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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

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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.