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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

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'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'.