

CONCLUSION

THE AGENCY OF THE DEAD, THE AGENCY OF SYNTHETIC MATERIALS



So that in the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetu-
all and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death.

—Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*

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

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

Anthropology and the Materiality of Death

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Work for the Dead and Political Economy

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

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

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

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

Implications

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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