leaving them in a socially favourable position. Here, this means that the demands of and debts to the community become ineffective. The cemetery and its constitution serve to sever unwanted social ties while producing distinction, a demonstration of social power and presence. However, since equality reigns with regards to grave aesthetics (the VVIP section marking a clearly structured upgrade), competition takes place on an equally elevated level, whereas public cemeteries are environments in which individual labour, means and status are in a wild state of competition. In the public cemeteries, concrete has a slightly different function: it marks a victory in the battle to achieve social acceptance, materially demonstrating a clean slate, social credibility and financial potency, not just of the deceased but of their family members, while remaining tightly woven into a web of social responsibilities and duties. At *Porte du Paradis*, labour and the work for the dead are not only outsourced as a service rather than a personal task, but the responsibility is also taken over by Fred, who remarked that he only employs local workers.

Engraved Granite and Reliable Workers: Buying Grave Construction Services out of Town

In Peki's public cemeteries, where people must take care of building graves themselves or buy this work from others, it seems to be common for materials

as well as labour to be brought in from outside the community. This was the case for the construction of Alfred Menka's grave. Alfred Menka, the late husband of my neighbour Mama Menka, died eight months before I moved into the house next door to her. In April 2017, Mama Menka's daughter Janapare, a judge in Accra, oversaw the final construction of her father's grave. At this point, in March 2017, the cemented base with temporary decoration had been resting in the Peki Blengo cemetery for long enough. Upon the first anniversary of Alfred's death, the grave was supposed to be finished and unveiled, meaning that on the day, a delegation of relatives – all of whom have a one-year anniversary on the same day at the same place – and a pastor would come to visit the grave early in the morning after dawn, sing, pray, lay down a wreath and acknowledge that the work on this grave had now been completed. As I witnessed on a different occasion, the group usually proceeds to visit all the graves of those who have a death anniversary on that day, effectively bringing a small gathering of participants together to share this work, similar to the digging of graves.

As a person who – like potential clients of the *Porte du Paradis* cemetery – lives out of town and has a prestigious job, Janapare was left with the challenge of having to administer and oversee the building of the grave herself, as her father had been buried in a local, unserviced cemetery. When Janapare went to pay for and inspect the gravestone for her deceased father, I accompanied her to a shop in Teshie, a Ga township west of Accra. The shop specialized in importing granite as a material for headstones and grave covers. It offered design and cutting services and finished the headstones off by engraving them according to their customers' wishes. Granite is a costly and prestigious material, especially since it needs to be imported into Ghana. Engraving headstones is a similarly costly service, requiring specific machines. After making the payment, Janapare discussed the details of the delivery and purchase, which also included the construction of the grave in Peki. The building work, which may take a long time in cases where families do the work themselves or raise funds more slowly, is included in the price and will be carried out swiftly in just one day, or so the shop promises. In total, the package that is offered seems to have several advantages in comparison to either doing everything on one's own or possibly using a local person to do the work. As applies to the production of funeral banners, several goods and services that are sought after in relation to work for the dead are unavailable in Peki. Engraving and granite are among them, which means that they are attributed with a special sense of distinction, while also creating movement and social ties between places.

When I spoke to Yao,[3] a cement worker living in Peki, who had been involved in working on the construction of Fred's private cemetery, I learned that he was also part of a chain of work and transport relationships. Working under a boss for whom he was a contractor, he also ran his own company, employing other people to work under him. The work for Fred was work that his boss was hired to do, who then employed Yao to

Figure 6.2 Slates of granite lean against a wall at a grave design shop in Teshie near Accra in 2017. © Isabel Bredenbröker

work on it. Yao also took up jobs outside Peki, wherever they occurred. He said that it was desirable for people in Peki to give work to those you know, 'your brethren', not people from outside. The distinction between outside and inside, however, is not necessarily congruent with the distinction between community members and outsiders. Yao worked with different people, some of whom he became acquainted with during his training and who live dispersed across Ghana, others being people he knows from within the Peki community. Some community members had also moved away and are now based in Accra. As a result, he often employed people who do not live in the community or are not part of it. To him though, they were still insiders – people he knows and trusts for various reasons. Yao also offered the digging and construction of graves as a person based in Peki, thus competing with services like the option that Janapare chose from Teshie. His offers included different services, depending on individual demands. If nobody can be found to dig a grave for the deceased – for example, if everyone in the family has left the community and the possibly accrued social debt is not going to be repaid by relatives via physical work on the graves – he is called in. This, it seems, only happens rarely. In other cases, he offered to lay blocks and seal graves, subsequently building the cover of the grave, leading up to the one-year celebration. Pricewise, he charged 5,000 Cedi for the full job including digging (coincidentally equivalent with

the home burial costs) or 2,000 Cedi upwards for sealing and construction, depending on what is demanded. With regards to materials, Yao relied on buying his cement in town and brought back terrazzo and tiles for grave decoration from Accra by *trotro* minibus. He said that while he uses cement as the base material for everything, he could not offer granite as he had neither the means nor the tools to acquire, transport and engrave it. Within his range of options, however, he regarded terrazzo – in the Ghanaian context referring to small stones that are strewn across a cement surface and pushed into it – as the best option. Tiles may crack and fall off the cement, whereas terrazzo, according to Yao's view, is made to last and impossible to remove. It is supposed to last forever, as is the cemented grave. Cement, in Yao's opinion, means respect. This kind of moral attribution of things being equivalent to an expression of respect relates back to the selection of tendential properties, in the sense of a semiotic ideology following Webb Keane, as became evident, for instance, in relation to plastic grave wreaths compared to organic wreaths (see Bredenbröker 2024b). Such moral characteristics of materials are intrinsically related to the moral evaluations of people, blurring not only the boundaries between inside and outside, but also between the material and social worlds. Materials, by virtue of a shared social perspective on them, then come to stand for and enact the moral values they have been imbued with, making them 'social agents' once they are shaped into form and installed as part of an index of relations, in accordance with Gell's art nexus model (Gell 1998). The notions of insider and outsider are continued in thinking about materials as either commodities that must be bought in an internationally fuelled market, such as cement, tiles or granite, or locally sourced resources that grow back, like plants, wood and stones. And while synthetic and other commodified materials are given a preference in the construction of graves, these materials which are as 'acculturated' as Christianity in local social contexts by now, still retain a strong connection to an unequal global market, which offers them as commodities but only to the people who can afford them. Viewing this through through the lens of neo-colonial relations,[4] it is evident that these materials, while perfectly integrated into a local moral and political economy in its own right, also cannot be divested of power relations from that bigger global context. The attribution of materials and services as being local or vetted for is often excluding that larger perspective, as materials like concrete and tiles are omnipresent in the daily lives of people. Yet, their use in response to death, with their specific role in shaping power relations, brings this aspect to the fore, especially around questions of reuse, depositing and recycling.

While there are different perspectives under which materials and people are categorized as local or outsiders, the moral evaluation of synthetic materials or imported things is usually positive. People, on the other hand, may either form part of a trusted network of relations or, as community members, be subject to suspicion. As I learned repeatedly throughout my stay, local people tend to voice distrust of other locals, particularly when

it comes to carrying out jobs and getting things done in time. Distrust was equally expressed in relation to greed and spending of money in public, such as making big purchases in a local market. Such expressions of distrust regarding work might, for example, include comments about how one prefers to hire workers from Accra for the harvest season on one's local farmland, since external workers are expected to be more efficient. Different interlocutors who had bought materials and services for grave construction out of town also voiced the hope that workers from Accra might be more reliable when it comes to constructing a grave, since they travel to town for this job, and can be expected to want to leave right after finishing it. In comparison, as implied in this expectation, a person from Peki might have other things to do at home or in the community, consequently dragging the work out slowly. In Ghanaian English, this kind of attitude regarding work would be described as 'sitting on it'. Laziness is another word that repeatedly comes up when attempting to evaluate or explain certain things in the community that take too long or move too slowly. People in town are seen as lazy when it comes to explaining the lack of engagement in community labour and the cleaning of public places, as well as in relation to the temporally extended presence of obituary print media in the town's public spaces. Obituary posters and funeral banners often outlive their deceased counterfeits by months or years after these have been buried. At the same time, laziness also seems to have a positive, if ambiguous side to it. In the anecdote about laziness that I recounted earlier, a street vendor in Accra told me 'But you must take it! You are lazy!' in response to my refusal of a plastic bag. She clearly meant no offence, but was happy to offer me a material thing – the 'rubber bag' – that would make my life easier. So, while trying to avoid laziness in humans, lazy materials such as plastic or concrete can take over most of their work, more efficiently. Laziness in humans, then, would also be met with some sort of social correction. Such corrections, usually by way of rules and social structures, require a deep engagement in local community relations. In effect, as with the organization and material effects of the cemetery at *Porte du Paradis*, the outsourcing of labour achieves a degree of liberty from possibly unwanted or difficult social ties within the community. It speeds up time (the construction is a quick affair) while also prolonging or slowing it down, transported via the apparent durability of commodified, long-lasting materials and material techniques. Synthetic and imported materials, such as concrete, plastic or granite, can here all be accredited with a degree of agency in the process of making the time of the dead navigable for living community members. Certain infrastructures and conditions – for example a private cemetery or the financial ability to purchase services that are less socially sticky – are necessary to overcome the constraints which control movement in the 'good' death sequence. The outcome of this process, that is, the resulting social position and the ties that are created through the dead, are easier to manipulate by altering the sequence and bringing in external agents and external materials. That way,

living relatives can select only those ties and positions that are favourable to them, in the present as well as in the future.

Peki Again versus Peki Union: Managing Expat Participation

As described before, social credit or debt in Peki is evaluated within a complex set of relations and demands, reflecting loyalty and obligations by community members to institutions in the community, such as traditional governance representatives or clans. Active participation in communal life is a necessary requirement for all Peki community members, whether in town or abroad. It is mandatory in order to receive recognition as a 'good' community member. The deaths of community members are moments at which the active participation of the deceased and their nuclear family is evaluated and acted upon. Funerals are also possible occasions to claim these demands, as people who live outside of town come back to attend or organize funerals. In cases where the deceased as well as their children are found to have been active contributors in communal life, they may receive financial help from their clan. In cases where neither of these are found to be the case, accrued debt plus additional penalty fees may be demanded by the clan and the town chiefs. How then, can expat community members make up for their lack of presence and active participation in communal labour, funeral attendance and clan meetings? The Peki Union, founded in 1923, was initiated as a charitable organization devoting itself to connecting absent community members with those in town, redirecting wealth that was generated by expats towards the community, which could then stand in for active participation in the community. The aim of the Union was and is to develop Peki. A representative and former administrator of a sub-group of the Union recalled that it was initially called the Peki Improvement Protection Society, an aim that prevails. During my research, the Union's main aim was to direct money into education and to sponsor children whose parents cannot pay for their studies. However, although the Peki Union still existed, the contributions that were sent via the Union were no longer reliably considered a valid equivalent of one's presence locally and of active participation. Instead, the Union was increasingly being perceived as failing to achieve anything for the communal good in Peki, rendering the contributions by its members meaningless. This meant that expats who had made contributions through the Union still faced penalty fees for their absence when they returned to Peki to bury a parent. These fees were often significant amounts. Demands could be quite high, reflecting the expectation that expats' financial means are greater than those of people who live and work in town. Such expectations usually resulted from increased awareness that 'prodigal' children of Peki often lived in places that offer better economic possibilities.

In reaction to the perceived ineffectiveness of the Peki Union when it came to preventing demands being placed on children living abroad, a competing

organization to the Peki Union had more recently emerged under the name of Peki Again. A representative of Peki Again said that they wanted to liberate people abroad from the pressure of participating in the Union or subjecting themselves to excessive demands upon their return. My interlocutor regarded the Union's judgements and ways of managing contributions as arbitrary, subjective and therefore unreliable. This view was shared by other community members. A clan elder suspected that most of the money was used up in paying for administration, leaving almost nothing to be invested in the community. With the aim of not falling into this trap, Peki Again wanted to collect money from successful expats and invest it in the community's economy, creating jobs to help the living and thereby visibly making a change that would count as active participation in the community, rather than sending money and resources to the dead. Peki Again was initiated by those who expressed dissatisfaction with decisions that previous groups had made. Other members had joined because they had previously been asked to make exaggerated 'penalty' payments after a relative's death. These could be claimed in response to the negative assessment of a deceased relative's credit status or of their own participation in communal affairs. Representatives of Peki Again said that they were explicitly not attempting to replace the Union, but rather that they wanted to be regarded as affiliated with it. Members of Peki Again therefore also remained members of Peki Union, to be on the safe side. However, their monthly contributions of 50 Cedi per person were significantly higher than payments to the Peki Union, the implied hope being that they would be recognized as doing things with this money which are of greater benefit to the community than projects initiated by the Peki Union. Apart from the charitable aspect to which Peki Again devoted itself, their aim was also directly linked to the perceived ineffectiveness of the Peki Union towards preventing demands being placed on children living outside of the community. Kofi,[5] an elder and a founding member of Peki Again, who had been living outside Peki for thirty years, having worked in a European capital city for a public service provider for the past twenty-five years, recalled that he and his siblings were charged a very high sum by their clan when their father died. First, the opinions of residents and expats differed regarding the nature and expenses of the grave. The father, having been a member of a local E.P. Church, could have been buried in the E.P. Church section of the Peki Blengo cemetery without having to pay a fee. However, local family members did not approve of this plan since the burial in the church's section of the cemetery meant that the grave could not be built in a permanent, cemented form. While he, having lived in Europe for a long time and aware of different burial customs there, would have been fine with that, local family members disapproved of this plan, feeling that their father would then have been buried in a lowly way, like a commoner, without a cemented grave. To cement their father's grave, they had to buy a privately owned plot in the cemetery, which increased the cost further.

Secondly, a representative of the clan who oversees accounting for communal labour participation approached them, saying that the children of the deceased, who had been absent from the community, had to pay money to the clan before their father could be buried. This occurred even though Kofi had been a member of the Union and had, as he says, sponsored several computers for a local school. On top of that, he had always made a point of inviting clan and family members for food and drinks whenever he visited town, all of which were accepted but yet not regarded as an equivalent to payments made locally or to communal labour. Kofi raised these points and insisted on their validity, causing arguments among the representatives of the clan. In the end, he managed to re-negotiate the sum that was demanded of him by offering a 'token' – meaning a smaller, symbolic sum of good will, rather than paying the sum demanded and thus acknowledging his debt to the clan and the community.

Kofi was particularly puzzled by the demand with which he was approached since the clan's representative could not produce any books or written records in support of that demand. But it appeared that what counted most in making an assessment regarding the dead and the living were the immediate perceptions of people in town, their witnessing of a person's presence – something which money does not always manage to achieve if it does not become manifest in a recognizable form. This means that, whatever measures an absent community member takes to make up for their lack of presence and participation, it must be subjectively and consistently perceived as *doing work*, in the way in which human bodies do work by digging, cleaning or building. Otherwise, if an absent community member were to pay their money directly to the clan, they would have to find a way to make this publicly recognized – something which the transfer of money via mobile money or in cash via family members does not achieve. Money is silent if it is not accompanied by someone displaying their contribution or by something that becomes visible and known in the community.

The conflicts that expat community members run into at precisely the time when they process a loss and are asking for support in the community make several things evident. First, such demands demonstrate attempts to draw money and labour back into the community from afar. The implied expectation is that there may possibly be an increased income through access to foreign currencies, different economic systems, and different kinds of commodities in places where Peki expats have moved to. Secondly, these conflicts demonstrate the persistent autochthonous connection that people from Peki have and maintain with their hometown, whether they want to or not. Work that takes place in town still concerns those who are absent. Their participation as community members is still required. Similarly, the opportunity to make contributions never closes until one dies. As an elder and clan representative put it: 'We know you are alive, you are not dead. We haven't buried you. We know you owe'. Being alive, according to this logic, becomes a status of constant indebtedness to one's home and social

relations, which needs to be counteracted either through work or through an equivalent to work. As it turns out, money is often unfit to be such an equivalent. Without a bodily presence, money does not do what can be achieved by being there, embodied and in person, literally as a manifestation of being alive. Being dead and buried, on the other hand, comes to stand for a cancellation or settling of debt – by the living, whose state of constant indebtedness also extends to include debts accrued by the dead. In addition, the deaths of nuclear family members make living family members' debts acutely relevant as they are forced to engage with the community in the burial process, and settlement of any of these debts is a precondition for letting the funeral go ahead. The founding of Peki Again is therefore an attempt to counteract the power of local clan elders and chiefs to claim debts at subjectively calculated rates. Furthermore, Peki Again's business-oriented approach could also generate money that may flow back into the pockets of its 'shareholders' – if things go well.

And, thirdly, all the above shows that local traditional units of social organization – whether kinship relations in the narrow sense or traditional governance that is linked to them – make their influence and position known by linking funerals to the evaluation of social credit and states of indebtedness. By repeating a cycle of demands on community members outside Peki in relation to funerals, labour and money that have been lost to the outside world are redirected towards living community members who still physically reside in the town. And while some of this money is spent on the dead, ultimately not all of it will be if clans or chiefs are successful in fining people and large sums are paid to clear debts and to be able to bury a relative. As a result, the local political units gain in importance compared to the nation state's presence. And although a representative of Peki Union described the order of attachment as being Ghanaians first, Voltarians second and coming from Peki third, this seems to be an order that is supposed to be followed accordingly, respecting the primacy of the state. It is a 'should be' order, but it does not reflect the actual order of people's attachments which, as becomes evident when looking at the organization of debts and obligations around funerals, works the other way around: Peki comes first. It is thus not surprising that an elder who explained the ways in which his clan enforces payments and obligations ended up by talking about the Volta Region's paramount chiefs. The region only has three big paramount chiefs, one of whom has his seat in Peki. When we spoke in March 2016, the paramount chief's throne in Peki had been vacant for several years – a problem for local political representation. The paramount chief continues to stand for the powerful local political unit which used to be the Peki State. And while the Peki State does not exist anymore,[6] representation and the attraction of obligations to local institutions are important to maintain whatever is left of the former state's autonomy. This is because, as the elder phrased it, 'the previous [colonial] occupation is still working – in our behaviour, in our speech, in our body language'. Peki, however, as this statement seems to

imply, may still be bigger than the borders that delineate it today, with local traditional institutions helping to preserve this heritage. The description of such a habitus that is a systemically and individually embodied result of colonialism certainly rings true, while Ghana is an independent state and many external factors have been integrated and appropriated into local contexts to fit people's needs. Within the nation of Ghana however, Ewe people hold a special position towards the state, often being framed as potentially troublesome and unruly in national media. Here, a narrative still reverberates, at times characterizing Ewe communities as prone to creating different ties, such as by becoming independent or by joining Togo. It seems that these ideas are attempts to deal with changes of indigenous political relations since colonial times, by questioning existing power relations and creating a sense of possibility in different directions.[7] Creating obligations around the dead helps to make up for some of the damage that has been done by giving residents and traditional political representatives something they can bargain with. The connection to this field of power is strengthened by the public aspect that death has. Synthetic and imported materials take an active role in this process. They contribute to the settling of conflict and aid with the representation of people as 'good' community members. Instead of negatively assessed 'lazy' local workers, lazy materials such as plastics and concrete achieve to do work that money alone cannot, in turn changing the moral assessment of laziness from negative to positive. All in all, it is socially shared perspectives on specific material properties and their moral evaluations that give synthetic materials this special role and the death-related public sphere in town serves as an arena in which these ideas come to be reproduced.

Visual and Sonic Media: Making Ancestors Public

Part of what makes death such a potent political field is the public side of it, facilitated not just by the conspicuous funeral weekends. In the public sphere, the dead are represented by vital images and locally rooted sounds. Sonic, material and visual representations of the dead serve as an updated representation of ancestors, incorporating the dead into the social fabric of the living, while serving the latter's concrete aims (Bredenbröker 2024a). Different media are used extensively to make death not only public, but also a matter of public concern. This public kind of death becomes something that community members as well as external passers-by can immediately feel a connection with, and, to some degree, an obligation towards. Sonically, so-called information centres and a local radio station make it possible to make announcements of deaths and of upcoming funeral celebrations, including a breathtakingly exhaustive list of relatives and mourners. While the general level of noise is always quite high when it comes to important things, such as church services or advertisements, funerals do not hold back on that either. In the process of making information public and circulating news in Peki,

such as about funerals and other communally relevant pieces of information, the local information centres play a vital role. While not every town has its own information centre, those that do issue daily announcements at dawn around 5.20 am and in the evening around 6.30 pm. The centres consist of a loudspeaker on the roof of a building and a microphone with an amplifier. However, the electrically amplified sonic technology is used in a very analogue way. Instead of passing information on through a website or other digital media – channels that might prove unfruitful since a lot of Peki residents do not have reliable access to a smartphone, computer or data signal – the information is broadcast at a high volume across the entire town, practically structuring people's days as a wake-up call or a call to end work. In December 2016, during my early mornings in Peki-Dzake, I woke up to the sound of Ewe pop tunes, music in the local language which set the mood to cheerful, before the female announcer's voice started with a 'Good morning' and the daily news. The centres are a technical evolution of the traditional system of announcements called *gong gong*. This consisted of a person, usually a child, running through town beating a metal bell or a pot. A lot of the information centres were originally sponsored by political parties in the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections. Parties argued that they were sponsoring these institutions of communal interest. In practice, they were also creating better media for their own election campaigning. Post-election, most information centres now operate as communal tools, while some are run as private businesses or form part of the palaces of town chiefs. The evolution from sponsored political campaign tool to popular community system that generates income for private individuals or chiefs' palaces describes a movement from national political level towards a local level.

Since visual advertisements of deaths and funerals are omnipresent on the walls of houses, on public buildings, on trees and by the roadside, it is hard to escape them and, with them, the constant presence of the dead among the living. However, visual obituary media such as banners and posters are also physical manifestations. Their material basis, the process of their production and their material properties make them objects with the potential to be more than just what their image content suggests. They also invite specific ways of evaluating their materiality and transporting moral and social messages that are associated with materials, similar to grave wreaths. In November 2016, shortly after my arrival in town, I set out to acquire an overview of all the funeral banners and obituary posters that were visible in Peki's public space. The task of getting an exact number quickly proved to be impossible. Obituary print media are excessively present in public spaces in southern Ghana. As such, they are permanent eye-catchers for city-dwellers, visitors, commuters and the residents of towns and villages alike. To make death public deliberately, to advertise funerals and put out visual information, different media are used in the region. Obituary posters, pamphlets and funeral banners, as well as commemorative T-shirts, mugs,

'hankies' and keyholders are popular items used to commemorate the dead in public spaces and to some degree also in more private settings. Obituary pamphlets are booklets containing biographical information and photographs of the deceased, together with prayers, and are handed out during funerals. Obituary posters announce a death with all relevant details, mostly a picture and the name of the deceased, a long list of the names of family and mourners, as well as the funeral arrangements. They function as public invitation cards and are printed in colour on self-adhesive foil, like stickers. Funeral banners are a development of the obituary posters. In a much larger format of A0 or bigger, and printed on a thick PVC base, the banners are an image-based format, which relies on the power of one or two photographs of the deceased.

With the advent of digital technology, the use of visual media which are adapted to local needs and practices has emerged as an anthropological research object, instead of being mainly a form of documentation for the latter. Tobias Wendl traces the visual history of photography in Ghana and West Africa, especially in relation to funerary contexts (2020). In his social history of photography and illustration for the region, he finds that photography and the use of photographic images have partly become funerary and death-related practices, turning them into tools for introspection, documentation and re-embodiment of the dead. In Ghana, photography has become an 'object' of importance in relation to death. Andrea Noll and Jan Budniok date the emergence of obituary pamphlets back to the late 1970s in Ghana (2017) while announcements of the deaths of prominent members of society, visually and in written form, can be dated back to the 1930s (McCaskie 2006). Apart from the use of visual print media in public spaces, other means of publicizing deaths and funerals are obituary radio announcements, such as made through the local radio station Volta Star FM, and announcements regarding upcoming funerals that are broadcast over loudspeaker systems at information centres in town. Most banners follow similar visual guidelines (see Bredenbröker 2024a). There is a heading, a title describing the death, such as 'Home Call' or 'Glorious Exit', then a photograph of the deceased, either as a portrait shot or full body. Depending on the designer's taste and the client's demands, the background can be filled with stock imagery, such as a Western style interior, or it may simply consist of more subtle colour schemes and patterns. Other written text on the banner will usually display the name and the age of the deceased. Placing a smaller, framed image in the lower part of the banner has become very popular, usually depicting the deceased as a young person if they have died at a more advanced age. What is remarkable about the funeral banners is that, in comparison to the posters, they provide only very little, selective written information, with the photograph and the visual aspects of the banner format predominating. This makes them more immediately consumable by passers-by. The information communicated focuses on the face of the deceased – their marker of identification – as well as on what name

they were known by, what age they reached and, to some degree implied by the title, whether their death is considered a 'good' or a 'bad' death. In all parts of town, some walls are dedicated as pinboards for notices and advertisements. Here, political campaign posters of the upcoming presidential elections 2016 and advertisements for religious events mix with obituary posters. Funeral banners and political campaign posters appear across town, in likely and unlikely places, implying a proximity of death to positions of power and its representation.

The economy around printed obituary media resembles the economy of grave construction in many ways, putting a synthetic material and digital technologies that are difficult to access in rural places at its centre. The production of the banners for the community relies on a network of trade relations between Peki and larger towns such as Ho and Accra. As most printing businesses in Accra are Chinese-owned and offer their services at cheaper rates than the local print shops in the Volta Region, this fuels a lively back and forth between the capital and the countryside. In the making and use of the banners, local photographers take on production roles as banner designers. Anyone who has a computer and some spare time can make money by offering to design banners – demand is high. While aesthetically, the images are fuelled by an imagined 'modern' or 'Western' digital space, the photographs of deceased community members are most central to these images. In town, digital images tend to have shorter lives than printed images, usually because access to digital technology is sparse, memory space is limited, and devices break. Printed copies of images remain for as long as the material can sustain them. While in previous decades the taking and owning of private photographs was a sign of privilege, today young people are less and less likely to have a printed photo collection. It is therefore often the case that photographs, taken for banal occasions such as a Health Insurance Card, or for more celebratory moments like a birthday, are taken digitally, printed and later scanned for the design of a banner, only to be printed again, this time at a much larger scale. While this ongoing transition from embodied to spirit-like, from digital to material, mirrors the transformation of the dead, local photographers make the most of their money by producing photo and video content of funerals, something that relatives are willing to pay a lot of money for. Kojo,[8] a photographer working in Peki, offers beautifully made photo albums and carefully designed DVDs with covers to bereaved family members, which have proven a success. On a personal level, funeral banners are often made with economic considerations in mind. As advertisements, they attract guests to a funeral and help to hopefully receive some donations from those guests. However, they also uphold the memory of deceased community members for their families in public space. As I have written elsewhere, obituary print media contribute to producing a place in which these persons, independent of whether they have died 'good' or 'bad' deaths, may quietly take on an ancestral function, as would previously have been the case by having the dead close after a home burial (Bredenbröker

2024a). Importantly, this kind of ancestral presence now also seems to become attainable for those who have died 'bad' deaths and are materially and visually present through their funeral banners. Compared to historical documentation of 'bad' death and the inability of these dead to receive ancestor status, this is a change that offers an alternative route to making their deaths good, yet subtly and not verbally pronounced.

Direct relatives often express a degree of pain and melancholia in relation to having funeral banners on their houses. These images remind them of their loss daily, often combined with memories of the lying in state, which also took place in the house. At the level of personal experience, the extended proximity of the dead is therefore also daunting and difficult for relatives. This seems to apply less to photo and video documentation of the funeral. Video is either produced for relatives who live abroad, or it serves to ensure, by visual proof, that everything has been done to send the dead off in the best possible way. During funeral celebrations, while the body only allows for certain degrees of touch, funeral banners may be interacted with in a livelier manner and can also represent the deceased during the service when the coffin has already been closed. Tobias Wendl points out that the body should not be regarded as a unit that is disparate from media or technologically mediated objects, but should, following Marcel Mauss, rather be conceptualized as an 'archimedium' (Wendl 2020). Practices through which people in Peki relate to death make the dead body public. They equally rely on the publication of images and other mediated information concerning the dead, in which they are remembered as living community members, hereby reversing time. Information on death is publicly present through bodies, through visual-material media and by means of sonic impulses that resonate within the material structure of the town: from the walls of houses, crossing into the interior of the domestic space, and sounding along the valley. Gillian Rose and Divya Toliya-Kelly describe the intertwining of materiality and visuality from a practice approach as 'ecologies of the visual: where the co-constitution of materiality and visuality is in constant dynamic process and situated within networks, hierarchies and discourses of power' (2016: 4). The cycle of the digitization and materialization of images exemplifies such an ecology. Images are literally born, die and are born again in a circular process of transformation between the concrete and the abstract. To actualize an image in material form, one must have the financial and structural means to do so. As an exemplary format for such materialization, a funeral banner is much more than just an image – it becomes a representation of a deceased community member, which populates the communal space, which can partake in a funeral, and which also functions as an invitation for the public. Like an effigy, it serves as a 'better' representation of the deceased compared to the dead body, allowing hands-on contact, and conveying an impression of preserved, timeless life. Banners and posters can also be mobile or fixed, according to what is required at a specific moment, in contrast to the body, which is restricted by constraints on its movement

and containment. And finally, a banner can be placed alongside commercial ads, religious posters and political campaign posters, with the effect that the deceased populate the same sphere as political, spiritual and economic actors. One aspect of visual media's materiality is defined by the materials they are made of – in the case of obituary printing products these are the sheet plastic PVC (polyvinyl chlorine), self-adhesive sticky backs, synthetic ink, rope, rivets and other components. Only through synthetic materials, imbued with a moral evaluation of being 'appropriate', can these media-objects guarantee the continuous presence of the dead in public spaces. Obituary printing products are associated with durability, longevity and visual plasticity in terms of design work. The thickness of the PVC makes the banners proper 'objects' that can stand their ground, almost like signs, yet with the potential to be worn as a cape or skin, to be interacted with during a funeral, and finally to be folded away and kept in the house once their time on display is up. As canvases, they promise a personalized design that is also a generalizing representation according to the visual prototypes of the format. The non-organic nature of the materials that are required, as well as large-scale colour printing technology, which is not available locally, make them objects of prestige, signs of being able to spend for the dead, and at the same time effective advertisements and proof of a working rural-urban relationship.

No less important as part of their materiality are the places where banners end up. These can be sticks as props, house walls, trees, signposts, the back windows of cars, the surfaces of graves and so on. It is, after all, the inextricable connection of the visual and the material that succeeds in making death a public affair. Additionally, other objects, such as coffins and wreaths, are sold very publicly at roadsides and in open air shops, adding to this presence. And then, finally, there is the public who practically shape these environments and objects, who look at them, consume them, normalize them and re-use them. Within their focus on practices, Rose and Tolya-Kelly also locate the viewer. The public, as eyes and bodies in relation to visual media and the material world, should rather be understood as a 'situated eye, an attunement to the collective, multiple and embodied textures, sensibilities and productive meanings of the visual through the material, and vice versa' (2016: 4). This approach seems like a useful guideline for anthropology in general, and more specifically for looking at visual media in context, such as the embeddedness and usage of obituary posters and banners in public spaces in Ghana. Rather than making use of art-historical theoretical approaches – broadly understood as judging aesthetic properties with the specific ability to 'read' them – Rose and Tolya-Kelly's understanding of the public can help to capture undertones of uses and meanings that are attached to the present visual media *in situ*. The public for obituary print media is context-specific. Its aesthetics and aesthetic measures are coined through a feedback process of reception and production with individual elements contained in every visual outcome. In this feedback

process, repeating a cycle of births and rebirths of images into the material world, images and sonic information constantly oscillate between an agentic and a receiving position. According to Gell's art nexus model, in which he sees 'art objects' (broadly understood) and humans as equally able of being agent, recipient, index and prototype, images and sounds constantly change roles. While a public which receives information from these media does so as recipients, the images and sounds also act upon their audience when placed in public spaces. They communicate information about a family, and the deceased's social and moral status post-mortem, and they include the deceased in a publicly owned body politic. Unlike the materiality of graves, in which bodies are contained away from the living, these dead are allowed to populate the spaces of the living while retaining features of their social identity in a prototypical format. Funeral banners are therefore as much active participants in the makeup of a public as are the living community members: the public itself consists of people as much as of places and media. And, apart from being made by the living to fit their needs and purposes, they are also recipients that serve as intermediaries, as channels that communicate directly with the dead and their spatio-temporal locations.

Making Ancestors Personal: The Dadi Family Wardrobe Room

In contrast to the public ways of framing the dead and commemorating them, there are also private ways of doing so that happen behind closed doors, much less conspicuously. Rather than highlighting durable, commodified and de-personalizing synthetic materials that serve to deconstruct the social nexus of the deceased, personal, inalienable objects stand at the centre of private commemoration. Events in the sequence of containing the deceased spiritually and physically allow institutions to introduce their interests. In contrast, personal objects and private spaces allow a more personal fashioning of the dead. Without explicitly being called ancestors, such representations come close to the concept and description of ancestors in the 'traditional' Ewe sense. These are hidden from sight, at the heart of private living spaces. When lodging with the Dadi family after my arrival in Peki, I came across a room in the house that was used as a storage room for old sewing machines, tar buckets and other things. But at second glance, it revealed itself as a room for three wooden wardrobes containing the clothes of dead relatives: the mother, father and sister of Kuma, the father of the family. An adjoining room, also uninhabited, was his mother's old room and still contained her bed and dressing table. By means of furniture and personal objects, which were archived here indefinitely and only occasionally used, borrowed, altered or traded, the dead had a continuous representation in the family house. They were given a personal space for continued remembrance, which had been there for several years already.[9] I lived with the Dadi family for the first two months of my time in Peki at their home in Peki-Dzake. The nuclear family with four children had returned to Peki,

the hometown of Kuma's family, from Accra. Kuma, being a member of the Dzake royal family, wanted to re-appropriate the house of his parents, which would otherwise have been left empty. Merci, his wife, recounted that her mother-in-law had put quite a bit of pressure on her because she was unwilling to move from the city to the countryside. She herself is not from Peki, so has no direct connection with the land. The family, having previously had a stable source of income in Accra, were now living in Peki with different and not always reliable work. Merci worked as a seamstress and Kuma as a *trotro* minibus owner, professions that produced ebbs and flows of income. Kuma was also active in the local E.P. Church community and in summer 2018 he became a presbyter there, a prestigious voluntary position. However, the belongings and spaces of their dead relatives were, to a large degree, exempt from use calculations or transforming them to feed the family. After finding that this apparently uninhabited room contained the wardrobes of three dead relatives, I was puzzled. None of the family members owned a wooden wardrobe for their own clothing. The usual practice in the house was to hang clothing on a piece of string in one's own bedroom or to keep them in a wooden box. Why, then, I wondered, would they use these refined pieces of furniture for clothing which appear to be merely stored? After some time, I was allowed to explore the three collections of clothing in their respective wardrobes. As furniture, the individual wardrobes had also belonged to the respective person whose clothes were now being stored in each of them. Kuma told me that these things were destined to remain there, in the family house on family land, at the origin of the family. His mother's wardrobe alone contained a huge number of different tailored outfits, church and choir clothes, funeral attire, celebratory clothing, pieces of cloth, *kente*, underwear, handbags, towels and beads.

According to the family, some things had been given to family members, and all the gold jewellery had been sold to pay for the children's school fees. Kuma told me that buyers 'from the north' who pass through town usually come to houses to enquire if people are open to selling things. Even though the family agreed that to them the things that remain are of no monetary value, Kuma said that they had recently refused to sell anything else. All that was left now were things of no direct use to family members. Even the wardrobes were unwanted as objects of everyday use, having been removed from everyday life and circulation, while remaining in the place of the living, the family house. As Merci explained, the most useful and valuable things in the private wardrobes today were the pieces of cloth or fabric which had not been sewn into a tailored outfit, usually intended for use as extra hip wraps to accompany women's outfits. These could now be used for a completely new outfit and adjusted to a person's figure and taste. Some of the family's clothing had been made from such pieces of fabric, while other pieces had been altered to fit family members. Some of the more valuable festive clothes or *kente* weaves (which are usually untailored) could be borrowed by family members and people who came to visit on special occasions. The rest was

destined to remain in the wardrobes. Quietly, and without religious or other ideologically charged explanation, these wardrobes had been given a place in the house and were maintained like representations of the three deceased family members. While this might have been a rare instance of a family maintaining their relatives' wardrobes, it also shows that things that they deemed to be of relatively little value and quite irrelevant in terms of their actual use were nonetheless imbued with a personal value through their careful storage. Throwing them away or selling more of them was not an option for the family. As these silent but materially present reminders of three people's lives, they served a purpose. They were there to maintain their memory and presence in the house, but in a low-maintenance way. They also guaranteed that, while the deceased's bodies were buried in Dzake cemetery, memories and personal connections may endure in a more private place. In the cemetery, as Kuma showed me, he updated his sister's grave when his mother was buried, and he had money to spend on an engraved stone from Accra. The old concrete slab with tiles that adorned the family bathroom was taken off and can still be found a few metres away, left along the wayside. Investing in a public representation of his family by means of graves was apparently still a good idea, even several years after a grave had been completed. But while the bodies, graves and memories of the deceased as members of the community now belonged to the community and their family's representation, their intimate social relations remained in possession of the family and could, to a degree, be integrated into their lives.

Tricking Death Is Only a Temporary Solution

The alternative sequences described here have demonstrated different strategies in response to the pressure created by communal claims and demands. A mixed-faith funeral may be used to circumnavigate demands made in the case of a fully 'traditional' funeral, while allowing mourners more time to re-imbue the deceased with personal and social connections, represented as gifts in the coffin. Ownership of the dead may be outsourced to private landlords, as in the case of the *Porte du Paradis* cemetery, or work for the dead may be outsourced while achieving greater durability and distinction by obtaining better materials for the construction of the grave. Instead of making kin or community members work for the dead, materials and an initial payment take over this job, thus freeing the living from further necessary engagement. In social institutions that seek to re-engage with community members outside of town, responsibilities and states of indebtedness to the community are maintained through obligations around funerals. Equally, these obligations can also be channelled by trying to change the structures that allow for this kind of pressure to be put on expat community members, here using the dead and their uncontained agency as accomplices for changing the political status quo in the community. Public visual-material and sonic representations of the dead, mediated through modern technology

and synthetic materials, contribute to an elevated political importance of the field of death. They also serve to mark moral states of the deceased while bringing the dead as new ancestral representations back into the centre of the community and eventually allowing 'bad' death to become 'good'. Behind closed doors, private connections and the representation of the dead as ancestor-like presences may be achieved by maintaining representative collections of personal objects, which may be shown, kept or partially reappropriated according to a family's needs.

There are shifting roles, relations and properties that can be abducted from various attempts at changing the status quo around death in the community. These roles show that, depending on whether one is a local politician, a bereaved family member, an expat community member, a successful business owner, a wandering spiritual element of a deceased or a religious authority, one may want to channel the agency of the dead into different directions. Hence, alternative strategies are needed in this struggle to achieve different outcomes for containing and commemorating the dead. The effects of changes imposed on the local population by missionaries and colonial administrations still resonate in the ways in which death and its associated power struggles are addressed today. Equally, though, these kinds of struggles are also connected to more contemporary states of unequal relations, such as represented by extractivism, trade of materials and goods as well as access to technologies, including the tools needed to recycle and dispose of materials that would otherwise remain indefinitely and pollute the environment (see Bredenbröker 2024b). Ultimately, it would be a misguided and indeed colonial perspective to condemn a local Ghanaian population of waste mismanagement when looking at ways in which synthetic materials and the dead are entangled. Max Liboiron describes such a kind of negative and condescending view in their discussion of non-indigenous evaluations of Native American land relations (2021). Rather, it is neo-colonial relations that bring materials into a social and ecological setting without enabling people to dispose and recycle of these materials in a way that will not harm human and non-human inhabitants. This, of course, is not the fault of those that have been systemically disenabled to take full agency of these processes, meaning that larger political and economic structures beyond communal and individual control have led to an unequal distribution of resources and technologies across the globe. For example, while plastics and other synthetic materials are produced and traded across borders, it is especially places in the Global South such as Ghana where they end up without the facilities to recycle them, due to a larger set of global injustices and inequalities (Masco 2021). Yet, synthetic materials as 'external' arrivals are integrated into local social contexts beyond their mundane use value. As the two funerary sequences and various alternative strategies presented here show, social ecologies of beliefs, relating and evaluating human and more-than human worlds will incorporate new arrivals in very idiosyncratic ways. Such new arrivals may be materials, ideas, institutions or aesthetics.

Ultimately then, the notion of agency, which in the art nexus model retains the function of a thought experiment on a post semiotic-philosophical level, takes on a decidedly political meaning. Taking agency, in that sense of the term, means to contribute to the shaping of conditions for living in a place where one maintains social and land relations. It means contributing to taking control of one's own destiny and of social institutions, as well as of spheres that to some degree remain outside the strictly human, meaning the social field of influence. These other spheres are the worlds of non-human living beings on earth, the forms in which the environment exists beyond the categories of being alive or inanimate, as well as spheres of more-than-human entities such as the dead, which lie beyond the immediately accessible space and time of the living.

Notes

1. Pseudonym.
2. The history of the farm has not been well documented. However, during the time of my research up until 2018, it was run by investors from the global corporation Equatorial Farms. This investor seems to have withdrawn from the farm in 2019, see 'Ghana Headlines': http://78.47.45.183/agency/ghana-web-/20190121/106622202/operations-suspended-workers-laid-off-as-equatorial-farms-face-challenges, accessed 2 January 2023.
3. Pseudonym.
4. For a detailed contextualization of the term neo-colonial as I am using it here, please refer to the Introduction.
5. Pseudonym.
6. The end of the kingdom of Crepi, which was the Peki State, occurred formally with the division between the German (later French) and the British colonial territories, which divided this area. This was perceived differently by different parties and, while not welcomed by the traditional authorities of Peki, other chiefs, who did not appreciate being bundled under Peki, welcomed this intervention. Equally, other attempts by external forces to create a sense of unified national identity, this time according to language and ethnicity, were sought by the German missionaries of the NMG (Norddeutsche Missions-Gesellschaft). In her account of the NMG's idea of a unified Ewe nation, Birgit Meyer tells the story of how missionaries sought to construct a unity that had in fact never existed as such (Meyer 2002), hence employing different external ideas of belonging and identity than those which were locally present.
7. See Chapter 1 for a detailed account of the colonial history of the region.
8. Pseudonym.
9. Usually, commemorative items relating to a deceased are removed after a year, when the finished grave is unveiled and the person is believed to ideally reach ancestral status.

Conclusion
The Agency of the Dead, the Agency of Synthetic Materials

> So that in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death.
>
> —Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

The accounts of a Ghanaian Ewe community's engagement with death in this book show that, different to what Thomas Hobbes has claimed, the struggle for power does not end with death. Rather, it includes the dead and makes them a vital component within the social fabric of the living. The dead form part of the body politic's makeup. In Peki, events and practices that occur around death represent sites of convergence in plain public sight and at the heart of the local community, incorporating within them economic, religious and political activities. Whoever 'owns' the dead can affect the society of the living from a position of authority. The dead and the living are connected in a system that serves various political aims. Materials and tendential qualities invested into them are crucial elements for manipulating these political relations. In the Introduction, I set out by asking what locally attributed moral and temporal properties of the dead and synthetic materials do in relation to social change. In other words, does control over the dead-synthetic-material-complex serve to keep power relations as they are, or to promote various agendas of change, and if so, to what end? This question is relevant because it considers the effect that historical events of grand scales, such as colonial and missionary activity, have on social life today. Adding a focus on a specific set of materials made sense to me in this context. Synthetic materials were what stood out during my time of research. The ways in which residents of Peki relate to death and the dead today are unthinkable without PVC, plastic, cement, satin, superglue or synthetic ink. Synthetic materials, especially plastics and cement, also happen to stand at the centre of a global anthropocentric age of changing

the material makeup of ecologies, very often not in a favourable way but rather connected to the climate crisis und the unequal distribution of its effects globally. I believe that apart from providing interesting and educative ethnographic details, which this book has also done, there is something more important to be learned from my observations. It is an understanding of how historical effects of political pressure and inequality continue to be active today, and how these are locally embedded into very specific social practices that are always material at their core.

Anthropology and the Materiality of Death

The experience I had of being in Peki, of taking part, asking, learning, and exchanging with people is what the ethnography in this book relies on. Turning lived experience into a written account sometimes happens by way of storytelling, sometimes by way of summing up different events into one observation. In analysing this kind of ethnographic material to answer my initial questions, I have relied on anthropological works that address materiality and death. My account gives detailed insight into how and through which material qualities the dead become a vital part of the body politic in Peki, highlighting the importance of synthetic materials and their temporal attributes. My investigation of the lessons from the anthropology of death discusses the influence of the pioneering work of Robert Hertz and his secondary burial model (Hertz 1907). The profound value in Hertz's analysis lies precisely in his drawing attention to the body and its material transformations, insofar as it comes to represent the regeneration and reformation of the social body. As explored in the Introduction, work within the anthropology of death after Hertz has leaned towards studying the symbolic function of death or framed it as an impediment to be overcome to achieve social regeneration. That is to say, materiality comes to be of secondary or incidental concern to a supposedly more central question such as ritual or religion and the afterlife, usually favouring symbolic, structuralist or semiotic approaches. While I am taking a different approach here in highlighting the materiality of practices around death, there are still valuable insights to be found in the works of a range of authors writing after Hertz. I have gathered crucial clues and references from Ernst Kantorowicz's discussion of the role of effigies (2016 [1957]). Kantorowicz's ideas are reflected in Susanne Küchler's work on *malanggan*, which explicitly grapples with the role of materiality and power around death (2002). Additionally, references to materiality and material practices in Gillian Feeley-Harnik's work – the consequences of which are implicit but often underdetermined or unexplored – serve as a valuable comparative foil (1991).

A more emphatic engagement with materiality has thus remained the secondary choice of frame for understanding death in anthropology, while archaeology has always embarked from exactly that point to understand life. Recently, however, a developing body of research in anthropology has

begun to address this oversight. These accounts have dealt predominantly with European societies and focused on the body and corporeal materiality, phenomenological approaches to the materiality of death, the making of memory, the formation of social identity, religion, and emotional states of mourning. The important role that materiality plays in the reproduction of social and institutional power is acknowledged and alluded to in contemporary work. Yet, it remains to be adequately actualized in contemporary analyses. My investigation of the Peki funerary cycle has therefore chosen to combine elements of anthropological theory that address the role of the material in social and cultural contexts with studies from the anthropology of death, which focus on the links between death and power. I have also contributed a perspective from a West African context, which goes beyond the predominant focus on European societies in studies that attempt to link death and materiality. In the existing studies that deal with African societies, the often-conspicuous funeral celebrations have taken centre stage and resulted in approaches that treat materiality as again secondary to other systemic questions and concerns (Jindra and Noret 2013). To enrich the existing body of anthropological work on death and materiality, I chose to provide a fuller account of the values, qualities and degrees of agency that the material world has within the funerary cycle. This extends Hertz's claim that the body and the 'social' are intimately connected in their relation to death by suggesting that it is not only the body itself which is the materially interesting focal point. Rather, much can be gleaned when we extend the notion of the social body to the broader material environment in which individual bodies are submerged. Indeed, taking Hertz's outlook further, we see how materiality has its own agency in producing indigenous notions of the 'good' and 'bad' death, along with their social consequences.

I have focused on analysing aspects of material properties in flux, of human interactions and perspectives on the material world. The works of Alfred Gell and Webb Keane have given me the necessary theoretical foundation in poststructuralist semiotics to frame death with a focus on its materiality in Peki. I have followed Gell's art nexus model (1998), Keane's 'semiotic ideologies' (2018) and other anthropological adaptions of the Peircian 'qualisign'. This latter perspective claims that things may be part of a sign system while still producing a variety of possible effects resulting from their different evaluations. Socially shared and subjective perspectives on materials and things, as well as the momentarily activated 'tendencies' of materials are expressed in relation to their transformations, as these become relevant in funerary and commemorative practices. Material differences between ephemeral constitutions of graves, bodies, gifts and decoration, as well as durational variations, mark the stages of a successfully lived life, a legacy well established, and a task completed to the satisfaction of the living. Adam Drazin's work on the social life of materials and their 'tendential' properties (2015) confirms that materials are undergoing constant transformations and are subject to perspectival readings of their

'tendencies' – qualities and properties which may or may not become relevant. In Peki, local perspectives on materials highlight how tendencies such as longevity, newness and artificiality have profoundly impacted not only the physical constitution of funerary contexts but, more importantly, their evaluative and moral registers. Concrete, plastic, cellophane foil, and satin are contextually regarded as producing a state of containment and durability: contributing to the making of 'good' death, they are seen to be resistant to change and transformation. Given that, in particular, 'plastics and their chemicals defy containment . . . as they blow, flow and off-gas so that their pollutants are ubiquitous in every environment tested' (Liboiron 2021: 17), this latter perspective on synthetics undermines some of the morally positive attributed qualities which here are specific to the Peki context. Yet, as Max Liboiron remarks, plastics, just like other synthetic materials, operate on a scale of 'geological time, and cleaning just shuffles them in space as they endure in time' (2021: 17). In Peki's local political economy of death, however, subjective perspectives on materials and their ostensible temporal qualities function as the basis for other positive moral evaluations. Ultimately, each and every community member in Peki is assessed in terms of their contribution to social life. One of the core aspects of participating in social life is ensuring that the funerary cycle is successfully executed. This is assessed according to the degree of permanence that can be established. Thus, from a local perspective, durable materials represent morally 'appropriate' ways of establishing the deceased in the time and space of the dead.

Gell's method of time-mapping and the concept of chrono-geography have allowed me to theoretically frame the connection between the visible and the invisible, between time and space, life and death, in a concrete, applied way (Gell 1992). Time-maps are produced through moving and containing the body. Materials and places that play a role in this movement and containment thus act as 'go-betweens' (Pomian 2006) connecting the worlds of the living and the dead. Depending on their context, go-betweens may be used to separate or to induce touch between worlds. They can function as anchors on time-maps that make the locations and movements of the dead subject to the living's control. Techniques like wrapping, sealing, covering and layering are material practices: they remove the person from a living nexus of social and economic relations in order to protect both worlds from possibly dangerous contact. Visual and sonic media are caught in a perpetual cycle of transformations between material and immaterial states. Their role as go-betweens often serves a mediating or representative function, which fosters connection instead of separation. Through funeral banners, a deceased person can be touched and moved even when their physical body is restricted. Additionally, Gell's art nexus model of reading art objects as 'person-like' sources of and targets for social agency has proved very productive for understanding the effects and affects of the material world beyond the binaries of human life and death (Gell 1998). This occurs in a time and space 'beyond' the world of the living, where the

possible agency of the dead – and the living's attempts to contain it – risks transgressing such categories. By seeing agency as a quality that can be executed by different human and non-human entities in a nexus of relations, it becomes evident that depending on which perspective one takes – different community members, social institutions, spirits, ancestors – the agent-patient-prototype roles may be attributed differently. Following the art nexus model and its proposed roles reveals that whether the living or the dead are in control may be a matter of difference of perspective, and that the upper hand over having agency in that regard may be lost in an instant. Whether the dead are contained and of use towards maintaining current power relations among the living or whether they take agency and challenge those power relations, sometimes also serving the intentions of community members that seek to do so, happens through the indexical transfer of properties from synthetic materials towards the dead. The art nexus model and its proposed idea of understanding the effects of agency as a process of abduction via different relations therefore helps to highlight how things may be in control and out of control, go right or go wrong, based on a shared set of practices and perspectives relating to material properties.

Synthetic Materials, Death and Time – Taking Agency through Anthropological Work

Due to the large public visibility of death in the town of Peki, my ethnographic account has dealt with a variety of things, materials and places that make death tangible: dead bodies and the soaps they are washed with, cemeteries and the economy of using concrete versus perishable materials to build a grave, decorative materials such as satin fabrics that cover the walls of rooms during a lying in state, obituary posters and funeral banners that feature colourful digital images and photos on PVC sheets. Also, the morgue's limiting architecture with its use as a site of communal mourning or things that are donated to the dead, such as the colourful grave wreaths made of plastic ribbons and cellophane foil. As these examples demonstrate, synthetic materials play a particularly important role in the process of intently transforming the deceased of the community into spiritual entities. The ethnography has engaged with a field of tension that emerges when 'things get out of hand', here applying to the dead, power and synthetic materials in combination. Understanding processes around death and commemoration as processes of negotiation places a focus on power relations. At times, the endeavour of exercising control over both the dead and synthetic materials turns out to be a quite tricky business. The dead partially tend to defy containment, spiritually as well as materially, especially when having died a death that is locally categorized as 'bad', for example through accident or at a young age, while 'good' death offers more chances of controlling the destination and behaviour of the dead. The distinction between the two, however, is not always straightforward and often equally

subject to negotiations. Therefore, all efforts that the living undertake in engaging with the dead and laying them to rest are always at risk of slipping into unsafe territory and possibly being subverted by powers beyond their control. In that respect, funerary and commemorative activities mimic the workings of power within the community, which is never quite safe from being challenged by individuals and groups with intentions different to those who hold on to it. Similarly, attempts to contain the transformations and lives of synthetic materials may be just as challenging, since synthetic materials do not 'die' the same death as organic materials and may in fact be hard to get rid of, as comes to show in the global problem of recycling and disposing of synthetic materials as rubbish.

As stated before, my interpretation of the presented ethnographic material builds on Robert Hertz's secondary burial model. Coming from a contemporary and anti-colonial perspective, though, I am critically referring to and expanding on Hertz's model, which stems from a time of so-called 'armchair' anthropology. In many aspects Hertz's model is brilliant and, borrowing the words of Lévi-Strauss, 'good to think with'. At the same time, it was based on a mix of archival sources, not empirical fieldwork. In Peki, just like Robert Hertz suggests, the living also aim to gain control over death and restrict the dead to their proper space, temporality and degree of agency. In other words, for the dead to not be disruptive and possibly pose a threat to the community members, their new state of existing in the world and the beyond must be limited by boundaries. This happens through materially mediated and socially enacted processes of working towards containment and shaping transformations. But instead of focusing exclusively on the transformation of corpses, as Hertz does, I also consider material things and substances around the dead body, literally providing matter with which to negotiate who can leave their mark on the transformed dead and who gets to demonstrate their social standing via materially shaping the transformative process which is death. This extended take on Hertz's framework makes for a more nuanced understanding of society as a diverse group with multiple intentions that become manifest around the dead. Transformation is a process that relies on temporality in a particular way: it either is left to unfold on its own, uncontrolled, as time passes, or it is manipulated by humans, often against the flow of time. It is time, therefore, that is aimed to be controlled and navigated by the living in the face of death. I refer to the temporality of death and its associated transformations by discussing the temporal qualities associated with materials while building on Alfred Gell's concept of controlling time through time-maps (Gell 1992). With their apparent properties of durability, of resisting change and withstanding deterioration, synthetic materials, by which I understand materials that are artefactually made by humans and do not, as such, occur in nature,[1] seem ideal for establishing boundaries and stability. They virtually cement and conserve the dead in the places where they are supposed to belong. Synthetic materials, in the eyes of the living, transform differently,

if at all. They represent the opposite of organic transformation, a process that human bodies undergo when left to their own devices after death (as well as during life).

When aiming to control the process of physical transformations of corpses and establishing boundaries for the spiritual elements of the dead, synthetic materials therefore appear as helpful accomplices against unruly transformation. These materials are hugely popular in the community as materials for funerary and commemorative contexts. They are also ubiquitous in everyday life, such as, for example, marked by 'Pure Water' plastic bags in which drinking water is contained and sold across West Africa. Coincidentally, these are often also branded with labels of religious institutions, such as the E.P. Church in Peki-Avetile, hereby framing packaging and content as morally good. However, while these durational attributes of synthetic materials may come across as unshakeable properties, it turns out that these materials, too, are equally subject to transformation and deterioration, albeit of different temporality and quality. On a pure water sachet from Peki that I took home to Germany, a recycling logo promises that the material is oxo-biodegradable, meaning it is conventional plastic with additives that are supposed to speed up its decomposition in a non-environmentally harmful way. Yet, whether that is true is currently subject to heated debate, with different parties contesting that the process does not result in microplastics as by-products. However, with no recycling facilities in sight, the end-of-life of these sachets in the Ghanaian countryside is often just being left scattered across the landscape or burnt on dumps. The former option seems to imply that the material excuses the sachet's presence as rubbish in all kinds of environments, whereas the latter makes no use of these changed material properties at all. Transformations of synthetic materials become particularly apparent as 'different' when compared to the transformations of so-called organic materials, such as human bodies, plant matter or animal products. Synthetic materials are framed according to a particular local, socially shared perspective around them, often defying some properties and transformations of synthetic materials and highlighting others selectively. This could be called a semiotic ideology in Keane's terminology or a collective representation in Hertzian terminology. By way of pointing out similarities between intentional attributions and uncontrolled behaviour, it becomes apparent that the dead in Peki and synthetic materials are in fact quite similar and mutually constitutive in several ways. Objects made of plastic and synthetic fibres, for example, are often employed to support the new and ideal state of the dead, turning them into ancestors, who have arrived at their destination in the beyond. Hence, via engaging with different materials, objects and environments, the ideal transformed dead become indices – that is, places of inscription – of ideal social relations.

As my ethnography shows, things and materials can serve as effective agents in the process of producing durability, an extended present time as well as material, physical and spiritual control over the dead. Local

perspectives on material tendencies in funerary contexts and in everyday life imbue synthetic, commodified and plastic materials with the same agentic qualities that the Hertzian sequence of unmaking and remaking a person in death yields. In line with Gell's art nexus model, objects and materials that are deployed in the funerary cycle in Peki sit in a nexus of relations that collectively work to control the dead body's process of transformation alongside the changing relations of the surviving. Taking the role of an agent in the production of containment, these materials and things are employed to subject the dead to human control in what, following Gell, works as an agent-patient relationship (Gell 1998). Yet, on a broader analytical pane of understanding power relations in contemporary neo-colonial relations and before historical backgrounds, the term agency also contains within it the question of self-determination and taking political control of the powers that be, as I mentioned before. Concerning such an understanding of agency, anthropology has seen its fair share of proclaiming political, anti-racist and otherwise socially transformative agendas to empower people fighting for these aims. Anthropology has also seen its fair share of the opposite. The ethnography of this book has, in a way, dealt with quite a traditional subject matter of the discipline and gone about it from an (among other things nevertheless also) white, European perspective by means of ethnographic description and participant observation. Yet, I hope to go beyond these roots of my discipline and my own personal background and to contribute to an understanding of social life that will empower the former kind of anthropological aims. The entanglements of historical developments in relation to death and power and of moral evaluations around persons and materials show how ideas, rules and materials are not only transformative but also become actively transformed in a local social context. In this case, that context is the Ghanaian south and a small town in the Volta Region. Thinking through the entanglements of death, time and synthetic materials shows that it is just as important to understand the social aspects of living with ideas and materials in constant social transformation as it is important to understand the more 'scientific' aspects that often become highlighted in environmental critiques relating to waste and the afterlives of synthetic materials. Understanding that there are local ways of agentially transforming, adapting and tricking at the intersection of these fields which may not immediately seem to conform to ideas proclaimed by what Max Liboiron terms 'dominant' scientific environmental critique is important (2021: 20). Understanding these ways of taking agency adds a decidedly social perspective on living in a material(s) world. It highlights the negative effects of abuses of power, both on the environment and on ways of living. On a local level, the effects of historical development and the influx of new materials and things may become culturally appropriated in unexpected ways, resulting, for example, in combined forces of lost spirits with plastic bags, or ancestral existence with cement. This kind of creativity speaks to Birgit Meyer's description how Ewe people translated Christian terms and ideas to

fit local beliefs (1999). It is also in line with the perceived fluidity and openness of Ewe concepts, including ascriptions of inside-outside status.[2] And finally, the social institutions that may be reaffirmed by such unexpected combinations are challenged and sought to be changed by using the same materials, now differently interpreted. It is the local meanings, evaluations and political functions that materials take on which must be understood. Such insights can then inform a fruitful exchange with other viewpoints, all of which may have a different idea of what taking agency means.

The Work for the Dead and Political Economy

This book claims that a study of the 'political economy of death', borrowing Feeley-Harnik's term, benefits from taking seriously the concrete materiality of its respective field. Consequentially, my ethnography illuminates the material forces latent in practices around death. At the same time, it points towards the significant social and political implications which risk being underplayed in existing anthropological approaches to materiality. It is the connection and navigation of these two fields, which often fail to align, that proves to be a fruitful jab at recombining the thoughts of my anthropological ancestors towards new aims. In combination, they show how materiality, when given its proper place in the study of death, reveals important insights into power within a body politic. Hertz claims that the society of the living must emerge from death victorious and receive affirmation of its continued existence beyond the spectre of finality. If that is so, it follows that those various formations of 'the social' will produce different forms of ownership over the dead. It is the work for the dead and the ways in which this work is channelled which become decisive social tools for owning the dead. As Erik Mueggler comments, confirming Hertz's approach, 'work for the dead is ultimately intended to make them into others – into the kind of strangers with which one may enter into formal contracts' (2017: 7). The notion of 'regeneration' and its accompanying image of a homogenous 'social' is not adequate, without some qualification, for the diversity of contemporary Ghanaian society. In the Peki community, there is not just one authority that has exclusive claim to the dead. Kin groups, representatives of the state and of local traditional governance compete over the authority to regulate the funerary cycle, which plays out in physical spaces such as the morgue, cemeteries or family houses. Local traditional authorities and kin groups often prove to be more successful than the state. Contributing further to their strong political standing, bereaved community members who have moved abroad are pressured to siphon money back to local authorities and kin. Communal judgements in response to death add another decisive element. By evaluating the deceased and their nuclear family member's relationship to the community, those who are deemed unengaged community members are punished for their lack of contribution. Since the resulting penalties include the deceased's children, the dead and the living are drawn together

through the process of caring for the dead and its associated responsibilities. Work for the dead and labour for the living prove to be closely entangled and infused with moral evaluations – made and resolved in an economy of payments, contributions and participation in relation to funerals. By means of the visual and sonic media that permeate public space, the work for the dead also gains high public visibility and importance, both in the Peki community and beyond.

The dead are divided into those who have died 'good' deaths and those who have died 'bad' deaths. These two cases have different functions with respect to authority. The former 'good' deaths are easy to integrate into predictable funerary cycles – ranging from storage and washing at the morgue to lying in state to subsequent burial. As such, the administrative and pecuniary interests at each stage of this process remain undisturbed, maintaining a normative order. The latter, 'bad' deaths, however, are much harder to contain and control, since they simultaneously operate in various spatio-temporal locations, be it the cemetery, the *agbadɔme* site or the site of the original accident. This unpredictable oscillation between the spirit world and the world of the living poses a danger and destabilizes the authorities controlling the 'good' death sequences. That is to say, the movement of bodies – and the unique materiality of places and things associated with it – is intimately tied to how power is distributed, reproduced and disrupted in Peki. The dynamic interaction between rules, regulations and the use of material and visual things, each influencing the other in intricate ways, thus contributes to a political economy of death in the community. Opportunities and dangers emerge in cases where the worlds of the dead and the living are at risk of colliding. An example of this can be seen when gifts for the dead at an *agbadɔme* site begin to mix with the rubbish of the living at a nearby dump. Here, the material qualities of gifts and rubbish, all of which do not organically decompose, are, rather, transformed over time, contributing to the dead's extended presence in the *agbadɔme* places. The inability to recycle rubbish at dumps poses a problem for the living – as does the associated persistence of the unruly spirits of the dead. By turning the rubbish into a site of spirituality, the spiritual and material realm of *agbadɔme* comes to resemble the rubbish dumps in appearance and function – and vice versa. Established boundaries are wilfully destabilized when rubbish overflows into these other spaces (see Bredenbröker 2024b). Yet, it is hard to pinpoint individual responsibility here. Ultimately, a takeover of the *agbadɔme* place by rubbish means that this site becomes re-introduced as a usable place for the living. It is re-mapped spatially and temporally and may possibly even become available as a seat of local traditional power. Rumours had it that a local chief wanted to build a new palace at the *agbadɔme* site, an exertion of power only made possible because this spiritual site had been 'compromised'. And whether these were only rumours or had some truth to them, such stories demonstrate that death-related sites are seen as desired by power in the public eye. This ethnographic observation pays attention to the

micropolitics of the material. It is an example of how the political economy of death is more richly understood when taking note of the agency and role that the material world plays in it, something that would have been missed in a study that leans towards studying 'just' monetary payments or social and political organization around death.

Implications

In considering the colonial history of Peki, the implications of this book also inevitably push beyond its empirical and geographical scope. Gillian Feeley-Harnik remarks that the Sakalava of Madagascar specifically banned the use of foreign materials in their ritual re-construction of the royal tomb (1991). Contextually, the work for the dead within a larger political economy of death among the Sakalava formed part of a strategic resistance against the French colonial government. In Peki, it is precisely the use of 'foreign' materials, such as commoditized, imported and factory-wrapped items like soap or underwear, as well as non-indigenous materials like concrete, plastic, granite or tiles which, from a local perspective, convey a sense of the morally good and appropriate. Some local actors have moral and cultural outlooks that differ from these prevailing views and practices, such as Bob and Jacqueline, the Rastafarian Ghanaian-English couple who run a local guesthouse, Roots Yard. They and their family were great hosts to me in Peki during my visits. We frequently discussed their approach to materials and local resources over home-cooked food and moringa shakes. On their business website, they express this in more formal words, stating that:

> Roots Yard is firm in the use of Traditional, Local, Natural Building Materials. We will not compromise and use imported tiles, even when this involves many difficulties of locating, acquiring and transporting, we do not bend. We know that this will not only benefit Ghana more than imported materials, but the natural Terracotta is organic and sustainable with the production causing minimum pollutants to the environment. There is also less Transportation reducing Our overall 'Carbon Footprint'. We use mud-brick instead of cement-block. Our local timber is being replenished by the Tree-planting projects we are helping to implement. We feel our buildings blend into the environment physically and aesthetically. (Roots Yard 2023)

These different moral horizons co-exist among people in Peki and Ghana. However, the views shared by the owners of Roots Yard represent the conviction of a minority in the country. Things are used for a reason, as the involvement and importance of durable, artificial and 'imported' commodities in practices around death exemplifies. They play important roles, serving specific political functions in the political organization of the town and are mediated through the funerary cycle. This is not to say, of course, that the living do not make extensive use of similar materials and things. The same satin fabric that is used for lying in state dresses and coffin inlays can also

be used for more sophisticated dresses worn for special occasions, such as church services, weddings or birthdays. Sponges made from synthetic fibres have long replaced those made from loose natural palm and yucca fibres – for the dead and for the living alike. A modern Ghanaian house is usually built with cement, not necessarily to the advantage of its inhabitants, as mud brick is in many ways better suited to the hot climate. Beyond the local scale and the town's specific political economy of death, these materials stand in a larger context as globally traded commodities. It would be hasty to conclude that those in the community who use and value these materials do so out of a lack of regard for the environment and ignorance of global economic power relations. There is no doubt that the role which these materials have in the community is also representative of structural injustice and exploitative capitalism, which floods Ghana with goods from outside. My study, however, wishes to paint a more nuanced picture in reflection of this dynamic. It shows that things made from synthetic materials are used to separate the dead from their social ties and relations. They are immediately 'at hand' and take an active part in this process in a way that the local materials that the Roots Yard website so proudly lists are not.

If anything, the fact that local and 'traditional' materials are harder to get than non-local and imported goods can be structurally associated with the fact that systems which care for the dead are much more elaborate and effective than systems that care for the living. From the perspective of many Ghanaians, funeral celebrations and funerary economies in the country are often criticized with this disbalance in mind. Why waste resources on the dead when the living in Ghana need them? These are justified concerns. However, the involvement of foreign materials and the function of the work for the dead in Peki cannot simply be understood by adopting the logic of usability that governs the economic and social exchanges between the living. Any proposed changes to these practices would need to consider the centrality of political economies of death within Ghanaian societies. But to do so – and this is the essential point – requires understanding this perspective from within the system's own logic. The colonial and neo-colonial history of Ghana, as well as the local migration and community-building that occurred before these external influences, reorganized the socio-political makeup of the region. Considering these events, it may be useful to recall Claudio Lomnitz's study of the role of death as a national symbol in Mexico (2008). His argument that 'Mexican death totemism reflects structural differences between nation formation in strong and weak states, between imperial and colonial states' rings true for Ghana more broadly and Peki as an Ewe community in the Volta Region, formerly German Togoland. The structural impoverishment and violent reformation of the local population still reverberates in the 'lifeworlds' (Jackson 2017) of Ghanaians today, albeit largely unconsciously. It persists in the exploitative trade relations between countries on the African continent and those nations that take advantage of their resources while treating them as markets and outlets for

their used cars, electronics and clothing. In contemporary Ghana, it is still much more difficult to purchase a new T-shirt, car or phone than it is to buy these as second-hand goods which arrive on a container ship. If you live in Europe, the United States or the UK, this should read as quite strange to you. Given this background, the meaning and moral valuation of new things and durable materials, as opposed to used things and indigenous materials that are prone to change, may be seen in a different light. The dead are likely to remain the most secure way of negotiating relevance and re-directing socio-political capital to institutions, places and individuals in Ghana. In an environment where life and livelihoods may be difficult to secure, materials that are invested with properties such as durability, newness and artificiality help to establish a transcendent sense of control and security, ultimately linking the world of the living with the beyond. That is, so I would say, until the conditions for building a livelihood become less precarious for the living. Taking these thoughts further, future contributions to this discourse may productively probe into uses, valuation and moral or spiritual associations of non-indigenous alongside indigenous materials. Death and funerals are certainly an interesting nexus for this kind of research in Southern Ghana. In other contexts, there may be different fields that carry a similar importance in the sense of a Maussian 'total social phenomenon'. Studies looking at the political economy around materials in a larger, global context, with comparative insights into the local micropolitics, may represent a particularly interesting research design.

I have dealt entirely with individual deaths, even in the cases of exceptional deaths such as murder and suicide. While only recounting a few select examples in ethnographic detail, I visited close to forty funerals over the course of my research. Although many aspects of life in Peki are less than perfect, life here is by no means governed through a state of exception. That means that other types of death, which are a product of exceptional circumstances, may require a different approach, especially in scenarios of mass death, genocide, epidemics or natural disasters. When looking at the precarious conditions of life it remains of great importance to gain an understanding of the overall context that distinguishes between the exceptional, the precarious and the state of normality – all notions, of course, that demand constant re-evaluation. In response to this ever evolving process of re-evaluating, I embrace the 'theoretical pluralism' that Chris Tilley advocates (2013: 11). My research contributes to the corpus of literature surrounding materiality, but also pushes these pathbreaking theories further to address their shortcomings. But perhaps this isn't just a question of some in-built deficiency of these theoretical apparatae. It may be more productive to reflect on whether it is the object of enquiry itself, the complexity of death (despite how misleadingly simple this signifier may appear), which never seems to be wholly circumscribable by the theories that attempt to fix it in place. A threshold notion *par excellence* – neither entirely material nor ideal, neither simply event or process, nor wholly at place in the profane or

spiritual world – it is the essence of the subject matter itself which unstably and yet productively elides and unifies different theoretical outlooks. Which would only be another way of saying what this book has done by telling stories about death in a Ghanaian town: that it is the matter itself which must be investigated as a relational agent within human social life and more-than-human ecologies.

Notes

1. See Introduction for an in-depth discussion.
2. Highlighted in Chapter 2.

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