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The temporal dilemma of death

par

Thomas WIDLOK*

RÉSUMÉ

L'un des dilemmes que la mort crée pour les endeuillés concerne le temps. Hertz a montré que la coupure de liens sociaux demande que des rituels puissent étendre le départ d'une personne décédée. Selon Rappaport, les rituels sont aussi un moyen de "numériser" le processus analogique prolongé de pourriture du corps et d'oubli. Dans cet article, j'étudie comment ce dilemme temporel est résolu par des rituels mortuaires dans le nord-ouest de l'Australie. Les objets possédés jouent ici un rôle important, et j'avance l'idée que leur traitement rituel reflète également ce dilemme temporel. Ces biens peuvent utilement être considérés comme l'objectification durable de souvenirs, tout en renvoyant simultanément à l'exclusion "numérisée" d'autres souvenirs. Un bien personnel enchâsse donc le même problème de continuité et de distinction que celui posé par le corps mort. Ceci signifie que ce qui arrive aux objets lors des funérailles va bien au-delà de question d'héritage ou de redistribution de biens.

MOTS-CLÉS : pourriture corporelle, oubli, rites mortuaires, objets de propriété, Australie

ABSTRACT

One of the dilemmas that death creates for the bereaved concerns time. Hertz pointed out that the severance of social ties requires rituals that can stretch the exit(us) of a deceased person. Following Rappaport, rituals also serve as a means to "digitalize" the analogic protracted process of bodily decay and of forgetting. In this paper I investigate how mortuary rituals in northwest Australia solve this temporal dilemma. Property objects here play an important part, and I argue that their ritual treatment also reflects the underlying dilemma. Property can be usefully considered to be the lasting objectification of memories and at the same time to be based on the "digital" exclusion of others. It therefore enshrines the same dilemma of continuity and clarity that is posed by the dead body. This indicates that what happens to objects at a funeral goes far beyond questions of inheritance and the redistribution of property.

KEYWORDS: bodily decay, forgetting, mortuary ritual, property objects, Australia

Properties and Bodies

One of the dilemmas that death creates for the bereaved concerns time. As Hertz has pointed out almost a century ago "participation in the same social life creates ties which are not to be severed in one day" ([1907] 2004:210). Hertz focused on temporary and final burials and the intermediate period between them but he under-

lined that this was but one way of solving the underlying dilemma. Correspondingly, it is one of the central arguments of this contribution that what makes a comparative perspective on mortuary rituals particularly important is not so much the re-occurrence of similar forms but the divergence of ways in which societies deal with a dilemma that is ultimately irresolvable because it is tied to the temporality of human life. As Hertz

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put it: “We cannot bring ourselves to consider the deceased as dead straight away: he is too much part of our substance, we have put too much of ourselves into him” ([1907] 2004:209-10). Talking of substance in this context is more than a vague metaphor. After all, the human body does not simply disappear with death. Instead its substance slowly decomposes just as the “memories and images”, the “desires and hopes” ([1907] 2004:210) that people have shared with the deceased contradict the immediacy of death. The surviving members of a society seek to resolve this dilemma through a diversity of rituals that can stretch the exit(us) of a person or otherwise help to deal with overlaps between death and life. In one of the most recent theories of ritual, Rappaport (1999) has argued along similar lines. Survivors are uneasy about the uncertain status of a recently deceased person and rituals are a means to “digitalize” the analogic process of protracted bodily decay and of forgetting (Rappaport, 1999: 87). In this article I will show how present-day funeral and pay-back rituals in northwest Australia solve the temporal dilemma of death. In this part of Australia it is the ritualized treatment and transfer of property items rather than secondary funeral rituals that today form central elements of death rituals. My argument, in a nutshell, is that property objects play an important part in these rituals because there are parallels between the memory processes that constitute property relations and those constituting relations with the dead. Property, I shall argue, can be usefully considered to be the lasting objectification of memories (see Ingold, 2005). At the same time the notion of property is also based on the “digital” exclusion of others, thereby posing the same dilemma of continuity and clarity that is posed by the dead body of the deceased.

Aboriginal rituals of death and inquest

In “The Australian Aborigines” Adolphus Elkin opened his chapter on death and death inquest in Aboriginal society as follows: “Death is probably the most significant and important social event” because it “makes a break in the unity and joint action of the social group” (1981:336). Members of one group jointly bear murder accusations and responsibilities, and therefore death inquests sometimes are satisfied by indicating the responsible group rather than a specific individual. Elkin concludes that “inquest and revenge are corporate acts” (1981:352). In other words, death temporarily

fractions the social group as a corporate actor and at the same time provokes corporate action as a response (see Durkheim, 1960: 571). Focusing on the dynamic between individual and group these analyses underline how important continuity is for the group. They remain silent on the more agent-centred temporality involved. The social agents that make up “the corporate actor” not only want time and the group to continue. Their interest is also one of synchrony. To suffer illness or the loss of a person can be described as a being out of step with time. Phenomenologically, those who suffer may be said to experience their situation as a “not anymore”, an interruption of the flow of ordinary practice, and as a “not yet”, with regard to the expectation to be reintegrated into this flow (see Fuchs, 2002). This is true for the suffering of illness but also for suffering the loss of a person to whom one is related and also for the suffering connected to the expectation of one’s own death. From an agent’s perspective, therefore, all these forms of suffering introduce a notion of the present moment as a marked event (the so-called A-series time) into the eventless time of before and after (the so-called B-series time) and a notion of dyssynchrony (see Gell, 1992). Suffering persons become aware of time as a sequence of events and of the ways in which their experience is not synchronous with the time around them. In other words, while the socio-centric view demands that life (of the group) should go on, the agent-centred perspective is an experience of asynchronies. If we want a proper understanding of actions surrounding death we need to capture the strategies for coping with these asynchronies. These strategies are forms of social action, as rightly pointed out by Durkheim and Elkin, but they are also based on individual experiences of death as a temporal phenomenon and this is where we may take some lead from the work of Hertz. As I shall point out in more detail below many of these strategies involve the treatment and transfer of property.

What follows is an ethnographic account of mourning rituals as observed in recent years in Aboriginal communities the northwest of Australia. Based on the Australian ethnography of the past, Hertz and others had already observed that the belongings of a deceased “may no longer be used for profane purposes; they must be destroyed or dedicated to the deceased, or at least stripped, by appropriate rites, of the harmful quality they have acquired” ([1907] 2004: 200). The case material from Australia presented here suggests that this association goes far beyond questions of inheritance or the redis-

tribution of property and beyond the personal items of the deceased. Rather, the transfer of new property items is also involved which underlines that rituals involving the dead and involving property items are governed by the same underlying dilemma – or at least have enough in common to be in close parallel to one another. The ethnography shows how closely intertwined dealing with death and dealing with property are in these present-day Aboriginal mourning rituals.

I focus on the rituals following the death of two young men whose funerals I witnessed in the late 1990s. The two men died in a drink and drive accident. An instant death, one could argue, but one that nevertheless requires a ritual that deals with the gradual transition between life and death. News about the car accident which took place near Fitzroy Crossing spread rapidly in the town and in nearby Kurnangi and Bayulu, the home communities of the two men involved, where the death rituals were later also held. In fact, loud wailing was heard across the town during the night even before details were known the next morning. However, social life continued in many ways as most members of the community continued to gamble, to collect welfare money, to go shopping, to drink alcohol, to go to Karaoke in the local pub, to drive carelessly and so forth. But while individuals continued their everyday activities, corporate action came to a halt in the sense that – to my detriment – all community meetings were cancelled for the three weeks between the accident and the funeral ceremonies. There is no formal rule that would prohibit meetings to take place after a death has occurred but people nevertheless abstain from making corporate decisions during that period. Death and mourning are clearly social facts.

When funeral notices were put up, they avoided mentioning the names of the deceased persons inviting mourners to “the funeral of “Johnny and Betty’s son”. This corresponds to a long period of avoiding the name of the deceased, an avoidance strategy that is still fairly rigidly and widely followed. The names of dead persons are no longer mentioned, also with regard to other persons with the same name who are still alive. A whole network of living persons is affected by a death and the dead person is defined in terms of social relations, namely as the son of a couple to whom every person in the community can easily establish their kin relation – and their appropriate behaviour in the funeral ceremonies to come. Kin terms may be used instead of personal names or the name may be spelled in single letters (“B-I-L-L”), if necessary.

The invitation to the funerals of the two men was widely posted and there was a clear expectation that many, including those who had no close connection to the deceased, would feel obliged to follow the invitation and to be at least present in the local community on that day. Modern telecommunications and transport facilities today allow many more people to participate in funerals than in the past. And the modern services of undertakers allow a considerable time lapse between death and funeral, again giving more people time and opportunity to attend the funerals. In this case the funeral notice was typed on a computer, photocopied and put up at shop notice boards as well as faxed to outstations and neighbouring communities. KALACC (the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre), a regional NGO, provided the money and personnel to send out a bus that collected participants from as far as Bidyadanga (La Grange) several hundred kilometres away from Fitzroy Crossing.

The attraction and the inclusiveness of funeral and inquest rituals, I suggest, lies in fact that during a present-day death ritual, elements of funeral rites and elements of ritualized death inquiries are brought together. The straightforward connection between deaths and death inquests, despite a temporal gap between the two activities in the past, has warranted that they have been commonly described in close connection (see Elkin, 1981; Berndt and Berndt, 1985). Ontologically, however, a close juxtaposition of the two touches upon a more general and largely unresolved problematic in discussions about Aboriginal religion. While the destiny of the dead involves notions of “eternal dreaming” which links places, mythical beings and individual life essences in an *a priori* connection, the inquisitive activities of the living who stay behind involve notions of social causation in terms of almost technical procedures for establishing who caused the death and what the adequate social response should be. In other words, in these events two sets of relations are brought together which have been carefully separated in Aboriginal ethnography as “a-priory causality” and “social causality” (see Kolig, 1995) and which have been discussed in terms of “mythical worldview versus historical consciousness” (Petri, 1983). For the Aborigines of today, I suggest, death rituals are special because they give participants the confidence of being able to handle both modes of relations in a shared ritual activity. Another contributing reason why today funeral, inquest and compensation ceremonies are combined into one event in the Kimberley

region is that – as already mentioned – the modern facilities combined with improved means of transport allow for some control over the timing of these events. Among Walmajarri speakers in the Fitzroy Crossing area all three elements, funeral, death inquest and compensation, are covered under the single term *purṭayan* usually translated as “payback” or “punishment”.

***Purṭayan* – Payback**

“Payback” or “smoking” ceremonies enjoy the full aura and power of tradition. At the same time it is not disguised that this re-introduction of a public smoking ceremony – after a period of missionary ban – is a public statement made by identifiable organizations led by known individuals. In fact the puzzling openness with which visitors from outside are granted access to funerals, as opposed to the everyday political meetings, can be interpreted as a deliberate declaration of “being traditional”. Smoking or payback ceremonies are frequently talked about but this is done in a subdued voice of respect or slight thrill. On one occasion that I witnessed a bystander said with a lowered voice that “*purṭayan* [payback, punishment] has started” and there was a distinct tension and expectation in the air. This was at the departure of decorated and loudly wailing mourners from their private house to the public space. That is to say, the “traditional” element was considered to be strong on this occasion but it was also carefully designed that way with the support of organizations that aim to strengthen the indigenous cultural traditions. While the smoking ceremony was not “staged” like a dance festival, it was meant to attract and to entertain a large crowd and at the same time it was also a serious political statement made at a particular point in history. This double bind of traditional and current concerns is also found in the form of the main activities carried out during the main ceremony.

However, one could argue that a smoking ceremony starts much earlier than the ritual proper, namely with discussions and speculations about the style of the ritual. In the run-up to the funerals of the two men killed in the car accident it was pointed out that the first would be a largely Christian ceremony as the relatives of the young man tried to keep the possibility of clashes between participants and unpredictabilities of inquest procedures low. The second smoking ceremony, by contrast, was said to be “very traditional” and possibly violent because the father

of the deceased had a strong connection to traditionally-minded desert Aborigines. The difference was also put in ethnic terms, the first funeral being “Gooniyandi” style (of a Kimberley group with long direct contact with the colonizing whites) and the second in the style of the Wangkajungka community, postcolonial arrivals from the Western desert to the south of the Kimberley and in the reputation of having a “very strong Law”. The separation was, however, far less clear on the ground insofar as the first funeral included a large group of participants “from the desert” and the second funeral drew heavily on the logistics of organizations based in Fitzroy Crossing and on the links that the father of the deceased had established over a long period of engagement in the Bunaba community (also a local Kimberley group, not a desert group). In both instances the smoking ceremonies drew on both, the knowledge of religious traditions and the knowledge of how to make use of government funded resources. This was particularly striking at the second funeral (at Kurnangi, just outside the “town” of Fitzroy Crossing) to which I will restrict myself in the following analysis.

In all cases observed the *purṭayan* rituals were spatially separated from both the burial and the church funeral service: A short church service took place either in a local church or a community hall where the coffin is laid out and from where it is brought to the burial ground, usually in considerable distance away from the settlements. The church service is not attended by the closest relatives of the deceased who are kept in seclusion at a separate ceremonial ground (away from both, church and burial ground) until the burial is complete. There, formalized ritual acts take place including the “payback” exchange of blankets, the short dance of medicine men, the smoking of property and people, and often a death inquest procedure.

The spatial divide entails some differentiation in the group of participants. Those who are most directly concerned with the funeral stay away from the church service and the burial. Conversely, outsiders like the Euro-Australian undertaker hired to conduct the church service and burial, stay away from the ceremonial ground. However, only very few Aborigines felt that the “traditional things” at the ceremonial grounds do not go well with their Christian conviction and therefore stayed away. It is noteworthy that the dominance of missions on public life seems to have decreased in Fitzroy Crossing. While it may have increased for those individuals who are seriously engaged in Christian practices, espe-

cially of fundamentalist denominations, there is no longer a public opposition against non-Christian “payback” ceremonies which did not occur (at least not publicly) in Fitzroy Crossing during the heyday of mission activity 20 years ago (Kolig, pers. com.). In terms of participation the death inquest and payback ritual under consideration here attracted a far larger crowd than the church service or the burial itself but on the whole all these elements seem to be considered to be of equal importance and not in competition with one another. This is noteworthy, especially for a place like Fitzroy Crossing which began as a mission station and which is now home to a good number of fundamentalist denominations with Aboriginal followership and where non-Christian rituals were effectively banned for a long time.

At Kurnangi, south of the main road and of the centre of Fitzroy Crossing, the ritual had been carefully prepared on the big oval space that forms the centre of this community. A large shade roof had been constructed from tree trunks and leafy branches to provide the room where close relatives of the deceased would be kept in seclusion for several hours preceding the ceremony. KALACC had helped to build this construction and its members were instrumental for organizing the proceedings of the smoking ceremony itself. Opposite the shade roof a large truck of the Aboriginal resource agency (Morroraworra) was parked behind which the *maparn* (medicine men) prepared themselves out of sight of the mourners. Like in the other cases that I observed, mourners were recruited from the subsection or moiety to which the deceased belonged. These “close family members” were painted with white colour and kept in seclusion on the ceremonial ground. Men and women sat separately and they clearly formed the centre of the proceedings. They were surrounded by a varying number of “workers” and onlookers. The workers themselves were recruited from the moiety complementary to that of the mourners. They made sure that the mourners stayed where they were, they regulated the movements on the ceremonial ground, especially that of the approaching participants from other places. These visitors frequently attacked and abused those already sitting, accusing them of negligence towards the family members who had died. In one of the cases I observed, the family (subsection, moiety) members arriving from other places violently attacked individuals of the mourning party. Equipped with sticks they threatened to hit close relatives of the deceased while loudly mourning themselves and while

eventually hugging those already seated. The sentiment was one of accusing the local members of the group to have caused the death through their negligence and lack of foresight. The attacked did not dissuade the violence but very often took the sticks into their own hands inflicting head wounds on themselves so that they had to be stopped by other people present. That is to say, the close family members seemed to accept their responsibility. Even though they were recruited into the group of mourners, there seems to be an implicit acceptance that they, personally, should have looked more effectively after the deceased member of their family. The workers role, therefore, was to protect those seated not only from the visitors but also from themselves and from self-inflicted violence. The workers also managed the smoking fire and oversaw the distribution of gifts at the end of the ceremony.

After the arrival of visiting mourners from other communities and after the church service and burial had taken place, the smoking ceremony at Kurnangi started in earnest with the arrival of a group of about a dozen young men who were the peer group of the deceased, having been initiated together with him. At this occasion the men came running (in-line) into the circle of people sitting in and around the shade roof. They were shaking cans filled with stones. This, I was told, was an attempt to scare off spirits. But like the mourners who were sitting passively under the shade roof they, too, were scolded by the “workers”. They were ordered around and eventually had to undergo a death inquest very reminiscent of the traditions described in the early ethnographic literature (Elkin, 1981). Like the mourners, the peers of the deceased accepted their recruitment into their role during the proceedings and did not object to anything that they were made to do. As part of the death inquest the men were asked to hold a thread made of hair of fellow subsection members of the deceased and to hand the end of the thread from one to next as they formed a queue. When the thread tore into pieces they had to start at the beginning again. This happened three times, a result that was publicly interpreted to mean that “three blokes” were responsible for the death of the deceased man. This was not specified any further, which is in line with vagueness occurring in pre-colonial death inquest proceedings, but there seemed to be the assumption that these were three men visiting from elsewhere. In the Fitzroy Crossing area at this time this would invoke a wide-spread discourse in which the “Balgo boys” (young men from the

distant and remote desert outstations around Balgo Hills mission) were blamed for a great part of social disruption and violence in the town. Again this would be very much in line with proceedings of death-inquests described decades ago (see Elkin, 1981).

The next element in the proceedings was the emergence of four *maparn*, medicine or Law men, who had been sitting and singing out of sight behind the Morraworraworra truck. Decorated with body paintings, one of them carrying a sacred wooden board and the others carrying sticks, the men made several stylized steps towards the mourners, picked up some sand from the ground and threw it into the direction of the mourners before walking back normally towards the truck. This most clearly “ritualized” event took no more than two or three minutes and resembled very much what I had seen at the funeral of the other young man at the morning of the same day at Bayulu. The *maparn* were said to be men who had initiated the deceased young men, generationally therefore in opposition to the line of young men who stood with the mourners. In the morning the short performance of the *maparn* had been the resolution of the smoking ceremony. Tension fell, someone said “all finished now” and most people attending turned around starting to go to their vehicles or straight home. At Kurnangi the appearance of the *maparn* was also greeted with obvious relief since this core ritual, or ritual core, seemed to have purified the air, accomplished the proceedings and removed whatever had disturbed communal life. But what is more, several of the workers demanded the *maparn* to return again from behind the truck to “do it again” – which they did. They repeated the short formalized steps and then disappeared, putting on their everyday dress again and joining the crowd of bystanders. What is perceived as a highly traditional, immutable and unexplained ritual sequence becomes juxtaposed with the spontaneous command by the workers “to do it again”. The *maparn* may follow highly stylized rules but they also follow the demands made onto them in the specific situation.

This climax of the proceedings was followed by three activities that seemed to have in common that they restored ordinary life and social relations at Kurnangi. Firstly, the fires in front of the seated mourners were lit up by the workers who used leafy branches to produce smoke which would cover all mourners and most of the bystanders. Three 4x4 vehicles were driven into the circle and left standing with all doors open. A number of mourning women then took smoking

branches from the fire and “smoked” the vehicles which were said to have been in use by the deceased and would become fit for use by his family again after the smoking was complete. Secondly, a heap of goods, mostly new blankets but also including a TV set of the deceased, that had been piled up between the fires and the shade roof were now distributed. The workers were overseeing this “pay back” of blankets (that had been bought under great cost by the closest family members of the deceased) to other family members who had come from distant places. Thirdly, while most people were moving to their vehicles or moving around to chat with other people, some of the workers brought sacks of large quantities of red meat which was given to some of the mourners who were force-fed on the spot. This completed their period of mourning in which they had not eaten any meat but had restricted themselves to eating fish which is a common feature of individual mourning practices in the Kimberley. The smoking, the payback, and the termination of the food-taboo were clearly ritualized forms of behaviour, considered to be a key element of present-day funeral ceremonies. It is these sections (not the appearance of the *maparn*) that have provided the shorthand label (“smoking” “payback”) for the funeral ceremonies as a whole. This seems to be in contrast to the appearance of the young men and the use of the hair thread which are not necessary elements of a successful funeral ceremony. But despite this standardization all three elements allow considerable interference by workers to what they conceive of as to whom in particular should be targeted by these activities. The use of smoke is standard but I was told that the women’s smoking of vehicles was a singular feature. Distribution of goods and elements of property as “payback” is a common feature but the amount produced by the relatives and the details of who receives a part is arranged by the workers discussing things openly and in a matter-of-fact way. Finally, the meat taboo is common in the Kimberley but individuals vary with regard to the rigidity in their keeping of the taboo (and its duration). Consequently, the people targeted for force-feeding also vary as much as the amount of meat given to them, and the strength of the resistance exhibited by the targeted person.

Responding to the temporal dilemma of death

How shall we understand the ethnographic case sketched above in the light of the temporal

dilemma of death? As Hertz has pointed out, “death is not [...] conceived as a unique event without any analogue”, it is “only a particular instance of a general phenomenon”, namely of “a change that is made gradually and requires time” ([1907] 2004: 209). And, I would like to add: A change that poses the temporal dilemma between protracted transformation and the need to draw clear lines. This point has been elaborated by Roy Rappaport who pointed out that the formal character of ritual as opposed to any other events is that “ritual may summarize information concerning complex continuous processes and translate them into the simplest possible digital signal” (1999: 90). Or, to put it differently, “the occurrence of a ritual may impose a ‘yes/no’, ‘either/or’ summary or decision upon a ‘more-less’ process” (1990: 90). His prime examples are the “digitalization” of gradual differences between men (in PNG), the gradual decision-making processes “digitalized” in rituals of peace and war, gradual maturation of young people “digitalized” in puberty rites and a great many other rites of transition. Ritual, Rappaport concludes, thereby “helps to define – make definite – important but vague aspects of the world (1999: 87), and that “ritual occurrences are in their nature binary and as such they are especially well-suited to distinguish succeeding from preceding states of affairs unambiguously” (1999: 340). Although he does not refer to death rituals in this context, it seems to me that these observations are very pertinent to death rituals as discussed here. The ritual solution for dealing with both, dead bodies and property, is to “digitalize” the gradual transformation as Rappaport would have it. The transition of person at death has exactly those features (being important, but not directly observable and ambiguous) of the processes of boundary crossing in human maturation and social growth that he describes. His other observation, namely that rituals also facilitate “the transmission of information across the boundaries of ‘unlike’ systems” (1999: 97) is also relevant here because the changing states of affairs in death is a separate “system” from that of states of ownership in property items. However, rituals that create a parallel between the domain of property and the domain of death help making the digitalization in both domains more effective and convincing.

The declared aim of the smoking ceremony is to weaken the relation between the deceased person and objects that he used and owned which by implication allows the mourners who were close to the deceased to reconstitute a neutral relation to these objects. In other words, it allows them to

use the things again without creating an undesirable link between them and the deceased. In the payback part of the ceremony new, mostly brand-new, objects are introduced which create a new bond between those who give and those who receive, replacing any previous exchange relations in which the deceased may have been involved. As I pointed out in the beginning, if death rituals respond to an underlying dilemma, it is not to be expected that at all places the same practical solutions have been found. Correspondingly, there is considerable diversity in the funeral rituals in northwest Australia today. However, I want to argue that the centrality of property items may not be coincidental.

The very notion of property relies on a memory process whereby elements of the environment are converted into objects of memory, especially the memory of having invested labour into these elements (Ingold, 2005: 166). This process of “objectification” allows us to claim that something is owned by us. Combined with an ideology of genealogical ties it allows us to make claims to objects that were owned by someone whom we think has rightfully transferred the objects to us, just as we have “inherited” our personal identity and bodily substance from them. Thus, if the notion of property essentially relies on a memory process it should not come as a surprise that these memories may become problematic when the preceding owner is no longer alive and memories are subject to change. The objects of ownership may be said to have changed in the process. But even “new” objects, which also feature in today’s death rituals in Aboriginal Australia, rely on a memory process and a temporal dimension. Their ritual transfer may be said to digitalize the boundaries between owners and non-owners (or previous owners). The ritual is a channelization of the memory process, it effectively deals with the dilemma that in order for something to become property it requires the engagement of others in a memory process and at the same time the exclusion of others for property claims to be effective. The need to ritualize property transfers may be even more pronounced in settings such as Aboriginal Australia where shared claims to objects – be it sacred sites and hunting grounds in the past or social welfare payments and car-holds in the present – have a degree of ambiguity. While this ambiguity has many advantages, unless when confronted with the western legal system, there may be situations such as when death occurs when more definite boundaries need to be drawn.

Intriguing parallels emerge once we recall that the reason for the funeral rituals was that the human body, too, does not simply disappear when someone dies but decomposes over time leaving the body – and the surviving family members – in a somewhat precarious stadium of transition resulting from their lasting attachment with one another. Even if death is “instant”, as in an accident, it takes time for a person to change status from living to dead due to the processes of bodily decay and of personal remembering. I argue that this is not only true for the association between a dead person and its survivors but also with regard to property items that mediate the relationships between persons. We may therefore expect the transfer of property to be an element that is considered to be particularly appropriate in the framework of death rituals, and not only in cases where the property items are inheritance or personal belongings. The *putayan* as a single ritual works as a digitalization, a process of making definite both, the status of the deceased and that of the property items concerned. Furthermore, the disambiguation in the status of persons and things is facilitated by bringing the two systems together, allowing the clarity of distinctions made in one domain to underline those made in the other domain.

Conclusion

To much of the detriment of Australian welfare officers Aborigines often still abandon a house when someone died there, and the belongings are usually just left where they are. The grave of a dead person is also left alone since it is not the basis on which others build their claims or their status. There is much to suggest that the property in use at the time of death are subject to particular treatment because they are so closely associated with the deceased person. As Hertz has pointed out the reason for these protracted funeral rituals seems to be that the human body, too, does not simply disappear when someone dies but it decomposes over time leaving the body – and the surviving family members – in a somewhat precarious stadium of transition. It takes time for a person to change status from living to dead because of the memory process that is involved. I have argued that this is not only true for the association between a dead person and its survivors but also between persons and objects. In the very notion of property elements of the environment are converted into objects of memory, especially the memory of

having invested labour into these elements (see Ingold, 2005: 166). This process of “objectification” allows us to claim that something is owned by us. Thus, if the notion of property essentially relies on a memory process it should not come as a surprise that these memories may become problematic when the preceding owner is no longer alive and fades away from memory. The objects themselves may be considered to have changed in the process.

I do not presume to have caught all events taking place at funeral ceremonies of the Kimberley region today, or even to have explained all facets of the activities described for this particular funeral. My aim was not to produce a general model that fits all funeral ceremonies in the region – if that was possible at all – but to point at some valid connections inherent in the constellation of relations and activities. From the evidence presented for this case, there seems to be a striking juxtaposition of ritualized treatment of memories connected to the dead and to property. Although more evidence is needed and more detailed analysis is required, I suggest that these juxtapositions in the funeral ceremonies are grounded in the underlying temporal dilemma of death that an agent-centred perspective brings to the fore.

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