INTRODUCTION
DEATH, TIME AND SYNTHETIC MATERIALS

In Peki, a town in the Ghanaian Volta Region, funerals are loud, popular, public and extremely busy events, which take place over the course of dedicated weekends. Every second Friday, the town transforms into a temporary stage for commemorating those who have passed, bundling dozens of funerals together. Their temporal, material and spatial intensity engages all senses while being highly social. It is the essence of gossip and prestige, the who, what, when, how and why, that occupies the minds of community members while close kin, neighbours and guests rub shoulders over the course of the festivities. Despite the stark contrast between the vividness of these events and what they bemourn – the end of life – there is a profound grief, which resonates on a deeper level. Bringing together sociality and sorrow, the buzz of funeral weekends is driven by the urgency of settling issues that, ultimately, are extremely relevant to the living and essentially of a political nature. This book looks at those urgent affairs and intentions of the living, which become invested in the dead. It does so by focusing on the temporal and moral aspects of bodies, synthetic materials and transcendental entities as these become important for negotiating political processes within the community. Despite all the intents and purposes that community members may bring to the table, other elements, such as the bodies of the dead, spirits, deities and materials like plastic or concrete form part of this process, sometimes supporting the intended outcome, sometimes subverting it. Hence, this is a story about entanglements beyond human control, not just between 'humans and things', the latter of which according to archaeologist Ian Hodder stand out as materially durable in comparison to our fleeting lives (2012).

Before burial, the bodies of the deceased are stored at the local morgue for months or sometimes even years to prepare the best possible funeral. Materials which in Western-scientific categorization fit the labels organic and synthetic[1] and degrade at a different pace play key roles in this lengthy

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process: formaldehyde and super glue, funeral banners printed on PVC and dead bodies lying in state, cellophane grave wreaths and cassava plants, satin and locally woven *kente* fabric, plastic buckets and earthenware pots, cemented tombs and red soil. In all steps of the funerary activities, synthetic materials feature prominently and are held to embody durability and other positive moral values. Meanwhile, the decay of dead human bodies in association with other biodegradable materials is mostly seen as a negative event that must be controlled. It is the combination of materials incorporating different potential qualities, moral attributes, temporalities and aesthetics that plays a major yet not immediately visible role in commemorative practices, affecting long-term processes of community formation. The tension that arises between these different material orders reflects issues that are at stake when addressing the tension between the realm of the dead and the world of the living. Tense relations around synthetic materials also stem from the colonial encounter and, in its continuation, contemporary unequal economic relations. Similar things can be said about regulations around burial practices, beliefs around death and the involvement of the nation state in contemporary deathways. Responding to such a diagnosed multiplicity of tensions, this book traces the connection between death, a globalized-capitalist circulation of synthetic materials and the long-term systemic inequalities and harm caused by colonialism, which continue to have a massive impact on our contemporary world.[2] Considering the intersection of these fields, I will unpack how this nucleus of socially effective force fields shapes the negotiation of power relations in a Ghanaian Ewe community.[3]

The question that lies at the heart of these thoughts is how transformations of social practices, of the dead and of synthetic materials co-constitute one another and what role temporal scales play in this. Speaking about the most popular of all synthetic materials, Heather Davis traces plastic's apparently endless mutability and resourcefulness back to Western high modernist utopias, in which it came to represent a durable opposite to death while offering independence from organic life and otherworldly beings: 'Plastic represented a shiny new world, one that removed some people from the cycles of life and death, that superseded the troublesome, leaky, amorphous, and porous demands of ancestors, bodies and the earth' (2022: 34). In Peki, the demands of the dead, some of whom become ancestors, resonate throughout the community. These demands are responded to by attempting to control, fix, feed, please and eternally maintain the dead's material and spiritual elements as these go through a series of transformations. In light of this observation and following Davis' thoughts, I set out to investigate if and where in my 'field'[4] the durability of synthetic materials such as plastics and concrete serves to achieve conservative agendas when combined with a demonstrable control over the dead. Writing about plastics and time, Davis points out that these synthetic materials are of fossil origin and shaped by petrocapitalism, thereby collapsing deep time and a drive for short-lived consumption into plastic matter. As such, plastic time seems to be ignorant

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of history and life: 'Plastic fits within a blind drive towards the future, where the present is constantly discarded and the past has ceased to exist' (2022: 33). In this new temporality of plastic, being 'made to be wasted' (Hawkins 2013) is furthering petrocapitalist processes while creating toxic environments and waste that endures, stubbornly. Taking this observation to a level of social analysis in the context of funerary practices, I wonder if (and at what cost) the extended life of synthetic materials, when these become waste or other types of 'matter out of place', serves to promote transformative social agendas and to liberate elements of the dead from control. Combining largely local and contemporary ethnographic observations with a focus on global socio-political entanglements across time may, as I would argue, offer the quality of sightedness in response to this blind impetus of plastics and other synthetic materials. This perceptive gaze on synthetic materials is one which speaks from the present, looks at the past and reaches out towards different possible futures.

The Curious Case of Glitter Makeup on a Dead Body

My very first encounter with a dead human body happened to be a tense experience, one which I had very early on into my fieldwork in Ghana (but, at the age of thirty, relatively late in life). At the beginning of this book, it lends itself as a guiding affective image that illustrates the entanglement of the dead and synthetic materials in Peki. On the second night after my arrival in town, I attended the lying in state of a female elder. When I nervously entered the room in which the body was placed, I found its walls and ceiling clad in satin, with all doors to adjoining rooms and all windows covered. The entrance to the house led straight into this setting, making it appear as if the building had shrunk to a single room. A draft of air, sweeping through the open door and some invisible outlets made the layers of fabric sway in the breeze. The room was tiny and narrow. An elderly lady lay in a coffin that occupied the centre of the room, leaving very little space to circumnavigate it in immediate proximity to the body. Around me, people were saying their goodbyes, talking to the deceased and leaving small gifts to make sure the body and spirit made it through the night safely.

I remember my affective reaction to being in this space: I grasped my throat with both my hands and pulled my shoulders up tensely. On top of a mix of shock and disbelief, I experienced irritation about what in my eyes seemed like quite extreme makeup on the face of the deceased. She was adorned with what could have been glitter nail polish as lipstick. It only dawned on me later that what I had then perceived as an aesthetic faux pas, from my culturally European point of view, was in fact a tactical application of synthetic materials on a dead body. I would also learn later, when closely working with an undertaker in the community, that the mouths of the dead are firmly shut by applying super glue, yet another synthetic material. This experience serves as a moment of ethnographic observation which, beyond

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the immediacy of my affective reaction, contains a deeper lesson: the dead and synthetic materials are intentionally positioned in relation with each other in Peki. The former may take on the seemingly temporally durable and, like in the case of glitter, sometimes aesthetically spectacular properties of the latter. But through their association with synthetic materials, the dead may also live longer than wished for. This co-constitutive relation between synthetic materials and the dead serves as a leitmotif for engaging with the ethnography at hand.

Human bodies, things and materials are attributed with qualities that are shaped by cultural frames and individual perception. In relation to death, materials perceived as durable may help to put the dead in their intended place, a process of attribution which fundamentally depends on perspective. Synthetics seem to promise durability while the dead are ephemeral, prone to fading away. If the two meet under the right circumstances, the durability attributed to synthetics may pass on to select elements of the dead, helping to conserve their legacy in an ideal state. However, synthetics and the dead may also turn to other qualities that are inherent within them. Through these qualities, they may display different kinds of agencies, which may become amplified when both, synthetics and the dead, are combined. In efforts to control the trajectory and uncertain agency of the dead, synthetics promise to lend agency to the living in the town of Peki for temporally and spatially containing the dead. But since synthetic materials often overstay their welcome, meaning that they are notoriously difficult to recycle or remove at a macro- and micro-level once they are considered rubbish, they are in the same uncertain situation as the dead. Ultimately, synthetic materials and the dead in Peki form a tense relationship that exists between states of control and slippage, which creates problems for the living in fashioning ideal relationships to the dead. These relationships will have a positive influence on the social standing of the living and their relationships with community members. Hence, all involved in this ghostly game must navigate an uncertain terrain.

Synthetic Materials, Social Transformation and Colonial History

Death, as it turns out, is a kind of unknown territory that is at the same time relational while being loaded with various intentions to execute control, all of which influences how the living interact with one another. To understand how these different spheres – death and life, the material and the social – are connected, let me ask a rhetorical question. What does a plastic object have in common with an embalmed body that has been sitting in the deep-freeze of a morgue for a year? Initially very little. The former is merely a thing made of synthetic polymers, durable yet hard to fix once broken, while the latter is the organic form of a human being that is no longer alive, preserved temporarily but poised for decomposition. The plastic object may be at hand or become rubbish, while the human body commands piety and

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special engagement as it is more than the sum of its parts. But when thinking about ways in which the lives and afterlives of both are at the same time prolonged, yet highly precarious, there turn out to be more similarities than initially meets the eye. As matter(s) of uncertainty, dead bodies and synthetics also imply moral registers of evaluating their physical and ideological states while undergoing transformations, be they in life, death or in between these two poles.

I do not invoke this image to instigate feelings of shock. Rather, I believe that this admittedly unusual comparison can help to unpack how colonial powers and their diverse local appropriations continue to seek control over the social structures of those they seek to dominate. By colonial powers, as indicated before, I am referring to the ongoing afterlives of colonial interventions and their current effects on human and more-than-human spheres. Kwame Nkrumah, the first head of state of Ghana as the first African nation to become independent, coined the term neo-colonialism to describe and critique such effects that he perceived in the 1960s (Nkrumah 1984, 1965). While acknowledging that neo-colonialism could potentially be understood to include a very broad set of effects, Nkrumah was mainly concerned with specific ways in which Western nations and economies could install shadow governments in former colonies, either through military control or, more subtly, through economic and monetary means, with the aim of continued extraction of wealth from these countries. Contemporary critical anthropology is indebted to foundational critique from thinkers of the Black Radical Tradition and decolonial thinkers from Latin America and South Asia. The Black Radical Tradition is represented by, amongst many others, W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter Rodney or Audre Lorde, and scholars that keep this tradition alive today are, for example, David Scott, Christina Sharpe, Achille Mbembe or Fred Moten. Latin American voices include, amongst others, Walter Mignolo, Maria Lugones and Arturo Escobar, while the tradition of South Asian and specifically Indian critical thought is most famously connected with Mahatma Ghandi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha, continued by contemporary voices such as Julietta Singh or Leelah Gandhi. Contemporary critical thought in anthropology and beyond continues to think about the effects of colonialism as a force that needs to be given major consideration in contemporary analyses of social life. In an effort to critically reframe how Western analytical concepts are complicit in the actualization of contemporary colonialisms by way of a demonstrated critical gesture, such as, for example, through the concept of *ontology*, Elizabeth A. Povinelli writes: 'I will argue that the political relevance of any claim about existence emerges from the ways colonial power entangled existence, spawning capitalism and its long-standing governmental partner, liberalism, and in the process leaving the earth potted by the materially differentiated force of their toxic activities' (2021: 2). Science and technology scholar Max Liboiron, who practises and promotes anticolonial indigenous environmental research, engages with the social history of plastics and

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subsequently offers a similar understanding to Povinelli's framing of colonialism. They write: 'I find that many people understand colonialism as a monolithic structure with roots exclusively in historical bad action, rather than as a set of contemporary and evolving land relations that can be maintained by good intentions and even good deeds. The call for more recycling, for example, still assumes access to Indigenous Land for recycling centres and their pollution' (2021: 6). Following these thoughts, I am using the words colonial and neo-colonial in a similar sense in this book, referring to the entangled effects of material and social states of existence that are based on unequal power relations which also, but not exclusively, heed back to historical times of colonial imperialism. In her analysis of the influence on Ewe people by missionary and Western political institutions during colonial times, Birgit Meyer describes a process of negotiation, marked not just as a subordination of local people but rather by 'attempts on the part of Ewe converts to deal creatively with foreign influence' (2002: 169). Christianity, as one of many of such foreign influences, was adjusted to local beliefs and made to operate within a much older local framework of ideas and beliefs (Meyer 1999). Opposed to these complex processes of acculturation, Meyer posits different perceptions of what colonialism is or was, pointing out that it may be associated with uni-directional processes and moral attributions, such as alienation or reification, depending on which perspective it is viewed from. However, these views tend to overlook the complexity of interactions that took and take place. In the field of death and commemoration, Ghanaian deathways and the materials that they entail today have been shaped by colonial, missionary and global capitalist forces, in conjunction with local actors, social structures, world views and concepts. Yet, as a look at the social and material ways of relating to the dead in Ghana shows, attempts at domination by external forces are certainly not a trump card, rendering my local interlocutors powerless. Rather, they become embedded and appropriated in manifold ways of local negotiations over economic, political and spiritual issues. Tracing their intersection, I am telling a story about the organization of neo-colonially shaped power relations in a locally specific and globally connected social context, namely an Ewe community in the South-East of Ghana, through the lens of death, time and their connection to synthetic materials. Offering an alternative perspective to Heather David's assessment that plastic 'cannot be local' (2022: 49) and that it 'appears without ontology because of its accelerated dislocation' (2022: 50), I find that, while not using the term ontology here, plastic and other synthetic materials do take on particular and unexpected moral evaluations and relational purposes in Peki. These are highly local and address interlocutors in different worlds and times, such as spirits, ancestors, God, living community members and land, while being intimately tied to global interconnections past and present.

Within anthropology, there is emergent scholarship on synthetic materials, a category usually referring to 'synthetic fibers, plastics and fabrics'

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(Calvão, Bolay and Bell 2021: 7). There are studies which look at the social lives and possible properties inherent in such materials (Drazin and Küchler 2015; Pathak and Nichter 2019; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021), at meanings and ontologies associated with them (Braun and Traore 2015; Chao 2018), at their ecological and economic global entangledness (Krohn-Hansen, Nustad and Harvey 2019) and at waste, toxicity and recycling (Chalfin 2019; Papadopoulos 2021; Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022; Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). However, synthetic materials have not been the focus of an ethnographic study and it is in fact not easy to find a widely used and available definition of what constitutes synthetic materials as a category. Hence, I propose to define synthetic materials as materials which become finished materials in a process of chemically altering several compounds, a process which results in a new material or substance with different characteristics to the initial components. For this process, industrial processing equipment is needed at some point of the production chain, making it impossible for an individual to undertake the making of synthetic materials independently. Synthesis describes a chemical process in which the individual parts become a unit by transforming the structures of components involved. Artificial is a term often used interchangeably with synthetic. In line with chemistry's categorizations of materials, artificial refers to a process of synthetization that has been controlled by humans, for example in a laboratory or factory. In her critical history of capitalist industrialization as the making of synthetic worlds, Esther Leslie attributes the synthetic to human activity: 'There is one part of nature that synthesizes other parts of nature – humans, who exert energy in the transformation of nature' (2005: 248). Synthetic substances hence become synonymous with crafted and cultural, as opposed to natural. Heather Davis remarks that 'the synthetic or "artificial" nature of something suggests the way in which it develops, emerges or is created irrespective of its surrounding environment . . . Synthetics actively deny the relations in which they are embedded' (2022: 46).

In the context of exploring sustainability around materials, the natural sciences also distinguish between renewable and non-renewable resources, which are associated with the categories of natural and synthetic materials, despite oil (pre-synthesis) being a non-renewable resource (Betts 1991). Synthetic materials may hence be new materials that are the product of a chemical, human-controlled reaction and yield a material embodiment of unity and durability.[5] This needs some contextualization. After Latour and the critical re-evaluation of a binary nature-culture divide and of science as social practice, anthropologists are aware that ordering categories from the natural sciences which reflect these binaries do only partially speak to the hybrid social properties of materials (Calvão, Bolay and Bell 2021; Masco 2021). Material scientist Mark Miodownik (2015) gives an account of human interaction with the material world. In attributing the properties of materials to scale while also telling stories about human interactions with materials, he takes a mediating perspective between what we perceive and

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experience around materials and what material science and chemistry see in them. He points out that 'although a material may look and feel monolithic, although it may appear to be uniform throughout, this is an illusion: materials are, in fact, composed of many different entities that combine to form the whole, and these different entities reveal themselves at different scales' (2015: 357). Understandings of detailed characteristics that go beyond the basic chemical composition of materials, into the micro-, macro- and finally atomic scale, then allow an understanding of why they may have the properties they display. Yet, in the end, it is also their social role and our various associations and attributions of meanings, feelings and evaluations that play a role in how materials shape social life, and vice versa.

Composites form another category of materials, in which components with different properties combine into a new material with new properties. The technical difference that distinguishes them from synthetic materials is fuzzy, but while the compounds of composites still retain some degree of separate identity in the final product, they do not retain that same degree of autonomy in synthesized materials, despite both processes being irreversible. Cement, for example, is a material which is today largely produced by synthesizing different components at high temperatures. This serves as a base material for processing into concrete, a composite material which usually escapes being categorized as synthetic. However, concrete has been labelled 'the world's most used synthetic material' by *The Guardian* (Kane 2016), and anthropologist Joseph Masco counts concrete, but also aluminium and of course plastic, as synthetic materials (2021: 136). So, what is to be done with this fuzzy category of the synthetic? From an anthropological point of view, which focuses on the social relations that these materials help to produce, artificial meat, medication, cement, concrete, fabrics made from synthetic fibres and common household plastics are similar in several ways, which is why I propose to understand them jointly as synthetic materials.[6] They are not recyclable by disassembling them back into their original components; they acquire entirely new possible properties in their processed form (Allen 2015); they are regarded as 'artificial' while based on initially 'natural' components (such as minerals or petrochemicals); and they are inextricably linked to capitalism (Taussig 2004; Masco 2021), having been perceived as drivers of the Anthropocene and a globalized idea of Modernity (Forty 2012; Archambault 2018). Most importantly, though, synthetic materials, following this broader understanding, are extremely mouldable at some point of their production cycle: they have, or have had, plasticity. This plasticity, however, turns into its exact opposite as these materials are given form and it cannot be regained once that is done. The materials become hard and fixated in the shapes they have been given, leaving the agency over determining their form to those who are involved in the manufacturing process. For most things made of polymer-based plastic, for example, the initial form-giving process takes place in factories, while the objects that are produced may later be altered in other creative ways.

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Katie Lloyd Thomas discusses the use of plasticity and giving of form on a philosophical level very engagingly with regards to concrete (2015). While usually based on commodified and industrially produced 'Portland' cement these days (Harvey 2019: 150), concrete also allows the giving of form outside the factory walls. Yet, as Penny Harvey writes in her discussion of Adrian Forty's extensive mediation on concrete (Forty 2012), its most engaging quality is 'to exceed categorical qualification' (Harvey 2019: 150). Due to this, she calls concrete 'an entirely synthetic material, but the aggregates intrinsic to its composition carry a degree of uncertainty associated with the unconformity of soft matter' (2019: 150). Through a transformation from plastic to fixated, different synthetic materials acquire certain qualities that are comparable amongst one another, such as their apparent durability and longevity. These attributes and the fact that taking agency over their shape becomes more difficult along the line render synthetic materials powerful yet problematic. The fact that they 'exist[s] in a perpetually unstable state' (Allen 2015: 238) makes them easily mouldable. However, the moulded product that is hard to alter may also stand in the way of people's intentions while possibly transforming in unforeseeable ways, lending itself to becoming 'matter out of place' and ultimately ending up as rubbish .

The dead also hold the potential to be shaped by the living or to escape their intentions. This is somewhat easier when applied to the legacy of a deceased and their imagined new existence, but becomes more difficult when dealing with actual dead bodies. These, like synthetic materials that end up in a fixed form with often very little reshaping possible, have lost their 'living' plasticity and are difficult to bend and shape, as I learned hands-on during my work with an undertaker. Instead, dead bodies are poised for decomposition, setting in motion another very plastic process, yet one that follows its own rules. By means of bodies, places, materials and stories, the dead can be made to last, appropriated or forgotten, depending on how people choose to remember them. In Peki, much like in other places across the world, those dead who retain a presence in the world imbue their legacy-makers (often, but not always, kin) with power. Those who have departed in 'bad' ways or with unresolved issues may possibly come back to haunt the living, claiming agency that can turn against community members. Those cases then need to be addressed and counteracted by the community. Both possible scenarios show that the dead play a key role in negotiating power relations among community members. This makes them valuable but uncanny pawns that must be controlled well to achieve the most favourable outcome for oneself, one's kin, one's clan, one's political party and so on. A fashioning of the dead as new otherworldly persons happens via engaging with temporal and transformative aspects of the material world. The dead can be made 'ideal', just like synthetics, but there is also a constant struggle to contain certain elements that are unruly or even transgressive. By way of ethnographically illuminating two sequences in which the dead in the town of Peki are transformed, either in reaction to a 'good' or a 'bad' death,[7] it

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becomes apparent how synthetic materials and social entities are invested with attributes of durability and control, ultimately linking back to the question of individually and structurally executed power over people's lives.

At the very moment of attending my first lying in state in that small room, I was far from producing such elaborate thoughts or even analytical reflection. The inevitability of the dead body, my irritation, but also the build-up of tension during a long and hot walk to the house, the commotion of people on the street and the wait together with the other mourners, had culminated in a sense of acute awareness of the strangeness of death. In fact, it was strange to me. While people in Peki deal with the occurrence of death and the presence of dead bodies as part of their everyday lives, I had not been in any way forced or obliged to experience anything like this while living in Europe. Therefore, this material proof that death exists, in the form of a dead body, felt different from an abstract understanding of death. Although I accepted it as a reality, it had not 'really' been real. Peter Bjerregaard, Anders Emil Rasmussen and Tim Flohr Sørensen critique this attribution of 'facticity' to things, bodies and substances broadly referred to as the 'materiality of death' (2016: 5). They suggested that it is not death that possesses materiality, but rather the act of passing through death, materially, temporally and imaginatively. An understanding of death as a process of transformation is in line with this reframing. It is not 'death per se' that I encountered but rather decaying matter in the form of a dead body. Yet, my encounter with a dead body had a distinct affective quality to it than an encounter with a tombstone does not. This body was different to living bodies I knew. It had been fundamentally changed by death, marking a fleeting but nevertheless material representation of this state. Since human death had in fact not manifested itself in my life, other than in the form of a closed coffin at my paternal grandmother's funeral, it had not so far had the material quality of 'existence' that it now acquired. As stated earlier in the preface, I will include rather than obfuscate my focal point of view in the narrative that I am presenting here, owning up to the fact that I cannot represent a neutral position and, as culturally European, may partially refer to my own perspective as a subject to be decolonized.

My study is set in contemporary Ghana. Here, current practices of mourning are tied to long-term historical interferences between the local population and Western colonizers. The same is true of local uses of synthetic materials and their place within the history of global economic exchange. Plastics and other synthetics are developed and circulated within a neo-colonial and global-capitalist system. Often, as Joseph Masco remarks, the global distribution of synthetic materials is driven by the Global North, 'generated by nuclear nationalism and petro-chemical capitalism' (2021: 146) while leaving a large part of the global population in the position of consumers or waste depositories. Part of taking an anticolonial position as an anthropologist lies in the task of contextualizing ethnography before this wider historical background that still haunts our present, both in the Global

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North and South. In that regard, regulations around death on the one hand and the presence of synthetic materials on the other share a common history of domination and the latter have been labelled a colonizing set of materials (Masco 2021: 133). Synthetic materials, most famously plastics, have taken over unexpected markets and ecological niches across the world to the extent of literally colonizing ecosystems and economies, often with deadly consequences. The history of human death and the dead, as written with a focus on Europe and West Africa, is equally entangled with colonial domination. Thomas Laqueur's (2015) account of Western deathways and how the imperial colonial project shaped those, and John Parker's history of death in West Africa (2021), which was equally shaped by colonial presence, complement each other like two pieces of a puzzle. However, when looking at contemporary practices relating to death, West Africa speaks an entirely different language than many so-called 'Western' cultures and customs. Here, death is immediately present in public and shared social life. This powerful publicness across different social spheres, corresponding with what Marcel Mauss has termed a total social phenomenon (2002), was also a reason I chose to write about it, at the time being a researcher who was new to Ghana and in many ways relied on a topic that invited me in. And

Figure 0.1 Funeral posters, mixed in with political campaign posters, announcements for religious events and commercial ads, hang next to a stall selling eggs and bread, all wrapped in see-through plastic bags, in Peki, 2016. © Isabel Bredenbröker

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while funerals in my home country of Germany are an intimate, almost private affair, in Ghana it is quite the opposite: you cannot go to too many funerals, and everyone is welcome!

Three Lessons from the Anthropology of Death: Between Mastery and Failure

I am presenting my ethnographic accounts in dialogue with two key theoretical fields, namely anthropological theories of death and of materiality. A central question arises at their intersection: what role does the material world play in dealing with a powerful shared social condition, here death? It is one of the grand questions when thinking about social life and transformation in general. In the context of Peki, the urge to take control, to master life and death, is reflected in the multiple practices and perspectives on synthetic materials as 'unchanging' which represent attempts at containing death. But while some elements of death can be shaped, when do these efforts turn towards wanting to master death, a condition that is essentially unmasterable? Where is the qualitative line between taking agency and claiming mastery? And what effects do these slightly different aims have on relations between the living? While aiming to execute some degree of control is essentially a proactive gesture, mastery, its conceptual cousin, is a political tool that has been at the core of the colonial project and aims to dominate. Control of a shared social condition can only ever be possible in part, for example in the realization of diverse individual aims and the bundling of power in governmental structures. How, then, is the material world either complicit with human intentions or acting as a force that reveals mastery as something which may never be fully achieved?

Essentially, as I want to argue, attempts at controlling elements of death are part of clever micropolitical negotiations between people, while the grand aspiration of mastering it expresses the intent to dominate over others. As such, biopolitical control over life and death in the sense of Michel Foucault (2010) and what Achille Mbembe has termed necropolitics (2019) have a long history of being used as political forms of controlling and dominating. Yet, these macropolitical systems also exist in micropolitical circumstances and may be dismantled there. Thinking along the lines of Julietta Singh (2018) who has taken on the intellectual project of 'unthinking mastery' in a dehumanist and decolonial sense, mastery and its impossibility always relate to power structures, on macro- and micro levels. In colonial contexts, attempts at mastery became a counter colonial strategy in response to being subjected to colonial forces. Yet, this counter-mastery was equally bound to fail or create new problems. Singh recounts how Frantz Fanon's and Mohandas K. 'Mahatma' Gandhi's anticolonial strategies, despite their differences, both had at their core an aspiration to mastery that mirrored that of the colonizers. This happened at the expense of the rights and concerns of 'women, animals, the disabled and outcasts' (Singh 2018:

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24), hence perpetuating inequality on a different level and reproducing oppressive power structures which need to be challenged. It is then in the instances when mastery fails that the innovative forces of human relations make themselves known, where power relations change, where assumptions are challenged, where grand narratives break down. The material world, our bodies, lives, and deaths are repeatedly sought to be controlled and ultimately mastered by humans. Individuals and cultures will forever strive to have the upper hand in a match against death while playing the cards they have been dealt.

What can anthropology contribute to understanding these efforts? It cannot shed light on one essential question, namely 'what happens afterwards' to those who have gone. Unless a person claims to have a direct line to the beyond and communicate across this divide as a messenger, we are left guessing. However, we are also left to second-guess the messenger and even our own perception, should we find ourselves in such an in-between situation. Yet, what anthropology can do is to pay close attention to how the living make their moves in reaction to death and to study the intentions they pursue as they do so. To that avail, the anthropology of death has produced a rich discourse that helps to understand the connection between death, the material world, and the organization of power relations among the living. Anthropology considers ontological outlooks on death, be they explicitly religious, more generally cosmological and spiritual or even outspokenly unideological. Yet, anthropology does not have to produce new answers of that same ontological quality. Rather, it looks at the multitude of human life and social organization that we are faced with as a cosmos, one that can be accounted for by paying close attention to what is happening in the world.

While making sense of structural questions of social organization around death has been a core concern of anthropological discourse and the theory it has brought forth, I want to stress that anything that happens in relation to death and dying is not just a process that can be abstractly made sense of and formularized as a theory of social structure. Rather, death possesses an excess quality of never being fully understood, of causing emotional upheaval on a personal and social scale, and of revealing the fragility of individual life and sense-making in the world just as much as of social workings and doings at large. I suggest that it is this excess quality, similar to excessive meaning beyond semiotic readings, which is at its very core emotional, that gives death and social ways of processing it such an immense power for transforming the social structures of the living. The anthropology of death has dedicated itself to looking at how death and the social are connected and the models it has brought forth remain helpful for understanding how death continues to contribute to the organization of social relations, hereby revealing itself covertly as part of political anthropology. As we will see, the shaping and fixating of materials, bodies and social forms lies at the core of these anthropological musings, mirroring the potential of embodying plasticity or fixedness.

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Robert Hertz's Secondary Burial Model in Context

The work of the pioneering anthropologist Robert Hertz proves extremely productive to think with when attempting to understand processes of transformation, materially and socially. As an early text in the anthropology of death, it contains cues to the three major foci that have come to shape anthropological reflection on death. The first focus lies in the conceptualization of biological (as opposed to social) death. This offers not only an important theoretical distinction by means of which death and the social are connected, but is also the basis for theorizing materiality in relation to death and the social, leading up to more recent post-humanist approaches. Second is the concept of regeneration as a social and cosmological concept implicated in social responses to death, implying general ideas about the nature of the social. Continuing this thought, regeneration can also be grasped as a material process of recycling, replenishing or regrowing. And thirdly, a more recent interest in understanding death directly via its materiality has emerged, something which is in fact a fundamental concern of anthropology's engagement with death, which had been buried for some time. All these fields relate to one another and speak to the question of how social relations, the dead and the living, material things and bodies transform conjunctively. Anthropological discourse on death rests upon two traditions that have branched into different directions, one being a focus on symbolisms of death and belief systems based on sources from classic antiquity, as seen in the works of James Frazer and others (Bachofen 1859; Frazer 1913, 1933, 1996 [1890]; Tylor 1871), while the more recent tradition has moved 'towards an emphasis on social morphology' (Bloch and Parry 1982b: 2). The latter is the path I have taken here since it helps to unpack how intentions by multiple actors are expressed and negotiated around death by means of transforming social relations.

Robert Hertz is foundational for that second tradition. The essay 'Contribution à une étude sur la représentation collective de la mort' (Hertz 1907; Hertz, Needham and Needham 2004) was the first anthropological text that put forward a distinction between death as biological and death as social through a reading of ethnographic observations. Hertz looks at 'death as a social phenomenon' with the aim of identifying certain universal functions and features (2004: 86). His study focuses on the treatment of the corpse and the controlled transformation that it undergoes during double (or secondary) burials, materially representing the dissolution of the individual person and the regeneration of a continuous vital force for the community of the living. His core thesis is that death is a socially and culturally constructed event, temporally and socially extending far beyond the biological death of an individual person. Embarking from Hertz's theoretical model and critically developing it proves particularly fruitful for re-thinking material engagements around death from a contemporary perspective. And while the anthropology of death as such is a specialized yet

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wide field, there are concrete lessons to be learned if one follows the trail of Hertz's thought.

Lesson One: Material Transformations Shape Social Transformations (and Vice Versa)

The structural observation that Hertz puts forward is that, through the socially controlled unmaking of the corpse in ritual settings, the social person of the deceased is effaced step by step, allowing their death to be celebrated subsequently as an affirmation of life and of the social order. The so-called secondary burial of the remains then proves that this death has been transformed masterfully to serve the intentions of the living. The materiality of the corpse therefore represents more than just evidence of biological death, it becomes a site for negotiating the social aspects of death and marking the workings of time. In Peki, 'good' death is generally achieved by resisting change, conserving the body (which happens by freezing it for sometimes up to several years before burial) and then creating a material placeholder for the deceased, for example in the form of a durable grave, which help to make the transformed dead eternal. In many ways, this mirrors older burial practices in Ghana, where relatives were buried under the floors of houses, hereby literally becoming part of what constituted an ancestral home. Today, synthetic materials seem to be the perfect partners for achieving a similar kind of durability outside the domestic setting. Yet, these materials sometimes prove to be as unreliable as the dead themselves.

As becomes evident, all three major foci mentioned – death as social, transformative and material – are inherent in Hertz's work. He establishes that the dismantling of social relations, rights and responsibilities carried by the deceased also involves the transformation of relations among the living. The physical body of the deceased, as a material proof of biological death, thus anticipates the social body that emerges from the transformation of a living person into an ancestor. Its transformation and the ways in which the living achieve mastery over death by controlling the way the body changes are essential. Regarding the role of death-related practices and commemoration in Peki, this means that looking at material things and bodies that are of relevance here does not only help to understand underlying symbolic associations around death, but, much more engagingly, it shows how the ways in which death is made to matter come to shape social relations. This happens through processes of associating bodies, synthetic materials, and their transformations with temporal, 'ontological' and moral states of being, rather than just giving them a symbolic meaning. In other words: the ways in which the living evaluate the transformation of the dead, of material things, bodies and social relations, all influence each other. Ultimately, this leads to a constant reassessment of the social and power relations that govern it.

Synthetic materials, seen from a local perspective, are often imbued with positive temporal, moral and aesthetic qualities in relation to death as well

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as in everyday use. Yet, regeneration, recycling and reconfiguration are equally tricky businesses of transformation in Peki, both in an immaterial and in a very material sense. The town's rubbish tips are filling up with synthetic materials that can only be burned or buried, while cemeteries cannot be reused due to cemented subterranean tombs that are impossible to break up. It is in instances like this, be they structural or individual, where the material world demonstrates resistance, a movement of refusing to yield to mastery. In the context of theorizing musical practice, Bennett Hogg and Sally Jane Norman remark that 'agency only has significance in a world that offers resistance' (2013: 116). Similarly, effortless music making proves to be less artistically productive than engaging with instruments that resist human attempts at mastery in multiple ways, a property which is more and more intentionally incorporated into the design of such instruments. Resistance also expresses itself in immediate material proximity to death, such as in the dry and inflexible quality of a body that has been frozen for a long time, or in the way that plastics and foils of grave wreaths degenerate in the tropical heat and rain, rather than remaining unchanged and sightly. Resistance is also present in different opinions about the moral status of a deceased's death, inspired by individual agendas of possibly not wanting to pay for one's dead relative's misdoings, especially not to non-kin community members who claim to be at the receiving end of such makeup payments and services. It is here, in these moments of disagreement, failure or resistance, and in the situated perspectives that my interlocutors take, where the transformative potential that arises from engaging with death through various materialities can be found.

Lesson Two: The Social is as Diverse as Intentions Expressed in Response to Death

Death and the transformation of social relations have been paired in the anthropology of death since early on. Following Hertz's thought, anthropologists have posited regeneration as a remaking of the social fabric in response to death (Bloch and Parry 1982a). This connects to the 'grand' question that was raised earlier of how social groups deal with shared powerful conditions. In the discourse around death within anthropology, death has been conceived of as producing a fracture within the social organization of the living and therefore as a threat to the social order. However, the concept of regeneration, through and in response to death, begs the question: regeneration of what? A second set of questions that logically follows is whether regeneration of 'the same' is really something that is aimed for; if so, whether it can be successfully achieved, or whether it fails to be achieved; and if so, for what reason?

Seen through the Hertzian lens, the answer to the question: 'reproduction of what?' sketches a picture of society in which the social seems to function as a higher unit, striving for harmony, reaffirmation and security beyond

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individual concerns. This conceptual framing has seen followers and critical re-developments. Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, for example, went on to develop Hertz's approach in the form of a semiotic model for funerary contexts in any kind of cultural setting (1991). Yet, their understanding of society remains that of a smoothly running machine. More recently, Hertz's model has been criticized for working with an idealized 'harmonious' vision of the social (Jindra and Noret 2013: 4). Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry introduce regeneration into the discourse as a key word. They also take up Hertz's systemic interpretative model and build on it, focusing on the relevance of the social order's secured institutions of authority. Bloch and Parry understand society as a product of ritual activity and challenge Hertz' understanding of society as a homogenous group where regeneration becomes a totalitarian concept with very limited possibilities for expressing dissent, difference or conflict.

In the Hertzian model, the transforming corpse stands at the centre of a social process which strives for stability and conservation. Rather than hiding the body and obfuscating material change that may stand for social change, the ritual activities that Hertz focuses on make use of this change to revoke it through a process of controlled transformation. It is not just the unpredictability of biological death that is confined through social practices here, it is the threat that death poses to the social order on a larger scale. In Peki, activities relating to the dead have huge political potential: they are formative of the social. Synthetic materials and dead bodies alike are attributed with durational and preservative qualities to help maintain control, while possibly not aiming to maintain the status quo of the social order. Yet, rather than giving way to a unified and almost superhuman kind of social structure, the living are investing multiple agendas and intentions into their dealings with the dead. The social, as it turns out, is therefore a much more unruly force that seems to use the dead as bargaining material for different intents and purposes. It retains a degree of plasticity that is hard to master as it transforms constantly in response to its individual parts.

In her work on plasticity, a quality which is attributed to plastics and other synthetic materials but which is also inherent in the idea of social transformation, the Hegelian philosopher Catherine Malabou finds three application of the term plasticity: to give form, to receive form and to explode the idea of form (2012b). As sudden transformations of the brain and the neural system, accidents in the Freudian sense, the latter kind of plasticity marks a way of transforming that is out of control. Speaking about people with neuro-psychological afflictions, but also of socio-politically transmitted trauma on a larger scale, she points out that there may be constructive and destructive kinds of plasticity, depending on the moral framework from which it is interpreted. The brain may create new neural pathways that are desirable or suddenly abort most of what enables human sensual faculties and identity as preconditions for life. Seen before the background of colonial history and its brutal attempts at achieving mastery,

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the effects of these interventions can rightfully be regarded as wounds, just as much as the literal 'new wounds' to the brain that Malabou discusses. In making a connection between the globally social and the neurologically material, she observes that the effects of both are 'transformations unto death' that become apparent also 'in the aftermath of war, terrorist attacks, sexual abuse and all types of oppression or slavery' (213). Violence now lies in the forced separation of subjects from their memories. This assessment resonates with contemporary decolonial critiques, such as have been articulated around the return of objects from ethnographic collections and more generally in relating to the dead and the colonial past (Ndikung 2018). What Malabou's thoughts show is that the transformations of bodies and substances and the transformations of social contexts are closely connected. They can inform on how both may serve the intention to control, or to evade those aims. Hence, plasticity may here be regarded as a material and bodily quality but also as a quality of transformative social processes which has the potential to spin out of control, containing 'good' and 'bad' moral properties that depend on the eye of the beholder.

Elizabeth A. Povinelli discusses the proximity of Malabou's concept of plasticity to the French philosopher George Canguilhem's concept of normativity in thinking through the transformations and efficacies of a creek which is an Aboriginal dreaming (Rand 2011; Povinelli 2016). To Canguilhem, the urge to establish a norm is a defining characteristic of life, rather than being defined by 'a set of qualitative data' (Povinelli 2016: 96). In this new framing of what is considered alive, living things are those that shape their environment and creatively give form to it. Povinelli wonders how the past and future transformations of this particular Dreaming-Creek named Tjipel may be understood productively and shaped justly through the conceptual frames of plasticity and normativity. While Povinelli determines that ultimately these analytical paths may not offer a fully satisfying grasp on the matter – being different to indigenous concepts of geontological subjects such as Tjipel – plasticity still offers a being the possibility to give form but also to receive and change its own form, hence agentially possessing the potential to establish and change norms which apply to it (Rand 2011; Povinelli 2016). For Malabou, the concept of the synthetic is here mirrored in her understanding of such a subject as a 'synthetic structure', which achieves self-determination by means of Hegelian 'temporal synthesizing': in the Hegelian context 'it is the structure of anticipation through which subjectivity projects itself in advance of itself, and thereby participates in the process of its own determination' (Malabou and Derrida 2005: 18). This is interesting as the idea of synthesis is related to a human technique of navigating time and to the idea of becoming whole in order to take control of one's own destiny. While Povinelli deems the Hegelian idea of the synthesizing subject unfit for an entity like Tjipel which explodes this concept, formally and materially, Malabou's adaption of Hegel's idea can still lead us back to initial thoughts about the nature of 'the social', which

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is an entity that qualifies as an 'assemblage' (Povinelli 2016: 100) as much as Tjipel. The question of what the social is in a contemporary Ghanaian town community leads to a need to reframe this homogenizing concept. At the same time, materials and their homogenous properties, as identified in synthetic materials, may be used to construct states of (self-)determination and control on multiple levels.

Lesson Three: Death Can Preserve or Transform Power Relations among the Living

We now know that activities around death are co-produced by the material world and that they are important for influencing social transformations of diverse kinds, be these controlled, out of control or informed by past injury. The question remains how either the transformation or preservation of the social status quo can be achieved. To answer this question, the third lesson requires an excursion into the history of political theology and the politicization of death, considering strategic forms of governance. Through connecting death to attempts at defining the status quo of social relations and the distribution of power, the political nature of death becomes obvious. Social and individual duration in the face of death is often aspired to, yet this poses a problem of an 'essentially political nature to do with the legitimization of authority' (Bloch and Parry 1982b: 11). Bloch and Parry see Hertz's model as a solution, in which temporary burial removes the polluting and threatening individual aspect of death, while the secondary burial re-affirms the existing order and authority by taking control of the unpredictable. Their work might therefore be better for understanding conservative agendas, while not shedding much light on other aspects of society's relation to death, namely forces and agendas of change. It also does not conceptually consider what happens when things do not go as planned.

In contrast, the ways in which people in Peki grapple with death reveal practices and material things in the context of death as constantly addressing and facilitating power struggles within social organization. The local, pre-colonially established concept of 'bad' death installs lingering insecurity and possible failure right in the heart of institutionalized attempts to reinstate control over death. Regeneration, though strived for in funerary and commemorative activities in Peki, never fully affirms the social as a homogenous unit, while giving space to imaginary ideals of wholeness and belonging as well as to new units to which one may feel allegiance. It is therefore particularly interesting to observe how ideas of regeneration and duration are expressed in relation to the material world in Peki, such as bodies, materials and objects. The moments in which perspectives on how these earthly things transform or endure clash with other perspectives on the same material conditions are also the moments from which important insights about the nature of negotiating social relations via the material world can be gathered. Following Singh, (colonial) mastery is in its essence based on

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material conquest and on a moral (self)proclaimed status of supremacy, making it essential to investigate narrative and matter alongside each other (2018: 8, 16). The political imaginary, something that brings forth ideology, interprets material conditions in a certain way to achieve this, hereby combining perspectives on materiality with an authoritative narrative.

This is what the historian Ernst Kantorowicz describes in his 1957 study *The King's Two Bodies* (2016 [1957]), which shows how (royal) power aims to conservatively regenerate beyond the king's individual death. It offers a model for understanding how power can survive death through a complex set of institutional workings and fictions. This is helped by means of legal institutions, effigies as material representations, religious institutions, and corporeal governance. The 'two bodies' concept relies on the idea that the king has an immaterial 'body politic', one which does not die, age or transform. It represents the crown, which is immortal and immutable. Its members are the subjects and institutions of the state. The king's body natural refers to his physical body which will inevitably die. The only moment at which the two are separated is in death, and here the king's body politic does not die but is instead transferred into a new and living body natural.

The separation of the body natural from the body politic and the emergence of a body social in the context of medieval governance is insightful for understanding how the individual and the social may or may not be connected. Such separations are not exclusive to the European Middle Ages and royal governance. Divisions of representative and social functions, which become acute in the case of kings, as well as the distinction between the biological and social death of an individual, are conceptualized according to social and individual agendas. These may be diverse and lead to transformations of the social. Historically, the two bodies model is connected to the Western concept of the state, a form of governance that later became a colonial export. Kantorowicz offers a historian's perspective on how governance, the physical body and the metaphysical (interpreted through Christianity and the Church) have worked as a complex machinery, shaping political processes in Europe. The spiritual element of a superhuman power with which the king is endowed, is turned into a seemingly secular authority, while continuing to work in the same 'mystical' logic as before. The religious (or symbolic) part comes to serve an important role since it determines and is determined by material, real-world bodies and events. Ultimately, though, this secularization demoted the king's function in relation to the social. It is precisely this potential of death as a facilitator for change and diversification of power, often subverting the intentions of those who claim to hold a position of superiority, that practices relating to death can also reveal. Claudio Lomnitz's book *Death and the Idea of Mexico* provides a contemporary ethnography that shows how death has been appropriated as a signature trademark by Mexico as a postcolonial nation (2008). Lomnitz describes how the master's tools are appropriated and turned against them,

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now working for independence, something which, as Julietta Singh rightly points out in her critique of mastery, may cause subsequent problems for the newly formed nation. As Kantorowicz describes, historically established mechanisms also remain active in the background of modern European governance. While allowing the king to be done away with or to retain diminished royal representatives in the secular state, the medieval logic of governance continued to have a powerful effect, masked as secular governance. However, sometimes using the dead against an oppressive force has also proven to yield perplexingly successful results.

Along those lines, the work of the anthropologist Gillian Feeley-Harnik resonates as an excellent example of an ethnography that studies the demise of kingship and the reappropriation of royal death in a situation of colonial domination (1984, 1989, 1991, 2008). Feeley-Harnik contextualizes the phenomenon of worshipping dead royalty among the Sakalava in Madagascar by looking particularly at the Southern Bemihisatra (1984, 1991). She roots her analysis in a focus on the role and local understanding of labour. The Southern Bemihisatra work for their dead monarchs 'while participating only marginally in national political economy' (1984: 1). Seen against a historical background of French colonial rule on the island, she shows how the seemingly absurd development of a 'political economy of death' has emerged in response to a fruitless attempt by the French colonists to replace and destroy native institutions. The access to the realm of real royal power was kept out of reach of the living (French) authorities by removing the executive forces of power from their immediate representative (1991: 142). The society that Feeley-Harnik describes and its use of a political economy of death had a structure similar to Kantorowicz's medieval royal rule. Feeley-Harnik's work, like Kantorowicz's study, draws connections between death and power, this time in an African context and from an ethnographic point of view. Yet, the bodies of Malagasy kings and their symbolic functions come to play a quite different role than in the context of the European Middle Ages. Instead of looking at royal governance that is in full possession of the mechanisms which make it strong and 'eternal', Feeley-Harnik's ethnographic material presents a native Malagasy royalty that is struggling not to die out. Royal power here is being hollowed out from two sides: by the colonial authorities and by royal subjects who appropriate royalty for their own purposes. Instead of serving to preserve the 'status quo', the political economy of death becomes a counter-colonial strategy, removing the sovereign that has a masterful status into the realm of the dead and hence obfuscating the real seats of power to the outsiders (the colonial 'masters'). Instead, dead royalty becomes the vehicle for appropriating power and expressing a joint political agenda – opposition to the colonial rule – alongside individual agendas and identities.

Feeley-Harnik paints a nuanced picture of a differentiated society with collective as well as individual representations. In that respect, her description comes a lot closer to the multi-faceted historical and contemporary

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situation found in Africa, and in Peki today. Categories of inside and outside are more open to reconfiguration and hence produce a less idealized image of power. Activities in relation to (royal) death do not serve the purpose of regeneration but rather of defence. Instead, the various activities that occur offer the possibility to generate personhood and identities beyond such an equalizing social identity. In contemporary Ghana, the institution of indigenous governance with different positions of honour and royalty embedded in it continues to exist, along the nation state and its representative structures. This arrangement maintains an essentially 'traditional' indigenous governance system and upholds the existence of a number of royal families, kings, queen mothers and elders. What I want to take from this third lesson is that there are different strategies in response to death which aim to legitimate or challenge authority. All of them rely on bodies and material representations of power as well as 'ideologies': narratives that prescribe how to interpret reality, also including the reality of the material world. It is at this point where anthropological theories of signification and materiality need to be considered along these three lessons.

Signification and Materiality: Breaking down Clear Categories

Descriptions from the 'field' take the specificity of the ethnographic context as their starting point towards making sense of materiality in the context of the human life cycle. They tie into a discourse within material culture studies that offers a broad range of theoretical tools. The word materiality itself as a key term migrated into the focus of anthropological discourse from archaeology, through the work of, amongst others, Daniel Miller (Miller 2005), Chris Tilley and colleagues who established a focus on material cultures studies in the early 2000s at the University College London Department of Anthropology. The discourse around materiality provides different tools for theoretically and analytically understanding the material world around humans, and recently the more-than-human, such as in the work of Karen Barad, Jane Bennett or Philippe Descola, among others (Barad 2003, 2007; Bennett 2010; Descola 2013). There are approaches that put more emphasis on relations and fluidity, such as Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory (2005) or Alfred Gell's art nexus model (1998). Other approaches, such as found in the work of Webb Keane (2003, 2005, 2018) or Susanne Küchler (2002), discuss how signification is processual, perspectival and related to long-term processes of skill and knowledge sharing. Yet other approaches have problematized the productive use of the term materiality in the face of materials and their qualities, such as most prominently by Tim Ingold (2007) but also interrogated it in approaches from the anthropology of design, such as represented by Adam Drazin (2015, 2021) and others. I am following these approaches when speaking about materiality, drawing on conceptions of matter that highlight agency and interrelatedness as well as materials and their per-

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spectival effects alongside post-semiotic attributions of meaning that are equally fluid.

Things and materials float from states of meaningfulness and the attribution of multiple meanings and values into states of temporary meaninglessness, depending on perspective. For my purposes, accounts that consider the state of the material in these varying contexts are therefore a good way of shedding light on the process of transformation that is death and on the multiple agendas, practices and parties that are invested in appropriating the ensuing changes in support of their various aims. As we have just seen, the anthropology of death provides concepts that are helpful for understanding the role of the material world, substances, and bodies in relation to death. Robert Hertz' secondary burial model (1907), being an early work in that discourse, is extremely useful for conceptualizing the roles that the body and the material environment play in understanding death's political potential. But what other models has the discourse since brought forth that help to conceptually grasp the role of the material world in the attribution of meaning(s), which then serve various processes of (re-)organizing social relations? A few interpretations that veer more towards the semiotic have emerged based on Hertz's work. Metcalf and Huntington provide such a semiotic approach (1991: 62). According to their reading of Hertz, his analysis of 'collective representations' of death can serve as a well-structured model that helps us understand the deeper symbolic and political implications of different societies' relationships to death. Bloch and Parry's work also assesses the formative and re-affirmative function of death rituals for the social order. Following Hertz's point, they stress the connection of practices around death with the symbolic sphere. Death is symbolically related to the continued existence of a social order and its institutions, to the sphere of exchange, and to power held by individuals and institutions in society. The term 'ideological representation', which they use to mark such symbolic functions, reflects this quite well. While these interpretations have been influential, I want to offer a different approach to using Hertz in relation to materiality, moving away from looking for signification in the realm of the symbolic.

In their development of Hertz's approach, Metcalf and Huntington as well as Bloch and Parry do not focus on Hertz's considerations of the material in relation to the transformation of the body. Their texts were written before the theoretical turn in anthropology towards material culture studies and the focus on materiality. Regarding contemporary conceptualizations of the material world in anthropology, the binaries implied in Hertz's work have largely been replaced by a growing fluidity of boundaries. A weakening of opposing conceptual categories has occurred in favour of models that permit an understanding of social life which has become diversified and influenced by a multitude of factors. Adam Drazin uses the term 'composites' in order to grasp this breaking-down of clear categories defining the material world (2015). He also proposes to attribute materials with

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'tendencies' rather than properties or qualities, thereby including the perspective of those who perceive the material world. In contemporary work, what were formerly clearly established categories of the symbolic versus the material, of spirit versus matter, are undergoing a continuous process of deconstruction. As the editors of the journal *Material Religion* phrase it, the ideological and symbolic sphere (of religion) 'happens materially' and is 'inseparable from a matrix of networks of components that consist of people, divine beings or forces, institutions, things, places and communities' (Meyer et al. 2010: 209). Nor is materiality any longer viewed as 'cultural form [which is] inherently representational' and it can no longer be 'read in an interpretative process which reveals true knowledge lying behind its mirror-like surface' (Küchler 2002: 212). And while material objects and materiality may be regarded as signs carrying what Webb Keane calls 'semiotic ideologies' (2008, 2018) – attributed meanings that are structurally ideological – they have other possibilities beyond this function. As 'qualisigns', a Peircean semiotic concept that was adopted by anthropologists such as Webb Keane, Nancy Munn or Pauline Garvey (Garvey 2013; Keane 2003; Munn 1986), they may function in a simultaneity of sign systems and evaluations. Peirce's original definition of qualisign forms part of his semiotic theory and denotes a sign in which only a 'simple abstract quality' bears the function of transporting meaning (Atkin 2023). With a focus on what are tendencies rather than qualities, the qualisign, according to Keane, is a sign by which 'significance is borne by certain qualities beyond their particular manifestation'(2003: 414). These ideas of perspectivally oscillating interpretations of tendential 'qualities' bring the importance of relationality, plurality and situated perspectives on what the material may 'do' to the fore. As I detail elsewhere, the attribution of moral and temporal properties to materials and states of being (alive as well as dead) can be productively traced by following post-semiotic approaches such as offered by Keane's concept of qualisigns (Bredenbröker 2024b).

As a lens for conceptualization, materiality was dropped from thinking about death post-Hertz and only picked up again much later. The three lessons from the anthropology of death that I take on board are therefore informed by how death and materiality have been theorized in conjunction. Adding to that, theoretical models that are, as such, unrelated to death, but which help to understand processes of transformation, relationality and temporality are needed to think about death as a process that manifests transformation at the intersection of the social and the material. As such, these new theoretical leads can replace formerly articulated theories within the anthropology of death that rely on semiotic analysis and symbolism. In their place, Alfred Gell's anthropological theories of art and time offer models for understanding social processes from a material perspective, while they are not directly related to the anthropology of death. Instead, they augment Hertz's theoretical approach that helps to understand how engagement with the dead, materially and spiritually, produces the body

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social for the living. How, if we grasp social engagement with death as attempts of mastering or controlling the unmasterable, can humans claim to maintain and execute agency in the face of it? Or, to rephrase Gell's main questions addressed by his anthropological theory of art (Küchler and Carroll 2021: 24): how does the social making of death work and what does it do (in my particular ethnographic context)?

Gell, who placed the term agency on the discursive table, understands art objects to be operative from a nexus of relations. In *Art and Agency* (1998), he offers an understanding of art as defined by action and social agency, rather than just aesthetics or conventions. An art object, according to Gell, is an index in which different human intentions (as created by the artist) become manifest, literally as indexically imprinted on the art object. These, and the possible agency of the artefact, are assumed (abducted[8]) by different recipients, yielding different assumptions. The index and assumptions abducted from perceiving it may be modelled after one or several inspirations (prototypes). In fact, 'any constituent part [Index, Artist, Recipient and Prototype] may potentially act as agent over any other constituent part' (Küchler and Carroll 2021: 23). Developing Peirce's semiotic theory of the index, Gell's art(-like) objects may then, due to agency they possess, also be person-like, and persons may be art-like due to both potentially being 'sources and targets of' social agency, which may be construed in different kinds of agent-patient-index-prototype relations (Gell 1998: 96). An inanimate idol, for example, may be a social agent since it materially embodies quietude. The activity of abduction is here on the part of the recipient, who, with the necessary cultural-religious background, will be able to associate the idol with quietude. Any object or person may thus be such an index if situated in a nexus of abductive relationships. This means that the focus of interpreting the role of the material and its signification, in the art nexus model, moves away from attributing clear meanings and instead towards looking at indexes as relational things.

Gell's conception of intentionality in the art nexus model has been subject to ongoing discussion since his untimely death in 1998 (Chua and Elliott 2015b). As Susanne Küchler and Timothy Carroll have argued in their recent revision of Gellian scholarship, intention on the part of an artist or maker is not the sole source of intentionality in the art nexus model. Instead, as they argue, 'there is good reason to put the emphasis on the assumption – or specifically the abduction – of agency' (2021: 21). This leaves part of the agency in the sense-making of the artwork and towards unfolding its social agency with the recipient. The index also holds part of that agency, as does the prototype, which lives and unfolds in the perspectives of patients to whom the index relates. In Gellian terminology, the instance which is affected by agency is the patient. The result of multiple possible agent-patient relationships is a kind of distributed personhood (Gell 1998: 222; Chua and Elliott 2015b: 10), which exists in the ever-evolving relations of the art nexus and does not allow for one clear attribution of

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meaning or intentionality to dominate, long term. While Gell's application of the art nexus model initially only aimed at visual representations or artefacts, the extended application of this term to include, for example, 'human indices' (Carroll 2018: 12) has been established. A dead body and materials associated with the dead may thus equally become indices, since they stand at the nexus of various social activities that aim at the production of good death. The concept of indexicality in Gell's work therefore provides a fitting analytical framework for revealing how the socially produced dead are in fact similar to what Gell understands as artworks: they stand at the centre of, and contain within them, inductive relations co-constituted by the living, by materials and dead bodies. In the making of death as a social and material practice, society is also shaped by the values that the living invest into materially mediated ideologies around death. Gell's work on relations in the art nexus and the concept of semiotic ideology, following Webb Keane, are hence fitting complementary theoretical pillars for unpacking how certain properties and representational functions can be attributed to persons and things, concretely in my case: the dead and the materials that give them agency or keep them in check. Keane defines semiotic ideologies as 'basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world' (2003: 419). This concept may to some degree be compared to Gellian prototypes, as regarding culturally shared ideas about material properties and their moral qualities or shared ideals of personhood for the dead. As it turns out, the execution or control of agency in the case of death in Peki happens in mutual and multiple processes of formation, assessment and co-constitution in which individuals or social institutions are not the masters of their own actions but merely contributors to a collaborative process. Yet, when considering the dead, these appear as humans of a different kind as their bodies have lost intentional, attributable agency of the kind living human bodies can be seen to have. There is thus the potential and fear that these dead persons, wherever they may be, can now execute agency in uncontrolled ways, from unforeseeable locations other than their bodies, hence attempting to turn living community members into patients or indices. This means that different processes are at play at the same time. While community members and institutions each attempt to inscribe their own intentions on the dead as indices, ultimately resulting in a new 'dead person' after negotiations are over, there are also constant attempts to keep possibly unwanted actions on the part of the dead in check. The dead, therefore, are special kinds of more-than-humans whose agencies may be found in altogether unexpected places, something which social action will attempt to counteract in a number of ways. As such, social attempts at containing and mastering death are forever bound to be aspirational and can only be realized in parts.

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Temporalities

The same is true for attempts at controlling or mastering the temporality attributed to the worlds of the living and the dead, something which ultimately translates into the quality of being durational. Strategies that aim to control and navigate time, and hence the dead, are always at risk of losing control. Here, such as already mirrored in the development of a diversified perspective on signification and materiality, conceptual approaches to time and temporality in death have seen a move towards more fluid boundaries and concepts. On a general level, contemporary theoretical conceptions of categories, such as, for example, the biological and the social, are moving away from conceiving of these as opposed fields. Anthropologists Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth take up this criticism in their work on the role of the body in relation to death, making it their aim to destabilize the dichotomies associated with death and life, which are, they state, 'historically emergent cultural constructs' from a Western perspective (1999: 10). Rather than seeing a person's last breath as a manifestation of an abstract higher force beyond human influence, death, as anthropologists understand it today, is 'just as biological as it is social' (McKee 2020: 40). The temporality of dying extends from life, before the death of the physical body, into an uncertain future or even eternity. No matter how people are thought to live on after death – as ancestor, in a religious or cosmic world view, or not at all – the disappearance of a person with their social ties, functions and obligations changes those social relations for the living, on a more intimate as well as possibly on a larger structural scale.

According to Hertz, the passing of time is of crucial importance for these social and cultural processes. Death does not occur in an instant but is a process whose temporal structure mirrors that of life-giving processes. He describes the time spent in mourning as following closely the decomposition of the body and the dismantling of relationships involving rights, responsibility and property associated with the deceased person. Once freed from its earthly container and associations, the soul must be recaptured in an artificial container that mirrors the image society has of itself. In this way, the dead are incremental to the making of the social. During the final ceremony, the body is reclaimed and buried in its final resting place. The physical body has been altered. Time has passed, allowing the mourners to dissociate themselves from the deceased. The soul, which until now has been wandering between its final spiritual destination and its previous earthly home, is ready to depart from earth for good. Through interaction with the remains of the deceased, either by decorating them, incorporating them, polishing them or in some other way, the connection between the body and the soul can be used to send spiritual elements of the dead on its way. In their new destination, the deceased will continue to exist. The living are freed from the threat and possible dangers that the soul and corpse, in limbo between life and death, posed to them. With the material and immaterial parts of the

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deceased at their respective destinations, society can celebrate its triumph over death. Only in specific cases, such as particularly 'bad' deaths (during childbirth, accidents, drowning, lightning or suicide) may the soul not have an opportunity to re-enter life in an altered state.

The aim of the work for the dead in Peki and Christian communities in southern Ghana, linking this to Hertz's somewhat ideal model, is to preserve the body and to remake it as a more durable representation of the dead, suspended in time and contained in space. This is expressed in a local preference for enduring material qualities over ephemeral ones. The body is now in the perfect state to be manipulated by the living. Simultaneously, an alternative, infinite social time for the dead is produced, which is contained and hence will pose no danger. In *The Anthropology of Time*, Gell understands individual temporal experience as shared and co-constituted by other temporal experiences in what he terms social time (1992: 202). His concept of chrono-geography, a way of navigating this complex temporal experience, serves to illustrate and conceptually understand the temporal and spatial connections between moving bodies, objects and seemingly stable places (190–212). Gell describes the relationships between places, time, distinct sets of rules and the constraints that are placed on bodies and social agents. Building on ideas from human geography, he conceives of time and space as co-dependent. This co-dependence is expressed in terms of mobility (or restrictions on it) and affects human life and agency in a very real, material way. Restrictions on movement or containment – what Gell calls constraints – may be primarily spatial, temporal or social in nature. Yet, they have a general effect on how time and space are experienced, how they can be accessed and conceptualized: they affect human agency in the world. Based on the understanding of time as always containing within itself the experience of the past and the anticipation of a future which is again modelled with the past and the present in mind, Gell sees the human ability to navigate time as relying on mapping strategies. It is these mapping strategies that are being played out in interaction with materials, attributed significations, bodies and places. This model can be applied to the ways in which the dead are sought to be kept in check in Peki. Instead of remaining a threat to the living, the time of the dead is sought to be transformed into a temporal medium of control whereby the dead are yet again made to serve the various aims and purposes of the living within social time. This control is sought to be established and negotiated materially, ideologically, spatially and temporally, with again no clear boundaries set between these fields but rather a constant co-constitution of them. The time that ensues between experiences, anticipations, different worlds and their temporal logics is what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) terms queer time, as opposed to straight time. Specific to plastics, Muñoz's concept of queer temporality is in line with Heather Davis' framing of plastics as often out-of-control and entangled queer kin (Davis 2022). Gaining momentary control of this non-linear temporality may be an intention of individuals, yet there is no

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guarantee it will work long-term, leaving potential for failure, change and surprise. Nonetheless, specific practices and the use of synthetic materials are recruited to help with keeping the upper hand in Peki.

Outline of the Book

Part I 'Place: Afterlives of Colonialism' zooms in from a wide angle, which considers historical facts and infrastructure in Ghana, to a narrower focus on the town and contemporary death-related practices. Part II and Part III then bring the material and temporal aspects of these practices to the fore in the discussion of ethnographic material. Building on ideas established in this Introduction, Chapter 1 'Death and Power: The Nation, Indigenous Concepts and Colonial Remnants' disentangles the connections between practices relating to death, colonial history and contemporary political structures in Ghana and Ghanaian Ewe communities. It frames ways of channelling power and relating in the context of different local social institutions and concepts, such as indigenous governance, the state and kinship. In the light of colonial remnants and influences, this chapter considers the major structural institutions that play a role in the distribution of power and how these have been transforming and transformative in relation to the dead. Chapter 2 'Death in Peki: Sequences' addresses the role and history of death-related practices in Peki, my primary fieldsite in the Ghanaian Volta Region. It presents local framings of death based on historic documentation and my own ethnography. Drawing a picture of contemporary practices relating to death in town, the chapter distinguishes between two sequences that are locally used to process and produce 'good' and 'bad' death. Wrapping up the first part of the book, the chapter connects these sequences of events to contemporary ethnographies of death and power, historical influences and contemporary forms of social organization.

Part II 'Containment: 'Good' Death (*Ku*)' addresses how modes of control or mastery are sought to be implemented in relation to death and what role synthetic materials play to that avail. Chapter 3 'To the Cemetery! Navigating between Worlds with Cement and Plastic' looks at the dead body's journey towards containment in the 'good' death sequence. It illustrates the beginning of this passage by looking at the cemetery and investigates effects that materials, environments, rules and social actions have on constraints and movement. The chapter begins to flesh out how these effects are formative of economic processes and moral evaluations. The assessment of bodies and materials, here particularly plastic and cement, as well as their controlled movements in time and space are portrayed in relation to ways in which the living attempt to navigate the temporality of the dead. Chapter 4 'From Morgue to Family Compound: Overcoming Socio-Material Constraints' continues the discussion of the efficacy of materials and bodies in the social making of death and the containment of the dead. It illustrates these aspects further along the journey of the dead body using

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ethnography from the local morgue. As the controlled transformation of the dead progresses, the storage facility, washing of the body and attendance of a public contribute to a successful unmaking of the social person in death. It also gives ethnographic details of the lying in state and funeral celebrations taking place at a family compound, where the remaking of the deceased's persona in death happens. The use of clothing and decorative items alongside site-specific rules and regulations render the deceased at once touchable and out of reach. This chapter concludes the journey of the deceased in the 'good' death sequence, showing how the body becomes an index for the manifestation of power relations in the community.

The last part of the book, Part III 'Transformations: 'Bad' Death (*Ametsiava*) and Beyond', looks at how death effects a multitude of transformations and how these sit precariously at the border between control and the loss of it. Chapter 5 '"Bad" Death: Normalizing the Accident' introduces different ethnographic cases of events in the 'bad' death sequence. It shows how, by means of movement, temporal attribution and synthetic materials, the disruptive elements that follow a 'bad' death are sought to be contained, yet always remain on the verge of control. Here, the body as index can never be fully secured, thus giving way to transformative social processes that may challenge the existing order. Chapter 6 'Playing Tricks on Death: Alternative Strategies' continues the argument introduced in the previous chapter and adds ethnographic descriptions of various alternative strategies where the prescribed sequence was altered, offering opportunities to challenge the status quo of power in the community. Again, the role of synthetic materials, places and bodies is central to the analysis of a political economy around death. The conclusion 'The Agency of the Dead, the Agency of Synthetic Materials' brings the book to a close, with a final look at the intertwined nature of power structures, the temporality of death and the potential qualities of synthetic materials. It reflects on the attribution and use of synthetic materials in a neo-colonial present and before a historical context specific to West Africa, relating back to thoughts voiced in the introduction.

Notes

1. Heather Davis, following Catherine Malabou (2012a), proposes an alternative order by observing that 'form transforms, substance remains', which then 'could be the way to differentiate biodegradable materials (as form) from recalcitrant materiality (as substance).
2. For a recent critique and discussion about how to think through the impact that racial and colonial interventions and the concept of the West had on cultures and regions which became its Other, see Elizabeth Povinelli's book *Between Gaia and Ground* (Povinelli 2021). In this book, I am following this critique which, with Povinelli, makes it necessary to begin thinking through contemporary states from what she terms the 'ancestral catastrophe of late liberalism' rather than beginning a critical investigation 'with questions about first conditions'.
3. The history of Peki and being Ewe as a cultural identity as well as Ewe as a language

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are explained in more detail in Chapter 1. It is important to note that contemporary Peki is inhabited mainly by people that identify as Ewe and speak the Ewe language. Hence, I am speaking of it as an Ewe community. Nevertheless, there are also people speaking other languages and of other (largely Ghanaian and fewer non-Ghanaian) cultural identities present in Peki.

4. I am using the term 'field' in inverted commas to show a critical distance towards it, while not wanting to replace it with a new term entirely as I believe it is important to discuss core anthropological terms productively and learn from these conversations. As a term that is established in anthropology to mark the place and site of one's work, it is yet a term that sits uneasy with me, given its origin in the battlefield. I find that the term creates an artificial distance between the person doing research and their social environment during research, while also objectifying interlocutors as part of that 'field'.
5. Of organic or inorganic components, chemical distinctions attributed to the molecular makeup of materials and substances that do not equal the distinction between natural and cultural.
6. I hereby follow the social effects and perceptions that these materials have, while acknowledging that a lot of it also takes place on the 'hidden' levels that material science addresses.
7. These moral assessments are partially the product of translation into English as there are Ewe terms that denote 'good' and 'bad' death. However, as English is also spoken in the community, albeit only for more official purposes, and often used on visual media such as funeral banners and posters, these terms are still not strictly 'just' translations but do also resonate with local interlocutors. Yet, on funeral banners, for example, other words will be used to describe what then in effect is here categorized as 'good' and 'bad' death. I have also written on moral assessments of death and materials in Peki elsewhere (Bredenbröker 2024b).
8. As opposed to deduction. Abduction concludes, from observations of an effect, what the cause of this effect may be.

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