

PREFACE

THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEATH AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANCESTORS, OR, WHAT DREAMS ABOUT MY GRANDMOTHER TAUGHT ME

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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