

Bringing home the dead

Ritualizing cremation in the Netherlands

Meike Heessels

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Ritualizing cremation in the Netherlands

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Filosofie, Theologie en Religiewetenschappen

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Meike Maria Johanna Geertruida Heessels

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Promotoren

Prof. dr. H.J.M. Venbrux

Prof. dr. R.L. Grimes (Yale University)

Copromotor

Dr. M.M.A. Altena (University of Amsterdam)

Manuscriptcommissie

Prof. dr. A.J.M. van den Hoogen

Prof. dr. P.J.A. Nissen

Prof. dr. P.G.J. Post (Tilburg University)

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Introduction: Cremation rituals as a window to beliefs about the dead

In 1999 Betsie and Harrie lost their twenty-year-old daughter Marieke. Together with Marieke's boyfriend Bart and a funeral director, the parents organized Marieke's funeral. Knowing she was very ill, Marieke had already told her mother that she wanted to be cremated and to have her ashes dispersed at 'her secret place'. This was an island in the peat bogs where she used to play as a child. Later in life, she went there to think, because she felt at peace being surrounded by nature. After she died, Marieke was cremated and soon after, Betsie, Harrie and Bart visited Marieke's secret place. Then and there, they planned to scatter her ashes at her birthday.

Everything seemed to be arranged, except for one thing. At her deathbed, Marieke had asked repeatedly if her name had been called in church. At first Betsie did not know what her daughter meant. She was surprised by her question, because even though Marieke was baptized, her parents did not consider themselves, or her, practicing Christians anymore. Her boyfriend was a fierce atheist and from childhood Marieke herself had had an aversion to the church. After a while Betsie answered her daughter by explaining that her name had been pronounced in church at her christening. Upon hearing this Marieke seemed relieved. Aside from this question, Christian beliefs seemed to have had no role in Marieke's life, so Betsie, Harrie and Bart organized her funeral in a crematorium without the presence of a priest. Still, her daughter's question continued to rankle in Betsie's mind. She was not sure if they had done justice to all Marieke's wishes.

Shortly before the scattering an idea suddenly dawned on Betsie. She decided to ask the help of the priest from the church where Marieke was baptized. While they would conduct the scattering themselves, Betsie asked if the priest would bless Marieke's ashes beforehand. Betsie went to the priest and explained the situation. The priest had never blessed someone's ashes before but he agreed to help. He invited Betsie and Harrie to come to his house with the ashes and to take their daughter's birth candle and so they did. Together they drank coffee and talked about Marieke. The priest wore his ordinary clothes, but before turning to the blessing, he put on a stool. Then Betsie lit the candle and the priest recited a prayer and blessed the ashes. Betsie and Harrie thanked the priest and went home. 'It was a crazy idea, but it felt good', Betsie said. 'Still, my husband and I never told Bart, because we were afraid that he would disapprove. I now think he would have agreed, since he was also present when Marieke asked that pressing question about her name being called in church.'

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The day of the scattering Betsie, Harrie and Bart had breakfast together at Marieke's parental home. Then they put the urn in a backpack and took off for the peat bogs. At first Betsie carried the backpack. Then Bart asked if he could carry Marieke's ashes for a while. 'It was devastating and beautiful at the same time to see him walking with the urn, carrying his girlfriend', Betsie recounted. When they arrived, two of them waited at the footpath, while one after another they walked to Marieke's place scattering a handful of ashes. When all was scattered, they each stuck a white rose in the soft ground. In the end, Betsie laid down a pebble on which she had drawn 'with love' and a symbol representing the initials of the three of them.

This story shows how non-religiously affiliated people in the Netherlands inventively create rituals for the dead today. For centuries the care of the dead was considered a key responsibility of the churches, their parishes and communities of neighbours in the Netherlands. From the end of the nineteenth century medical and funeral professionals gradually took over the care for the dying and dead body. Since the end of the twentieth century, authority no longer lies only with the church or with professionals, but also with individuals and their families exercising their power to create personalized death rituals.

Nowadays, like Betsie, Harrie and Bart, many Dutch people create meaningful rituals outside of religious institutions, while at the same time drawing upon institutional teachings and experts (Margry 2008; Post 2005; Venbrux 2007a), a process that is also called 'believing without belonging' (Davie 1994; Davie 2000). The diminishing role of the church in organizing death rituals for non-religiously affiliated people is not universal. In various modern western societies religious institutions have responded differently to processes of secularization. The Church of Sweden for example administers almost all funeral activities in the country for religious as well as non-religious members (Walter 2005). Secularization thus does not necessarily imply that the role of religious institutions vanishes. Instead, religious institutions incorporate secular practices which can result in 'belonging without believing' (Casanova 2007; Hervieu-Léger 2004).

To organize death rituals, Dutch mourners draw on multiple sources, relying on the wishes of the deceased, the ideas of professionals and their own experiences with death rituals. Simultaneously the bereaved refer to various beliefs. Betsie and Harrie referred to the power of nature as well as the meaning of baptism, an aspect of institutionalized religion that they applied in their own way. Most bereaved are no longer religiously affiliated, but often they are still in connection with religious institutions. Moreover, echoes of religious practices of their past become embedded in the creation of contemporary death rituals. This mixture of sources relied on to create death rituals results in varying beliefs regarding the dead and their afterlife, about which so far relatively little is known.

In this book, I explore Dutch beliefs about the dead and the afterlife, not only as expressed verbally, but also expressed through gestures, objects and images among

non-religiously affiliated people. I refer to this whole complex as practices. Starting from mourners' practices, I will describe their dynamic patterning and answer the question, *In the Netherlands, what do the practices of bereaved people with human ashes imply about beliefs concerning the dead and their continuing existence?*

To answer this question a focus on the practices with human ashes is useful. Firstly because the percentage of non-religiously affiliated is higher among people who choose for cremation than among people opting for burial (Wojtkowiak 2011). And secondly because cremation rituals, especially ash disposal rituals, are new practices, forcing mourners to improvise and create rituals that suit their beliefs about the dead.

Secular rituals of cremation: valuing biography over belief?

In the twentieth century, the religious landscape of the Netherlands has changed quickly from one of the most Christian countries of Europe to one of the most secularized countries. In 1909, 57% of the population were Protestant, 35% were Catholic and only 5% were not religiously affiliated (Knippenberg 1992). This image is in great contrast to the data from one century later. In 2006, 16% of the Dutch were Catholic, 14% were Protestant, 9% belonged to other denominations or religions and the biggest group of 61% was religiously unaffiliated (Bernts, et al. 2007).

Until the 1960s, in the Netherlands most people were born as either Catholic, Protestant or Socialist and eventually went to school, made friends, married and died as such (Van Eijnatten and Van Lieburg 2006). This structure that divided society and in fact the whole of daily life into certain pillars of denomination is called 'pillarization'. In the past sixty years, the all-encompassing influence of religious institutions decreased, crumbling the pillars of denomination, a process called 'depillarization'. As a result, not only church attendance diminished, in fact the pillarized character of the whole of public life, varying from sports clubs to schools unsettled.

Secularization theorists such as Steven Bruce (2002) interpreted this movement of depillarization as a decline of the plausibility of religion in the face of increasing rationalization and modernization. Following this line, these theorists presumed that religions would eventually disappear. At the root of this hypothesis lies a definition of religion that defines membership to a religious institution as its marker and that equals 'un-churched' to 'unreligious'. However, modern Dutch practices show that being non-religiously affiliated does not necessarily mean that people reject spiritual, transcendent or otherworldly concerns.

In the Netherlands, a difference between the process of disaffiliation from religious institutions and the cherishing of certain beliefs became apparent. While church membership has indeed declined, belief in an afterlife has not. In 2006, 29% of religiously unaffiliated Dutch stated to believe in an afterlife and another 33% declared to be unsure (Bernts, et al. 2007: 49). In other words, this statistic means that

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a two-thirds majority of religiously unaffiliated Dutch in some way believe in an afterlife.

Throughout this research I wondered how these afterlife beliefs are portrayed in current death rituals. Contemporary death rituals are focused on the identity of the deceased, emphasizing his or her character and achievements, a trend called personalization (Garces-Foley and Holcomb 2006; Walter 1996; Wouters 2002). Religious funerals as well as funerals for the non-religiously affiliated increasingly incorporate life stories and other biographical elements (Quartier 2009). Personalized death rituals for the non-religiously affiliated are often characterized as non-religious, because at first sight they seem to omit references to a heavenly afterlife. For example, the historian Peter Jupp (2007) suggests that personalized death rituals privilege biography over belief. Religious studies scholar Kathleen Garces-Foley and theologian Justin Holcomb (2006: 224) assert that the religious aspects of personalized funerals in the United States are overlooked because of a narrow, mainly Christian, definition of what qualifies as religious. Instead of a decline of religion at the favour of personalized practices, the authors state that non-religiously affiliated people apply religious traditions in a personalized way. I do agree that the identity of the deceased has gained a primary place in current death rituals, but not necessarily at the expense of religious beliefs.

However, by stating that 'new funeral rituals are often combined with the continued use of traditional funeral practices such as clergy-led service' (Garces Foley and Holcomb 2006: 224), Garces-Foley and Holcomb seem to hold on to a Christian and institutionalized definition of religion. A close look at cremation practices of non-religiously affiliated people reveals that they refer to more than matters of biographical fact, even when traditional religious funeral practices are not applied. Current secular, personalized practices such as creating online memorials, having woodland burials, and shooting ashes into space, might also have transcendent aspects. Yet, the transcendent dimensions of these rituals are less evident as these practices are not prescribed by religious institutions or experts. Until now, little qualitative research has been done on the religious aspects of these new practices that take place fully or partly outside of prescribed religious teachings (Venbrux 2007a: 9, 11).

To interpret religion outside of institutionalized frameworks, scholars of religion have come up with a range of broad concepts. The constantly changing, fragmented character of religion among the non-religiously affiliated received various labels, for example *ietsisme* (something-ism) (Verkuijlen 1996), religious individualization (Felling, et al. 2000), individual religiosity (Casanova 2007), search-religiosity (Bernts, et al. 2007) and blenderspirituality (De Hart 2009). We should ask ourselves if it is useful to search for yet another broad term covering such a complex phenomenon. Scientists use these terms, but practitioners do not. Before deciding among such terms, my suggestion is to first investigate what people actually do and embrace the complexities of their worldviews instead of trying to cover them over.

When one focuses on individuals and their daily practices, it becomes clear that materiality and spirituality, the sacred and the profane, religion and magic and secular and religious spaces are not so strictly separated, maybe not even separated at all (Margry 2008; McGuire 2008; McDannell 1995; Meyer 2006; Orsi 2005; Venbrux 2007a). Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that the bereaved themselves do not regard the dynamic and varying shape of their secular-religious practices as a problem. Mourners creatively used Christian symbolism alongside a belief in nature or appropriated indigenous practices they had encountered on a holiday trip to Indonesia. In daily religious practice one rarely encounters tidy binary oppositions but rather a mishmash of ideas, objects and practices, differing among individuals and changing throughout their lives.

For this reason, when analyzing people's beliefs it is important not only to listen to what people say about these practices, but also to carefully study their actions. In the short article *Questions not to ask of Malagasy carvings* (1995) the anthropologist Maurice Bloch describes how he was focused on the meanings 'behind' objects while the informants viewed the objects as part of a broader whole of practices and beliefs. In daily practice what you say or think whilst doing something or what you do while talking or are pondering over something is part of the same whole. What people express by means of material objects and bodily language is just as important as verbalized language. Besides, beliefs are often hard to describe in words only. As the archaeologist Nicole Boivin (2009: 266) says, 'While language may frequently be adequate for dealing with everyday activities and experiences, ritual, often materially, emotionally and sensually oriented, helps to grasp the elusive and unknowable at the margins of these experiences.' Taking these statements to heart I have included material and bodily as well as verbal expressions in order to detect beliefs as they are practiced, not as they are theorized.

When confronted with death, religiously as well as non-religiously affiliated, are forced not only to think about the meaning of life, but also to give substance to their ideas as they want to take leave of a relative or friend. In 1925 the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski was one of the first scholars investigating religion as it was practiced. He focused on death which he defined as 'the supreme and final crisis of life and the most important of all sources of religion' (Malinowski 2004). Up to today, anthropologists consider beliefs and practices concerning life after death an essential element in defining religion (Saler 2008; Venbrux 2007a). Current quantitative research among the Dutch echoes this axiom (Bernts, et al. 2007). When asked about a situation in which people, religiously as well as non-religiously affiliated, experience the presence of God or a higher power, death is most frequently mentioned (ibid.). Furthermore, more than half of the non-religiously affiliated people expressed a need for rituals, especially during transitions such as death (Bernts, et al. 2007: 30, 85).

While death forces people to contemplate what death and life mean, these ideas are not necessarily at hand, waiting to be used, but come into being while acting

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individually and with others. Beliefs about the dead as practiced in cremation rituals are not abstract ideas. These ideas are attached to a deceased person who was known as a friend or relative and they are performed by bereaved people. This implies that religious worlds are not ready-made. Rather, they develop over time and in relation to other people (Orsi 2005). As such, religion is inherently social. It consists of shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery and imparted insights (McGuire 2008: 13).

Beliefs about the dead are held by the living, who are creative agents applying these ideas and sharing them with others. Therefore in order to detect the underlying meanings of cremation rituals, I focus not only on people individually, as if religion is an individual affair, but also on the interaction between people. While modern western people generally view themselves and others as 'pure individuals', people's social context greatly influences individual beliefs (Bloch 1988: 16). In fact, when analyzing cremation rituals in the Netherlands on a micro-level, it seems that these rituals are not focused on the deceased alone, but evolve around the relations between the living and the dead.

In psychological theories a focus on the relations between the living and the dead is proposed as a model to deal with grief by cherishing the bonds with the deceased (Klass 2006; Stroebe, et al. 1992; Walter 1999). This grief model is in stark contrast to the prevailing view of grief by professionals throughout the twentieth century when mourners were stimulated to break the ties with the deceased and enduring relationships were viewed as problematic (Stroebe, et al. 1992). The radical change in these models might indicate a change in beliefs about the dead. Psychological models do not exist in isolation, they are historically and culturally defined as they are made by people and based on people's experiences. Treatments designed in a certain culture or a certain historical timeframe can appear to be historical or cultural imperialist, when looked at from another historical or cultural perspective (Stroebe, et al. 1992: 1210). Besides, these professional grief models do not stay neatly within psychological practices and books. Rather, as these ideas are spread through mass media and used by funerary professionals, these paradigms influence daily experiences of mourners and as such the creation of death rituals.

The idea of continuing relations is more than a psychological grief model. I agree with sociologist Glennys Howarth (2007: 216) that the emerging personalized death practices are witness to a range of beliefs that reconnect the living and the dead (2007: 258). This reconnection of the living and the dead implies a change in the image of the dead. Throughout the twentieth century in the medicalized and professionalized West, non-religiously affiliated people believed in a strict separation between the world of the living and the world of the dead. As a result, in death rituals for non-religiously affiliated, the end of life was emphasized, while nowadays a continuing connection between the living and the dead and the possibility of an afterlife are also referred to.

Taking into account that death is no longer regarded as the end of life and that notions of an afterlife are apparent among the non-religiously affiliated, I will inquire beliefs about the dead by investigating which transition the dead go through after death in the eyes of the living. In the context of this question, two groundbreaking early works on death ritual are of use. First is *The Rites of Passage*, a book first published in 1909, by Arnold Van Gennep (1960), a folklorist who focused on the meaning of transitions in rituals. Second, is the essay on secondary death rituals *A contribution to the study of the collective representation of death* by his contemporary sociologist Robert Hertz (1960). Both investigated the meaning of rituals by focusing on transitions. Building on this method, I will ask what kinds of transitions contemporary cremation rituals mark, what they enable and what these transitions imply about mourners' afterlife concepts.

Van Gennep (1960) compared descriptions of rituals throughout the world, demonstrating the similarities of rituals marking great transitions in life, such as birth, marriage and death. He argued that great transformations in a person's life from group to group and from one social stage to the next, are culturally marked and facilitated by means of rituals. Van Gennep maintained that rites of passage consisted of three phases: separation, transformation and incorporation. In many ways Hertz's study is complementary to Van Gennep's work. Hertz (1960) concentrated on the different parties, the corpse, the soul and the mourners that are involved in these transitions.

At first sight the transitions after contemporary cremation rituals seem rather unclear in comparison to institutional beliefs in an afterlife. By following Hertz's (1960) insight that practices with a corpse have a metaphoric relationship to beliefs about the spiritual components of the corpse, I aim to get to the meaning of human remains to the Dutch. The frequent occurrence as well as the broad variety of practices with human ashes indicate that people attribute importance to them, but what can these practices tell us about people's beliefs about the dead?

Ritualizing cremation in the Netherlands

In 2010 the Netherlands counted over seventy crematoriums and in the following year still new crematoriums were being built. In 2010, 57% of the dead were cremated.¹ While cremation is a common choice nowadays, it is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. The first cremation in a Dutch crematorium took place in 1914, a little less than one hundred years ago. Moreover, it was not until 1955 that cremation was legalized. In order to understand the meaning of cremation rituals in the Netherlands, it is important to take the broader historical and cultural context of cremation into consideration. Throughout the history of cremation rituals in the Netherlands, several influences were of crucial importance: the changing laws on

¹ Cremation percentages in the Netherlands mentioned in this text are derived from the official website of LVC, the National Association of Crematoriums in the Netherlands. <http://www.lvc-online.nl/aantallen> as accessed on 1 June 2011.

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disposal, the dynamic religious background of society and the increasing authority of the funeral industry in the creation of death rituals.

In 1874 the institution of cremation in the Netherlands started with the formation of *de Vereeniging tot Invoering der Lijkverbranding in Nederland* (the Association for the Introduction of Cremation).² The association was founded by six urban liberals (Cappers 1999: 55; Keizer 2005a). Co-founder, Dr. C.J. Vaillant, used his expertise as a medical doctor to compare and contrast the medical and hygienic aspects of cremation and burial (Keizer 2005b). At first, the association fought for the legalization of cremation, advocating the importance of public health and deeming burial unhygienic and space-consuming. Later, the association's motives changed and the association switched over to propagating aesthetics, purity and emotional reasons for cremation (Cappers 1999: 70-81, 190).

In 1913, the association's efforts resulted in the building of the first Dutch crematorium in Driehuis. A year later, the first cremation was carried out, when co-founder Vaillant died and was cremated in his 'own' crematorium. This was an illegal act because the Burial Act of 1869 commanded burial as the only way of disposal. Afterwards, those who committed the cremation were brought to trial, but all were acquitted because even though the law commanded burial, cremation was not officially forbidden (Cappers 1999: 145). From that moment onwards, cremation was tolerated.

From 1915 to 1955, when legislation on cremation was still in development, cremationists operated mostly on their associations' terms. With regard to ash disposal, ashes could be stored in a columbarium in Driehuis, scattered at their crematorium grounds, but mourners were also permitted to take ashes home or to scatter these on a self chosen place such as the nearby beach (Cappers 1999: 290, 303). There was a constant discussion within the association on what was considered ethical, esthetical and respectful.

During this period only a small group of people opted for cremation up to maximally 2% in 1950. This was firstly due to the fact that cremation was too expensive for most citizens. Another factor that inhibited the growth of cremation was the condemnation of cremation by the religious institutions to which most of the Dutch belonged. In Protestant churches there has never been an actual ban on cremation, but there was a clear preference for burial (Bot 1998: 89). The Catholic Church did officially condemn cremation. Already in 1886 the Holy Office had declared cremation a negation of the dogma of resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul (Salice 2005). In 1917, the denial of clerical services for people choosing cremation was added as a measure for those who dared to disobey (ibid.).

² Afterwards, the foundation changed their name to *Koninklijke Vereeniging voor Facultatieve Crematie* (Royal Cremation Society). Today, this early association of cremationists has evolved into a multinational company that owns various crematoriums and cemeteries throughout the Netherlands and Germany.

In the Burial and Cremation Act of 1955 cremation was officially recognized as a legitimate method of disposal in the Netherlands. Along with the climate of depillarization that set in that decade, cremation flourished. In ten years the percentage of performed cremations doubled from 2% in 1950 to 4% in 1960. In 1961 the General Synod of the Reformed Churches declared that cremation was not prohibited and that members wishing to be cremated had to be respected. In 1963 the Roman Catholic Church followed suit. In 1968 the Dutch legislation on body disposal was again adapted and the need for a separate codicil in case of cremation was rescinded, finally treating cremation and burial equally. Cremation continued to grow explosively to 14% in 1970.

With the legalization of cremation, the role of professionals increased. In general, funeral professionals had acquired a decisive role in the organisation of death rituals. Funeral directors aimed to help the bereaved by taking over the task of arranging the funeral. Only a small role was ascribed to the bereaved in cremation rituals and their contribution was further restricted in the case of ash disposal. In 1955, it was set out in the new law on disposal that after cremation ashes should remain on funerary grounds. Instead of giving the bereaved a choice, as was the case in initial stage, cremated remains were now mostly anonymously scattered on crematorium fields or at sea by professionals (Bot 1998; Cappers 1999). Therefore, most of the bereaved did not know what happened with the ashes of their relatives.

From the 1980s onwards, people started to object against the dominant role of professionals in death rituals. Pioneers in this field were hands-on experts and publicists Marjan Sax, Knaar Visser and Marjo Boer who wrote the book *Sand on it? Farewell and funeral according to one's own views* to educate people about the possibilities to organize death rituals themselves (Sax, et al. 1989). The authors stimulated people to make their own decisions, from dying to disposal. Among other things they demonstrated that the deceased could be laid in state at home. From the 1990s, small funeral companies were established, arguing against the ideal of sparing the bereaved by arranging everything for them. Instead, these new companies strived for a personal and meaningful funeral arranged in consultation with the bereaved, taking into account the wishes of the deceased (Bot 1998; Sax, et al. 1989).

Mourners claimed, and eventually received, a greater role in the execution of ash disposals. In 1978 a Buddhist family demanded to take the ashes of their son home to put these on their home altar (Cappers 1999: 290). When the crematorium declined their request the mourners went to the municipality and eventually to court. This case as well as comparable initiatives eventually paved the way for an adaptation of the law on disposal. In 1991, a change in the Burial and Cremation Act enabled the bereaved to take the ashes home, after being kept in a crematorium for thirty days.

The instigation of the thirty days 'waiting' period stemmed from a severe case of serial murdering in the nineteenth century. A woman called Goeie Mie murdered

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several family members and neighbours by poisoning them. When she was finally exposed, several bodies were exhumed to find evidence of earlier murders. Arsenic was detected in every single exhumed corpse. As a result, ashes are saved in the crematorium thirty days before handing them to the mourners, so in case of a crime the ashes can still be investigated. In this aspect, the Netherlands differs from other European countries. In France there are only a couple of hours between the cremation and the ash disposal, in Belgium the employees take care of the ash disposal within one day and in the United Kingdom the ashes become available to the bereaved in a couple of days (Heessels 2008; Vandendorpe 2000: 25; Prendergast et al. 2006).

While the urn could be taken home after thirty days from 1991, it was forbidden to take the ashes out of the urn. Again mourners protested and took matters into their own hands. Going against the rules, some mourners forcibly opened sealed urns to scatter ashes at a beloved place. As was the case with the ashes of René Klijn, a famous singer whose ashes were scattered by his partner together with television host Paul de Leeuw, an event that was broadcasted on national television. While this act was illegal considering the Dutch Law on disposal, they were not prosecuted. Other mourners posed their problem to the funeral professionals involved by pleading with crematorium personnel to fill a matchbox with ashes to take home before sealing the urn (Enklaar 1995: 89-90). Despite the law forbidding the removal of ashes from urns or the dividing up of ashes, crematoriums took up 'the matchbox requests'. From 1994 onwards, several crematoriums started selling memorial pendants (Cappers 1999: 315).

In 1998, these unofficial practices were legalized, by means of another adjustment of the Burial and Cremation Act, officially allowing the division of cremation ashes into parts, some of which might be put in small containers. Moreover, the bereaved were permitted to scatter ashes themselves on a chosen place outside of funerary grounds. In sum, by the end of the 1990s, after almost two decades of protest and unofficial practices, these legal changes officially shifted the responsibility for human ashes from professionals to the bereaved.

The crematorium industry cleverly seized upon the emerging demand of mourners to be involved in the disposal of ashes. Most crematoriums have erected remembrance gardens, where bereaved can scatter ashes, create an urn grave, hang memorial plaques and leave flowers or other gifts for the dead (see picture 1 to 5). In case of a scattering at crematorium fields, employees invite the bereaved to be present. If mourners decline to do so, they can be informed of the time, place and weather conditions of a scattering. Crematoriums offer ever more ways of scattering ashes: at sea or at land; from an airplane or an air balloon; from a motorbike; by releasing a balloon filled with ashes; or even outside of this world by shooting ashes into space. In case the bereaved want to take ashes home, crematoriums sell a variety of urns and other objects that can be filled with ashes. Nowadays, every crematorium has an exhibition room (see picture 6) and/or display cases with

several products. The displayed products range from clay urns that slowly dissolve when buried, to glass ornaments to be cherished in the home or jewellery to be worn on the body. The prices of urns and ash objects vary highly. There are objects on sale for every taste and for every budget. Prices start at fifty euros for a miniature urn and can rise up to thousands of euros for an exclusive urn made by an artist.

Ash disposal has evolved from an anonymous practice carried out by professionals to a practice that is propagated as an important symbolic and personal choice by professionals (Heessels 2008). At the same time, because of its short history, to many bereaved the performance of an ash disposal is a new phenomenon. The advertisement of memorial options by the funeral industry creates a social expectation to do something with the ashes. Instead of asking 'Do you want to do something with the ashes?' crematorium employees ask their clients 'What do you want to do with the ashes?' This approach forces mourners with no previous experience with ash disposal to relate to the ashes one way or another. To sketch the broader international context of this phenomenon, the new character of cremation and ash disposal rituals also accounts for the United States (Roberts 2010). But, in the United Kingdom cremation was already legalized in 1885 and already since the 1970s 12% of the ashes were taken from crematoriums and dispersed elsewhere (Kellaher et al. 2005).

Despite the innovations in cremation and ash disposal rituals, the actual creation of meaningful acts with human ashes remains largely amorphous. Ash disposal rituals are without precedent. While there are numerous websites and booklets, the information about cremation rituals is quite general and mainly aimed at convincing clients of the worth of funerary products and services.³ As a consequence, the bereaved as well as the professionals assisting them struggle to create meaningful acts.

In sum, the analysis of the cultural and historical context of cremation rituals has revealed the dynamic and improvisational character of cremation rituals in the Netherlands. The relatively new character of cremation as well as the fact that there are no direct precedents to this ritual are of crucial importance as both factors cause insecurity, but also creativity. This statement leads me to an important insight with regard to the character of cremation rituals, calling for a theoretical reflection on ritual.

Instead of trying to nail down a strict definition of what an ash disposal ritual is, I aimed to discern common characteristics by studying ash disposals as they occur. I intended to explore the barriers of what is and what isn't considered appropriate for cremation rituals by mourners as well as professionals by spelling out special cases that reveal contests and conflicts. In *The presentation of self in everyday life* Goffman (1959) explains how professionals create ideal performances of themselves and their

³ Throughout this research I came across one ritual guide, in Dutch *ritueelbegeleider*, who explicitly mentions a ritual guiding ash disposal on her website.
<http://www.marianvanderveen.nl/nauitvaart.html> as accessed on 28 March 2011.



1. Dudok urns, Driehuis.



2. Memorial plaques at a scattering lane, Usselo.



3. Columbarium, Amsterdam.



4. Scattering field surrounding a pond, Driehuis.



5. Urn graves, Usselo.



6. Ash disposal room with urns and ash objects on display, Driehuis.

company throughout their work. Continuing this line of thought, I analyze what funeral professionals regard as an ideal cremation ritual and consequently, what does not fit in their ideal. Controversial acts as well as efforts to prevent or suppress these controversies provide insight in broader cultural values that would normally stay implicit (Falk Moore 1987).

When conflicts arise in rituals or 'ritual mistakes' are detected by the participants, the explanations given and actions undertaken to correct the deviation give insight in underlying norms that otherwise would remain hidden (Hüsken 2007b). When describing fieldwork I concentrate on moments during which mourners or professionals protest against a certain practice since these protests illustrate the participants' ideals regarding a proper death ritual. Throughout this process I took the agenda of different participants into consideration, since they do not necessarily agree on what is a ritual mistake or conflict.

This approach of rituals starting from the actual practices and concentrating on the negotiation of ideals regarding a proper death ritual between mourners and professionals calls for a flexible definition of ritual. In *Beginnings of Ritual Studies* ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes (1982: 60-61) calls for a soft definition of ritual, leaving room for ritual creativity, instead of attempting to create a clear figure of what is in fact a complex and dynamic human activity. Grimes explains how many scholarly definitions associate ritual too narrowly with liturgical ritual, concentrating on characteristics like repetitiveness, sacredness, formalization, adherence to prescriptive traditions and intentionality. We have seen that in the Netherlands no actual tradition of ash disposal exists, which immediately conflicts with a definition that declares ritual as inherently repetitive, formalized and traditional. However, rituals of ash disposal are not totally 'new'. People construct ash disposal rituals based on different sources such as bits and parts of burial traditions (Kellaheer, et al. 2005), religious traditions, but also their memories of the deceased and their imaginations. Although sacredness and intentionality might play a role, little is known about these aspects. Yet from the way they are performed and the pains that people go through to create such rituals follows that they are considered utterly important.

Overtly strict definitions lead those who use them to overlook emergent ritual, what Grimes calls 'ritualizing' (1982: 61). He defines ritualizing as 'the act of deliberately cultivating or constructing a new rite' (Grimes 2006: 163). To mourners themselves the label 'ritual' is ambiguous, as to them this is closely related to institutional Christian rituals, of which many informants have distanced themselves and of which ash disposal is not a part. Therefore, the concept of ritualizing, which is more openly defined and leaves room improvisation, is more in line with the situation of mourners creating meaningful acts in a new situation in which there is no ritual script. When I use the term ash disposal ritual in this book, I refer to emergent rituals and acts of ritualizing. Finally, I prefer the term ritualizing, because it is a verb laying emphasis on the act, the carrying out of a ritual, centralizing the

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actors and their gestures, objects and ideas. Through viewing ash disposals as acts of ritualizing, I will question possible sacred aspects of these rituals and explore the intentions that bereaved might behold instead of stating or ignoring them upfront.

Mixed methods

In order to create a multifaceted and dynamic image of cremation practices, I used a combination of several research methods. I conducted in-depth interviews, gathered life stories and made use of participant observation. I carried out content analyses of a corpus of emails and of websites concerning ash disposal. Finally, I made extensive use of photography, both mine and those of others, as a source of data as well as an incentive to tell stories.

To study interactions among mourners and professionals, I conducted participant observation in four crematoriums in the Netherlands, namely Nijmegen, Driehuis, Almelo and Usselo over a period of six months (see pictures 7 to 10). The crematoriums in Usselo and Almelo are the two establishments of an independent cremation company called Crematoria Twente in the northeast of the Netherlands. The crematoriums in Driehuis, located in the northwest, and in Nijmegen, in the central east, are two branches of the company de Facultatieve Groep that founded the first crematorium in the Netherlands. The crematoriums in Driehuis and Nijmegen have another resemblance. They both cooperate with a neighbouring cemetery. Therefore, by working there I could investigate the differences and similarities between cremation and burial practices.

Throughout my fieldwork in the crematorium in Usselo, I acquired a general understanding of the ideas of the personnel about cremation services (see picture 11). I assisted the employees working in the kitchen preparing the food and drinks and serving in the coffee rooms. I worked at the oven, inserting the coffins and checking on the burning process. Finally, I worked with the employees on host, receiving the mourners and leading them to the family rooms, the waiting room and the auditoriums. After some time I realized that the tasks I undertook were segregated from the bereaved visiting the crematorium grounds to commemorate the dead. I learned that the employees at the 'ash disposal department' daily receive clients for information conversations and for scatterings and urn placements.

In most crematoriums only a selected group of employees are assigned to handle matters concerning ash disposal. Working at the ash disposal department would make my presence more visible to the bereaved clients, as there is more direct contact with the bereaved visiting in small groups from two to fifteen people. Therefore at first the management in Usselo was wary to let me do observations. Under the conditions that I would use the material anonymously and present myself as a trainee, instead of a researcher, it was accepted that I would work at the ash disposal department. As a trainee, I could participate on the background, while my colleagues could carry out their tasks as they were used to. It was an excellent way

to get insight in the process of organizing and conducting ash disposals without burdening newly bereaved with my questions as a researcher.

The work at the ash disposal departments of the four crematoriums provided insight in the negotiation between the professionals and the bereaved. Together with my colleagues, I participated in more than 50 ash disposal appointments varying from scatterings with mourners present, to urn placements, information conversations and appointments for the collection of ashes. Through observing the contact between professionals and mourners, I could comprehend the reactions of the bereaved when they were confronted with the ashes of their relative or friend. I observed how the bereaved treated an urn, if and how they held it, and how they referred to it in conversation and eventually, how they carried out an ash disposal. During ash disposals, I focused on the language that mourners used as well as on the objects they brought and the gestures they carried out. Then, I closely watched the way in which these practices were guided, altered or even rejected by the crematorium personnel.

In addition to conducting participant observation, I analyzed the e-mail correspondence of bereaved clients using the general form on the website from Crematoria Twente, dating from October 2005 until July 2009. I have analyzed this corpus of 377 e-mails by categorizing the characteristics of the writers, their sex, their relation to the deceased, the year of death and the incentive for writing. The greatest category of e-mails concerned questions about ash disposal. Therefore, I made an additional categorization of questions about ash disposal by distinguishing how mourners related to human ashes and what was written regarding the meaning of an ash disposal.

To deepen my understanding of the ideals of professionals I conducted a content analysis of websites selling ash objects, meaning any object made or used to contain human ashes. I located 114 websites promoting and selling ash objects and subjected these to a systematic content analysis. I grouped the ash objects into five categories, citing the number of analyzed websites after each category: jewellery (73), cuddle stones (13), paintings (5), domestic sculptures (7), and tattoos (16). There are some other less common products with ashes for the home interior such as picture frames, candleholders, adorned bags and boxes for ashes that I have left out of the analysis. I closely read and compared the descriptions, ways of production and ascribed function and use of ash objects, and listed the values that producers attribute to them. By means of systematically comparing these objects, I drew up a shared framework of values invested in these objects by professionals. With regard to ash tattoos I closely cooperated with Fleur Poots (Heessels, et al. f.c.; Poots 2009), a cultural studies specialist investigating memorial tattoos in the Netherlands.

Furthermore, I have interviewed 40 professionals involved in cremation practices. I met most of them at their workplace, listening to them lecturing during a cremation service, assisting while scattering ashes from a boat, working with them in



7. The crematorium in Usselo.



8. The crematorium in Almelo.



9. The crematorium in Driehuis.



10. The crematorium in Nijmegen.



11. Conducting fieldwork at the crematorium, Usselo.



12. Interviewing at the living room table (by Rob Steendijk).

a crematorium and visiting the workshop where they created urns or ash jewels. I questioned them about their work, asking how they thought an ash disposal ought to be executed, if and how they assisted the bereaved in carrying out ash disposal rituals and what the function of such a ritual was according to them. Because I participated in their work, I could observe if and how they practiced what they preached.

At one occasion a man working at the oven told me that one day he had collapsed during his work. There had been a funeral of a little girl and he could not cope with the idea of that child in the coffin, waiting to be inserted in the oven. He had a son of the same age. Listening to their working experiences, but also their personal stories of loss I gradually realized that on other occasions these professionals were also mourners. I had held on to an artificial separation that in reality does not exist. They were both professional and mourner depending on the context, making them an even more interesting betwixt and between category. For this reason, I also interviewed professionals at home, questioning them about their working experiences as well as their personal stories. Some informants are thus presented in the text as professionals and as bereaved, depending on the context of their stories.

In order to get in-depth information about the meaning of death rituals, I interviewed thirty-one bereaved people who had organized cremation rituals for a loved one and/or prepared their own cremation rituals (see picture 12). I also interviewed sixteen bereaved people involved in the exhumation and reburial of deceased relatives. I have contacted mourners through different channels, through contacting my own personal network, through professional gatekeepers such as funeral lecturers and funeral caretakers, but mostly through the bereaved themselves who referred me to relatives, friends or neighbours who were willing to tell me their story about disposing ashes. The interviews varied from one hour to six hour-long sessions. I remained in contact with most of the interviewees during the period of my research by means of follow-up interviews, informal conversations, letters and e-mail. For reasons of privacy I use only the first names of my informants throughout the text.

Most of my informants considered themselves non-religiously affiliated, but many of them did have a Christian upbringing. I have interviewed eight men and twenty-three women in-depth about cremation rituals, among them sons and daughters of deceased, but also parents and siblings of deceased. Most interviews took place with one person, but often interviews were further contextualized when other family members, partners, friends or neighbours joined in. Most of the interviewees were born in the Netherlands. In order to include the multicultural and multireligious dimensions of the Dutch context, I conducted a project together with a student from Religious Studies, Anne Shwajor, on Hindustani immigrants performing Hindu death rituals in Dutch crematoriums (Shwajor, et al. 2010).

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From the stories of mourners became clear that in everyday contact people are fairly reluctant to discuss the details of an ash disposal. Most people considered ash disposal a private affair. The delicacy of the subject became painfully clear when one of my informants recognized the description of another informant in an article of mine. He pointed out: 'We have been friends for years now. Even though I was at the funeral, I never knew the story of the scattering of her mother's ashes and I did not dare to ask.' However, as soon as people agreed to be interviewed, they opened their homes as well as their hearts and were willing to share their stories surrounding ash disposal. They explained that they did not often have the chance to tell the whole story to someone and that therefore they valued this moment focused on their deceased relative(s) or friend(s). As people around me came to know what I was studying, stories that I had never heard before suddenly popped up. Once I was in a bar, when a friend told me that he wanted to share something with me, because 'you probably understand, having worked in that crematorium and stuff'. Some time ago he had scattered his grandmother's ashes with his parents, aunts, uncles and nephews. He confided to me that 'he had his grandma in his wallet'. He had saved some of her ashes. He took his wallet from his pocket and quickly opened it, spilling some ashes on the table. Whilst collecting the bits of ashes that had fallen out, he gave a kiss on the wallet, and said 'Yep that's my granny' and started telling about her life.

Because I wanted to investigate the ongoing importance of ash disposal in daily life, I strived to conduct the interviews in the homes of the bereaved. While drinking coffee and listening to their stories, I learned how people had disposed of the ashes and what the ashes meant to them. The destinations for ash disposal varied with every interviewee. Some had scattered their relatives ashes at sea together with family members, others had scattered part of the ashes and saved the rest at home in an urn, while still others opted for an ash tattoo. I have realized that this could come across as a focus on people who chose to do something extraordinary and hence would have a 'special story' to tell overlooking 'average stories'. But I also experienced that every disposal has a story. I have interviewed people who were not present during the disposal of their relative's ashes at crematorium grounds, but who did have outspoken ideas about the place of scattering. I spoke to a bereaved man who went through great lengths to accomplish a special way of disposing his mother's ashes by planting a tree in a communal park and illegally burying the ashes underneath, but who never visited the tree again. I talked to a bereaved family whose deceased father wanted them to dispose of his ashes in the rubbish skip as he did not attach value to his remains, but who told me that they could not get themselves to do that and considered memorial jewellery and a memorial tree. With these examples I mean to illustrate that the disposal of human ashes is a varying and complex phenomenon to which all bereaved have had to respond at some point. Thus, everybody has a story to tell, short or long, and all these different ways of telling the story are meaningful.

Along with observing the daily context of my informants, I visited the places of disposal in as many cases as possible. Visiting the place of disposal together revived people's experiences and stimulated their memories. At one occasion, I visited crematorium grounds with an informant. When I noticed that she had taken a rose, she explained: 'I always take a rose when I visit him and then I smoke a cigarette with him. I guess I forgot to tell you that during the first interview, because this is so habitual to me,' she said. When we arrived at the bench where she scattered the ashes of her partner, another thing happened. She gently laid the rose down and said to her deceased partner: 'Here, this is for you.' Such small, yet crucial gestures are easily missed when one only concentrates on interviewing. By means of direct observation I felt that I could still come a bit closer to grasping the meaning of an ash disposal.

Besides, visiting the places of the dead emphasized that material culture is an ubiquitous aspect of research about the dead (Gibson 2008; Francis et al. 2005; Hallam 2001; Hockey, et al. 2010). Often urns, pictures and other memorial objects were taken to the table during interviews. This enabled me to view the ways in which people handle these objects, cherishing them in home memorials, carefully storing them in a safe or saving them in a cupboard. The interviews were often complemented with diary extracts, death notices, pictures and other personal documents that bereaved provided me with. In virtually every interview photographs were shown, varying from family albums to framed pictures. These pictures functioned as stimulators of storytelling eliciting more details and new stories (Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Samuels 2004). Photographs also had an active role in creating new memories, as participants actively related to these pictures throughout their daily lives (Batchen 2004; Gibson 2008; Reyes-Cortez 2010).

Photographs not only figured as part of mourners' practices. To put cremation rituals in a broader context of Dutch death practices I took thousands of pictures myself. I have visited dozens of funerary grounds, varying from village cemeteries and natural burial fields to crematorium grounds in the Netherlands as well as internationally (see appendix II for a map and list of documented crematoriums and cemeteries). I spent days and days walking across cemeteries and crematorium grounds to conduct observations and record the traces of commemorative practices for the dead with my camera. These pictures can be found throughout the text, since they are complementary sources of research that grounded my argument.

Besides, taking pictures functioned as a method to reflect on my own perception while doing fieldwork. Photographs are interesting for what they depict, but they are equally fascinating for what they leave out of the frame (Batchen 2004). Taking photographs is a way of focussing that is different from observing with your eyes only. The frame of a picture forced me to choose what I wanted to show and what would be left out. These choices made me think about the relation between part and whole, between scattered ashes and their surroundings, between mourning families and the surrounding graves.

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Then, pictures had a third function in this project. Pictures revive experiences in other manners than words only can do. When I met Rob, a bereaved son as well as an excellent photographer, I was first confronted with the power of images. Rob had piles and piles of picture albums in which he had recorded every detail of the death rituals in his family. I have included a series of Rob's pictures of the cremation and ash disposal of his parents as seen through their son's eyes. This picture story is complementary to the other ethnographic chapters as it is a more direct and intimate way of communicating people's stories. The reader can actually see Rob conducting these rituals, giving a funeral speech, visiting his father and collecting objects for the scattering. Besides, in contrast to the other chapters, where cycles of rituals are chopped up for the sake of the argumentation line, this visual story depicts the whole cycle of rituals that Rob and his family created forming a more holistic perspective.

Finally, I have made an in-depth anthropological comparison of ash disposal and another post-funerary practice, namely reburial. I have followed a funeral company in the South of the Netherlands that is specialized in the organization of exhumations and reburials. I repeatedly interviewed the founder Peter Strijbos. He allowed me to approach his clients for interviewing. I interviewed sixteen bereaved people and nine professionals, involved in reburial of the dead to qualitatively document their practices and beliefs about the dead. Additionally, I studied questions about reburial posed on disposal on an online forum to a specialist on the law (see also Van der Putten 2004).⁴ By comparing ash disposal and reburial, I was able to reflect on the meaning of practices with human remains in the Netherlands from a different perspective.

Summary of the chapters

In the Netherlands the performance of cremation rituals mostly takes place in crematoriums. In the following chapter I will provide insight into professionals' ideals about an appropriate cremation ritual and how these are negotiated with mourners. To do so, I have focussed on moments of conflict or protest within rituals, because precisely at these moments notions that otherwise remain covert are revealed. In the third chapter I will zoom in on the character of ash disposal rituals as they are carried out by the inner circle of bereaved, within and outside of the crematorium grounds. By analyzing how human ashes are perceived and treated by throughout daily life I aim to get to beliefs about the dead. In the fourth chapter I will further go into the social relations between the dead and the living and analyze the purpose of cremation rituals by asking which afterlife concepts mourners behold. Then, in the fifth chapter, a rich visual story is presented. In this story all aspects of cremation rituals are brought together. The pictures show a holistic perspective on the creation of a series of cremation rituals and its impact on family life, throughout

⁴ See http://www.uitvaart.nl/index.php?s_page_id=12 as accessed on 11 January 2011.

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the years. In the sixth chapter, I place ash disposal rituals in a broader context by comparing the practices with cremated remains to acts of ritualizing with buried remains. Finally I will draw my conclusions and reflect on the status of human remains and beliefs about the dead in the Netherlands.

2

Every funeral unique in (y)our way⁵

Professionals have become a self-evident part of dying, death and disposal (Howarth 1996; Laderman 2003; Parsons 2003: 222). In the Netherlands funeral directors have increasingly professionalized and expanded their tasks since the end of the nineteenth century. Since the 1950s the process of professionalization intensified. As the role of clergy in the organization of death rituals declined as a result of depillarization, funerary professionals started to arrange the whole process from death to ceremony to disposal. From the 1990s, authority is increasingly ascribed to individual mourners organizing personalized funerals.

In practice the growing authority of mourners and the declining role of clergy means that professionals and mourners manage not only the organizational aspects of death rituals together, but also the ceremonial and symbolic aspects (see also Davidsson Bremborg 2006; Schäfer 2007a; Schäfer 2007b). The professionals involved are often unaware of their decisive role in the creation of rituals. They identify their role as that of neutrally assisting the bereaved in arranging death rituals according to their personal wishes.

In this chapter I will explore explicit and implicit ideals about death rituals espoused by funeral professionals in the Netherlands. I suspected that professionals do not simply reflect their clients' wishes as websites and company booklets as well as employees themselves propagate. Instead of following the dominant portrayal of professionals as enablers of their clients' wishes, I found that professionals' personal ideas about what constitutes a 'proper' death ritual form an influential context for the creation of cremation rituals, eventually also influencing the practices of the bereaved.

Here I deployed Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman's dramaturgical principles for analyzing social life within companies (1959). His work leads us to see how performers, in this case crematorium professionals, tend to offer their observers, in this case the bereaved, a scenario that is idealized. While professionals probably would not consider their work a performance, when closely examined their actions are not only practical, but also contain more implicit symbolic and performative messages that I identify as 'ideal images'.

⁵ An earlier version of this chapter appeared as: Heessels, Meike. (In press). Every funeral unique in (y)our way! *In Emotions, Identity and Mortality*. D.J. Davies and C.W. Park, eds. Aldershot, England: Ashgate.

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These ideal images are conveyed on a company-wide level by means of promotional material for clients including websites, mission statements and commercial correspondence as well as instructions for employees contained in in-house manuals, task descriptions and branch magazines. I take these documents as constituting an overt performance of company-wide ideal images.

However, professionals and mourners do not always support company-wide directions. By focussing on moments of conflict between company-wide ideals and the ideals of professionals, I will demonstrate that the personal convictions of professionals regarding best practices trickle out through their individual performances. Moreover, these conflicts show that mourners react actively on the proposed format for cremation rituals. These moments of conflict that cause professionals and mourners to act out and 'correct' what Hüsken (2007) calls a ritual mistake, provide insight in the meaning of cremation rituals that otherwise remain hidden.

Ideal image of a personalized funeral

The ascribed role of funeral professionals, religious specialists, the community and the bereaved in organizing death rituals, has changed throughout the last centuries. Until the late nineteenth, the involvement of professionals in the funeral practice was limited. Death rituals were mostly arranged by communities of neighbours. Neighbours were obliged by city laws to assist in death rituals in the Netherlands. This practice was called *buroplicht* (a neighbour's duty). These duties slightly differed by community, but generally included the announcement of the demise, the washing of the body and placing it on a bier and the transportation of the body to the church and the graveyard (Kok 2005: 144-171; Sleebe 1994: 369). As a result of urbanization, industrialization, domestic migration and the economic crisis of 1929, these neighbour duties started to decrease (Kok 2005: 217; Sleebe 1994: 375).

In order to complement or even replace this dwindling communal assistance, cooperatives of labourers were established between 1900 and 1920 (Kok 2005: 218-221). Labourers contributed monthly to a communal fund that ensured funeral costs for every employee. Because at that time, most organizations were organized according to three main pillars, namely Protestant, Catholic or Socialist, so were these associations of labourers. Many contemporary funeral companies started out as such, for example DELA, which is the acronym for *Draagt Elkanders Lasten* (Carry Each Other's Burdens), was a Catholic organization, while Monuta was Protestant (Kok 2005: 222). With these communal funds, a funeral director was hired to take care of the coffin, the transportation of the body, and the organization of the funeral. The ritual dimension of death, however, was still firmly in the hands of religious institutions. For example in the Catholic Church, the dying were anointed by a priest, the funeral mass took place in church and the place of the grave was chosen and blessed by a cleric.

In the fifties, the pillarized structure of Dutch society started to crumble. In the sixties and seventies, the religious base of cooperative funds for funeral costs was erased from the association's statutes (Kok 2005: 222). The professionalization of the funeral director further expanded, now including the organization of clerical as well as non-clerical funerals. The task of professionals was perceived as saving the family from the task of arranging a funeral (Kok 2005; Sleebe 1994). For example, the motto of funeral business Dela was *Alle zorg uit handen nemen* (Relieving the bereaved from all worries). Funeral directors made decisions about funerals on the basis of their professional expertise and commercial interests. By contrast, the role of mourners themselves in funerary practices was reduced to almost nonexistent.

In reaction to this development, by the mid-1980s, protests arose claiming that the bereaved had practically no say in the creation of death rituals, making them impersonal, uniform and cold (Bot 1998; Enklaar 1995; Sax, et al. 1989). Consequently, small funeral companies were established aiming to facilitate personalized death rituals arranged in consultation with the bereaved families (Bot 1998; Sax, et al. 1989). In 1995, several of these pioneers united themselves in a network of funeral innovators demanding that funeral companies and government officials instead of taking over the rituals should enable people's involvement in disposal. Approximately one hundred years after the institution of an association propagating the right to be cremated, an association was founded to lobby for personalized funerals arranged in consultation with mourners. Together with citizen's initiatives this association would finally change the perceived task of professionals in death rituals.

By 2010, the notion of 'a unique farewell' has become mainstream. Nowadays the wishes of the bereaved or deceased are central to the commercial communication of funeral businesses. Companies recommend their products by means of slogans such as 'the wishes of the bereaved are our point of departure'.⁶ In 2010, the Netherlands counted over 700 funeral businesses, but three companies dominate the market, namely Dela, Yarden and Monuta. The mottos of two of these big funeral businesses are telling, Monuta claims that its services bring about 'the end of impossible wishes' and Yarden advertises, 'Every funeral unique'. On their websites, readers are stimulated to think ahead about their own funeral and make this, as well as the funeral of relatives, as personal and meaningful as possible.

The propagated ideal of a personalized and unique farewell also affected the organization of ash disposals. One to three weeks after a cremation, a letter informs the bereaved about the forthcoming ash disposal. In this letter, the thirty days waiting period established by Dutch law on disposal is presented as an opportunity to take the time to make a conscious choice regarding the means of ash disposal (see appendix I for an example of such a letter). One crematorium employee explained the rationale behind this waiting period to a bereaved client as follows:

⁶ <http://www.boskamp.nl/wensen-van-de-nabestaanden-staan-centraal>, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

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Officially, this legal regulation was instituted so the ashes can still be investigated in case of a crime, but I have never actually heard of such a case. I view it rather as a time to contemplate. After a death people are disoriented and sad, they might regret a choice that is made too quickly. Therefore this rule gives people some extra time to think it over and make a conscious choice.

Ash disposal is emphasized as a personal ritual that should be well thought-out. The bereaved are invited to the crematorium for professional advice about 'a unique and personal disposal that reflects the life of the deceased'. The options offered vary, for example a scattering by boat, 'if the bereaved and/or deceased had a special bond with the sea'⁷ or placing an urn in one of the columbariums that matches the deceased best.⁸

A content analysis of funerary objects presented on the Internet (Heessels 2010) showed that these objects are praised as exclusive, handmade and one of a kind, all contributing to a sense of personalization. The promotion of glass objects with ashes by Kroes company illustrates this perfectly: 'The objects are blown and shaped by hand into a product that has a *unique* character, making every object *unique*, just as every person is or was *unique* (italics MH).'⁹ On her website goldsmith Annahbelle, who makes contemporary mourning jewellery, puts it as follows:

My designs come into being after a conversation with the bereaved about the deceased. In this way every jewel acquires its own unique character that reflects the relation with the deceased.¹⁰

Funerals as well as ash disposals are thus strongly presented as personalized and unique. When turning to the daily practices in a crematorium, the ideal image of a personalized funeral has two facets: 'cremation rituals as singular events' and 'professionals as facilitators of the wishes of the bereaved and/or deceased'.

Propagating cremation rituals as singular

The daily working routine, the architecture and the decoration of crematoriums, as well as the performance of professionals, underline the ideal image of a cremation ritual as a singular event. The professionals are instructed to present a unique and personal farewell, yet in practice they manage up to twenty bereaved groups per day, an amount that requires a strict management of time and uniformity of practices. In order to maintain the ideal image of completely personalized services, a

⁷ http://www.dela.nl/rondom_overlijden/na_de_uitvaart/asbestemmingen, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

⁸ <http://www.crematoriumjonkerbos.nl/asbestemming-bijzetting>, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

⁹ <http://www.kroesglasblazerij.nl>, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

¹⁰ <http://www.annahbelle.nl/annahbelle.html>, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

sharp contrast is made between what Gofmann (1959) called front and backstage regions. When in the front region, professionals have to preserve the ideal image, while at the back region when they are not in the direct presence of the bereaved, they can temporarily relax. In the following section, I will sketch the daily routine in a crematorium to illustrate the tension between practices and ideals.

The funeral is arranged by the funeral director in cooperation with the bereaved family involved. The choice of music, flowers, catering and the auditorium are communicated to the crematorium beforehand. Most crematoriums have different auditoriums, with different sizes, colours and types of furniture. The day of the funeral, the auditorium of choice is prepared by cleaning, putting the book of condolence ready and placing a sign with the name of the deceased and the time of the service at the entrance. When the hearse arrives the crematorium host waits outside, bows in silence and points the way to the guests.¹¹ The body is driven to the rear access of the crematorium. There, the funeral director unloads the coffin. Together with the host, the funeral director checks the death certificate and the permission to cremate. The deceased is given a unique cremation number, also called an identification number, which identifies the corpse and its subsequent ashes within the crematorium's administration. The coffin and the flowers are then placed on a cart and moved into the auditorium (see picture 13).

Crematoriums have introduced certain services and objects that help to give an auditorium a personal touch, in which the bereaved are encouraged to choose their favourite music, to tell the life stories of the deceased and to use personal objects or symbols such as pictures, film or objects from home. Crematoriums possess what I call situational religious symbols such as a crucifix that can be wheeled into and out of an auditorium. In some cases, symbols are designed to fit different tastes and denominations. In Nijmegen, I encountered a crucifix bearing the image of Jesus Christ that could be turned to display a plain cross. Generally speaking, most symbols are Christian, reflecting Dutch Christian heritage. However, with the arrival of Hindustani immigrants and other religious groups symbols have diversified (see picture 14). In Usselo a Hindu Ohm sign stands next to a crucifix and a chandelier with no direct religious symbols in the back stage area.

Mourners are received in two separate rooms. The immediate family is offered coffee and refreshments a separate room, called the family room, with comfortable chairs and couches, while the wider circle of mourners is invited into a larger waiting room with benches along the wall or standing tables. Professionals explained that the inner circle of bereaved is separated from the rest, 'to grant them a moment's rest before they are confronted with the condolences of all visitors.' While the guests assemble, the funeral director also takes a moment and drinks a cup of coffee backstage and chats with colleagues who constantly walk in

¹¹ Generally, the work in the crematorium consists of different shifts carried out simultaneously by different employees: the oven shift, the hosting shift, the kitchen shift, the garden shift, the shift in the music room and the ash disposal shift (also called after care).

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and out. Although the conversation serves to check the details of the service, it may also contain anecdotes about the mourners, their special requests or conflicts as well as personal talk. Behind the scenes the atmosphere is informal.

In the music room (see picture 15), the order of musical pieces is double checked in the computer. The employee is able to view the assembling mourners in the waiting rooms and auditoriums on monitors to check when the door should be opened and the music should start. Meanwhile, the host counts the number of visitors walking into the auditorium. After closing the door the host discretely passes the number on to the kitchen staff through an intercom, so they know how much food and drinks to prepare.

Then the service takes place. Generally, thirty to forty-five minutes are reserved for a cremation service, varying per crematorium. Generally, less time is available in the big cities than in rural areas. Mourners can reserve more time for an extra fee. In most cases, three musical pieces are played and professionals or the mourners themselves tell stories about the life of the deceased, and recite poems or prayers. At the end of a service, visitors pay their respects to the deceased by passing by the coffin, often decorated with a picture, flowers and personal objects. Sometimes the inner circle of bereaved stays behind to pay their last respects privately.

During the service, the catering is prepared and the foyer is made ready for guests. The foyer is also called the coffee room, because coffee is the main drink served, even though, nowadays, other food and drinks can also be requested (see picture 16). On their monitor, backstage in the kitchen, employees can see when the guests leave the auditorium to enter the coffee room. Again, the closest family are separated from other mourners, as a special table is reserved for them. In most cases, the funeral director asks the guests to allow the family for a moment's rest. Then, a line is assembled so guests can offer condolences to the inner circle of mourners. Thirty minutes to an hour are reserved for coffee and condolences. In the meantime, employees roll the coat racks from the entrance to the foyer exit enabling the guests to leave smoothly through the appointed exit, while a new group enters.

While the bereaved are having coffee, the host brings the coffin to the oven room. All decoration is taken off the coffin, unless otherwise requested. Depending on the preferences of the mourners, flowers and ribbons from the coffin are given to the bereaved or placed at a monument on the crematorium grounds. Dutch law requires the body to be cremated the same day as the service. In most cases, the coffin is burned without the bereaved present. The *ovenist* (oven operator) manages the cremation process. When the body and coffin are fully burnt, the oven operator shoves the cremated remains to the back of the oven until they fall in a reservoir to cool down. When the ashes are cooled, the employee sifts out all metals with a magnet. These metals are gathered in a box of the national Dr. Vaillant foundation that collects these metals for recycling and distributes the profits for charity. After sifting, the ashes are put in a cremulator to crush the bones to ashes and put them in a container. Afterward, the urns are placed in a niche organized by number. In the

meantime, the auditorium and the family room are already being prepared for the next scheduled service.

Crematorium employees arranging funerals have relatively little interaction with the bereaved, especially when compared to staff working on the department of ash disposal. The department of ash disposal is like another world within the crematorium, with its own rhythm, objects and performances, often located in a separate wing or even a separate building. In Usselo employees called the department of ash disposal 'the little ash house' (see picture 17), situated outside of the main building close to the crematorium fields. In Driehuis, it was called the Department of Information and Aftercare (see picture 18), this department is situated in a building close to the entrance of the memorial park.

When the bereaved arrive for a scattering or an informative talk on the possibilities of disposal, they are received in a special room where urns and other ash objects that can be filled with ashes are displayed (see pictures 19 and 20). In most crematoriums the room is filled with soft couches, walls are painted in warm colours and decorated with candles and flowers in an attempt to replicate the atmosphere of a living room. The bereaved are invited to take a seat and are offered a drink. When their drinks are served, the employee goes away. Once, while I was assisting, Rob a man in his late thirties with blond hair, who made a lot of jokes during work, I noticed that he suddenly hesitated when I wanted to walk back to the family. He explained that when he worked alone he purposely took a lot of time making coffee, even though the machine was very quick, to give the mourners a chance to talk and acclimatize. After bringing the coffee, the employee announces that he or she will fetch the urn or the ash sprinkler. In case of an information talk, the urn is not taken to the table. First, the wishes of the deceased and the bereaved are explored and discussed.

In any case, the employee describes the procedures in the crematorium, explaining that the cremation takes place on the day of the funeral and that the ashes are then collected in a standard urn, together with the identification stone that is always saved with the ashes (see pictures 21 and 22). When the bereaved have come to collect the ashes, the stone is still in the urn. Before mourners gather to scatter the ashes, the identification stone is taken out of the urn. During the gathering, the stone is shown and the employee asks if someone wants to take the identification stone home. If not, the stone will be destroyed at the crematorium. After this explanation, some minutes are reserved for questions from the mourners. In case of collection of an urn, mourners are handed a form to sign, emphasizing that they have indeed received the ashes and will only scatter them with permission of the landowner. In Driehuis and Jonkerbos, another form is added explaining the Dutch law on disposal and the fact that permission has to be granted from the owner of the land or water before scattering the ashes. When the ashes are to be scattered on crematorium grounds, the employee discusses the options for the scattering, describing the different fields and the options to carry the urn and scatter the ashes yourself. When



13. Auditorium, Usselo.



14. Hinduist scattering monument Nirvana, Usselo.



15. Music room, Usselo.



16. Coffee room, Usselo.



17. *'The little ash house', department of ash disposal, Usselo.*



18. *Department of information and aftercare, Driehuis.*



19. Family room at the department of information and aftercare, Driehuis.



20. Ash disposal room, Almelo.



21. Oven room, Drie huis.



22. Administreating the urns, Almelo.

the mourners have decided, the employee accompanies them to the chosen scattering lane and explains the working of the ash sprinkler. Then, if the bereaved want to scatter the ashes themselves, the employee takes some steps back and witnesses the event in silence. Afterwards, the employee takes the ash sprinkler and makes sure that it is well emptied. The employee shakes hands with the mourners, marking the end of the event by stating for example 'I am leaving now, but you can take your time to say goodbye. You can always come back here and leave flowers if you wish. Take care.'

Even though the procedures are in fact standardized, the whole performance of cremation rituals, both the cremation service and ash disposal, is orchestrated so that every group of mourners perceives the ritual as a singular event. As Goffman (1959: 138) contends, one of the aims of every performance in daily life is to sustain the impression of a personal and unique event. During a funeral or an ash disposal there is always an employee present supposedly to assist 'in case someone would be indisposed'. In fact, the main goal of this practice is to prevent the mourners from wandering off. If people would end up roaming around the building and different groups of bereaved would bump into each other, the ideal image of a singular event would fall flat.

Professionals constantly have to be aware of the whereabouts of the different groups of bereaved. The architecture of a crematorium building is designed to lead the mourners through the performance and prevent the different groups of mourners from meeting each other. Technical appliances help them to control the groups of bereaved. Red and green lights above doors inform the employees if the rooms are in use by mourners. Throughout the building, posts and movable partitions are placed to lead the bereaved on an appointed route from entrance to exit (Klaassens and Groote f.c.). The architect of a crematorium in Haarlem refrained from creating a linear routing, separating the different groups of mourners (Klaassens and Groote 2010). Instead, he explicitly used glass walls to open up this separation (ibid.). Against his intentions the employees reconstructed a linear routing as they could not get used to 'wandering groups of bereaved' and put up curtains as felt uncomfortable when bereaved could see them working (ibid.).

The ideal image of a singular event also accounts for the ash disposal. In a similar fashion, the employees daily receive several small groups of bereaved persons and prevent these from meeting each other through receiving them in different rooms and carefully maintaining a schedule of appointments. Employees do not appreciate bereaved people visiting the crematorium unannounced to collect ashes. At first employees explained their dissatisfaction with the fact that such a visit prompts them with more work, as the ashes have to be collected from the storage and booked out of the administration. But on another level, surprise visits do not tally with the personal and exclusive service that employees want to bestow. In case of a surprise visit employees do not have time to conduct their complete scheme to which personal attention, coffee or tea, lit candles and a warm atmosphere are

central. While the conversations of professionals are interspersed with metaphors of taking time: 'take the time to enjoy your coffee', 'we have all the time of the world', 'take your time deciding', or 'now we will quietly go to', it becomes clear that there is a constant tension between the tight schedule and the wishes of the successive groups of bereaved that have to be adapted into this schedule.

In sum, while the funeral professionals project an ideal image of cremation rituals as singular events, the same pattern is inevitably repeated daily. While some of the smaller businesses go to great lengths to create a personal ritual every time, the work of the bigger companies takes place along established lines with a step-by-step plan that is adapted to fit the wishes of their clients but which, nevertheless, always consists of the same steps. While the professionals initially underlined the ideal image of a singular event, after some time of co-working with them and sharing conversations backstage, they admitted that even though cremation rituals were personalized, they were never really unique. As I once heard an employee comment on a service, 'In some way it is like Duplo, the toy building brick'. However, the script of the performance is to present the ritual as a singular and personal event. This practice corresponds with another ideal image, concerning the role that is ascribed to funeral professionals in creating these personalized and singular rituals.

Balancing between facilitating and directing

The mission statement of the funeral company Yarden declares that: 'there are as many wishes as there are people. Self-determination does not stop with death, therefore we centralize the personal wishes and the individuality of every person in our way of working.'¹² Centralizing the wishes of the deceased and the bereaved corresponds with another role for professionals. In this quote, which is characteristic of most funeral companies in the Netherlands, the role of professionals is implicitly understood as discovering personal wishes and translating them into death rituals.

Uitvaartleiders (funeral directors) are no longer called funeral directors, because doing so emphasizes their directing role. Rather, their name has changed to *uitvaartbegeleiders* or *uitvaartverzorgers* (funeral facilitators or funeral caretakers) focussing on their caring and supporting function. As a consequence, the role of mourners is redefined. The following quote from the homepage of Monuta makes this shift perfectly clear: 'With the funeral insurance from Monuta *you* make a conscious choice for *your* funeral. Because *you* decide how *you* want to be remembered (italics MH)'.¹³ In the current ideal image, the directing role has shifted from the undertaker to the bereaved as they are invited to make their own 'unique' choices for a 'personalized funeral'.

Mourners are stimulated not only to choose consciously, but also to contribute actively to death rituals. This occurs even before death as people who possess a

¹² <http://www.yarden.nl/Over-ons/Onze-missie.htm>, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

¹³ <http://www.monuta.nl/uitvaartverzekeringen/>, as accessed on 11 January 2011.

funeral insurance, which was 69% of the Dutch in 2009 (Van Keulen and Kloosterboer 2009), are invited to construct a scenario for their own funeral and memorial. In a funeral insurance package a funeral codicil is included on which clients can register their funeral wishes pointing out their favourite flowers, music and way of disposal. Still the suggestion that every insured person prepares his or her own funeral is a symbolic message rather than an actual practice, as many clients have no such form prepared.

The ideal image of a ritual prepared by the deceased and executed by the bereaved themselves did influence actual practices. While the ashes used to be dispersed without notice to the bereaved, nowadays, this is mostly done by the bereaved under the guidance of a professional. Based on the quantitative data that I collected from crematoriums in Driehuis, Usselo and Nijmegen, approximately fifty to sixty percent of the ashes are placed on crematorium grounds. In thirty-five to fifty percent of the scatterings at crematorium grounds, the bereaved are present. Professionals list several options in correspondence sent to the bereaved emphasizing the necessity of 'doing something' with the ashes (see appendix I). The bereaved are urged to carry the urn to the field and conduct the scattering themselves. In promotion brochures the disposal is emphasized as a ritual or '*een plechtig moment*' ('a solemn moment').¹⁴ Suggestions are made to take flowers or to recite a last word of goodbye. In addition, some crematoriums provide suggestions for poems or other words to recite if people cannot find a suitable text, in the shape of a small library with appropriate texts that bereaved can choose from.

The rationale behind this ideal image of the bereaved as directors and the professionals as facilitators lies in appropriation of prevailing theories of grief. Psychological paradigms do not exist in isolation, they are historically and culturally defined (Stroebe, et al. 1992). In the twentieth century, mourners were stimulated to break ties with the deceased as enduring relationships with the dead were viewed as problematic (Stroebe, et al. 1992). Instead, within the current psychological paradigm on mourning called 'continuing bonds', it is assumed that bereaved people are helped by keeping their deceased loved ones close (Klass 2006; Laderman 2003; Walter 1999). Within this model, it is assumed that mourners are helped by 'working through grief' and keeping their loved ones close instead of breaking bonds. The influence of these scientific theories expires beyond psychological practices affecting the views methods, but also practices of professionals in related branches, such as funeral professionals.

From the statements of professionals in the funeral branch follows that theories of grief are used to underline the worth and function of their products. Producers of objects to contain ashes for example label these as 'instruments of comfort'. On one website ash jewels are praised as 'objects full of emotion', another company sells

¹⁴ In the leaflet about ash disposal from crematorium Jonkerbos in Nijmegen, the disposal of ashes at sea is called a ritual. The letter about ash disposal from Crematoria Twente in Usselo and Almelo defines the ash disposal as a ceremonious event.

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their statues with ashes as 'creations that affect'.¹⁵ Moreover, the objects are said to assist in the mourning process, as advertised on the website of goldsmith Annahbelle: 'A lasting memory of your loved one in the shape of a jewel. You will carry him or her with you always and that provides comfort and strength in hard times.' Another producer of cuddle stones containing ashes claims: 'Sense Shapes are designed as something that people can hold on to in the lonely process of letting go. When memories and longing for reunion arise they can literally as well as mentally feel by touching the Sense Shapes.'

Professionals are convinced that by participating in death rituals the bereaved can 'work through' their grief. During my fieldwork at an ash disposal department I repeatedly heard employees express their opinion to the bereaved that it was good that they decided to come. As Suzanne said to a bereaved family: 'I would like to compliment you for the fact that you have come, despite the difficulty. I think it is very brave and that it will help you in the grieving process.' Or as Rob explained, 'I always ask people to scatter the ashes themselves. I try to stimulate that, because it is part of working through grief. Just as closing the coffin, it is one of the last things that people can do for a deceased.' Another company, specialized in laying out the deceased or taking care of the deceased as they call it, echoes this ideal in their advertisement: 'It is good to take care of your loved one yourself, or at least to be present. Because it contributes to the process of coming to terms with your grief.'¹⁶

Funeral director Joke, who owns a small company together with her husband, described how she actively tries to convince people to take part in death rituals:

If people come to us, we try to challenge them. In the first instance the bereaved often think they are not able to do something. They are scared and often do not want to admit that. We try to stimulate them, because it is a one-time affair. You cannot redo a funeral. We have our tricks to get people out of their shell. For example by inviting them to wash and clothe the deceased together with us. By concentrating on the deceased, people are forced to release their feelings. Another trick that I used with a lady last week is to invite them here (in the funeral home where the deceased is laid out MH). Then they cannot get around it and have to visit the deceased. Eventually the lady thanked us. She said that she would never have been able to do that without us. That is beautiful, not to compliment us, but to see what it does to people to participate and keep the deceased close.

With the best of intentions, professionals stimulate, sometimes quite heavily, mourners to take part, because they are convinced of the benefits of these practices.

¹⁵ <http://www.annahbelle.nl/annahbelle.html>, as accessed on 11 January 2011, <http://www.rondomrouw.nl/> as accessed on 11 January 2011.

¹⁶ <http://www.overledenenenzorghartman.nl> as accessed on 11 January 2011.

While professionals perceive themselves as facilitating, in these cases their role is rather compelling.

In line with the ideal image of giving the bereaved a directive role, openness in communication is highly valued by professionals. The mourners are ascribed the right to get to know everything about the crematorium's procedures. The bereaved are granted more access within the premises of the crematorium. Instead of keeping them away from backstage areas which was generally the practice until the 1990s, these areas are now opened for the public, for example by means of open-house days (Bolt, et al. 2007) (see pictures 23 and 24). During these days the oven room is always the most popular area. Urban myths regarding the piling up of coffins and the burning of several bodies in one oven make people curious about the actual procedures (Newall 1985). Behind these myths is a serious concern that professionals should respect the identity of the ashes. Employees demonstrate their procedures (see pictures 25 and 26).¹⁷

The areas that can be entered by the bereaved are expanding, causing the lines between front and backstage areas to blur. Until the last decade the oven room was mainly a backstage area designed for technical purposes, but now crematoriums increasingly offer the possibility of accompanying the coffin to the oven. Since 1970 Hindus in the Netherlands requested to be present at the 'charging' or the entry of the coffin into the cremator (Swhajor, et al. 2010), but more recently this custom has spread among other groups in the Netherlands. Accordingly, oven rooms are refurbished and painted in bright colours to 'transform' them into a front stage area resembling the rest of the crematorium.

While openness is highly valued, some elements of cremation rituals are deliberately underplayed. As Goffman argues, performers tend to conceal those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of themselves and their products (1959: 48). A demonstration of the counterparts of the idealized images projected by professionals shows a more detailed image of their 'hidden' directive roles as well as the generic, non-personal dimensions of their work.

A first concealed element is that of profit. The import prices of products sold by the crematorium are carefully tucked away. This is the case with many businesses, but in the crematorium making profit is considered taboo by both mourners and professionals. While making profit is necessary for a business to continue existing, in the crematorium the notion of profiting from the dead is evaded as much as possible. The idea of profit is considered in contrast with professionals' role of caring for their clients. Most professionals were even ashamed to admit that they tried to make a profit. Once, an employee explained that he found it difficult to think about making profit when addressing emotional clients. His solution was that he tried to

¹⁷ One funeral company answers these questions by means of a slideshow showing the crematorium's procedures. <http://yardenprodweb01.lostboys.nl/Alles-over-uitvaart/Informatie/Cremieren-begraven/Crematieproces.htm> as accessed as accessed on 11 January 2011.

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sell the more expensive urns only to rich customers for whom he noticed that the prices did not matter.

Secondly, throughout the whole routine from corpse to ashes, work in the crematorium is riddled with control procedures. In fact, there are so many control measures that I got convinced that their character is symbolic rather than functional. These measures serve as a symbolic means to affirm the ideal image of singularity, not only of the cremation service, but also of the unique character of the ash container among so many other urns. Because the identity of the ashes is highly valued by the bereaved and because uncertainties still exist, the regulations function, as do the open-house days, to affirm the care of the integrity of the cremated remains.

Consequently, elements that would cast doubt on the wholeness and identity of the ashes are concealed. Despite all considerations, flakes of ashes can drift up during work and end on the floor. In one crematorium a vacuum cleaner was used especially for this purpose. While this is unavoidable and the employees quickly assured me that the contents of the vacuum cleaner were also scattered at their grounds, the use of the vacuum cleaner was withheld from me for a long time.

A third and more implicit way of concealment, is the fact that behind the ideal image of facilitating every personal wish, certain boundaries do exist. These boundaries are presented as 'natural' and as such are mostly taken for granted. For example, in the Netherlands, the cremated remains are always sifted with a magnet, extracting the metals before crushing them into ashes (see picture 27). In order to explore the boundaries of potential requests I suggested towards several employees from different crematoriums that some people might want to obtain the remains as they leave the oven. This means that bereaved clients would receive a mix of partially crushed bones still containing artificial materials such as hips or other prostheses. Every time my question was met with great disbelief and sometimes even with disdain. This suggestion was not even considered negotiable by most of the employees. In their eyes this crossed the boundaries of what they considered appropriate.

The fourth way of concealment also concerns the ashes. The ashes were hidden or kept at a distance in many ways. While the employees elaborately explained the control procedures using examples of ash containers and identification stones, the ashes themselves were scarcely shown. I met only one employee who always asked if people wanted to see the ashes before going over to the scattering. Next to that, employees repeatedly warned the bereaved for all kinds of 'mistakes'. They alerted the bereaved to keep the wind in check or instructed them to scatter in a certain direction so the wind would not catch the ashes. Implicitly, the employees presumed that mourners would experience contact with the ashes as inappropriate or scary. At one occasion, some ashes had indeed drifted upon a bereaved woman. She did not hear the employee's warnings during the scattering, because she was crying. The employee shook his head. He looked at her black shoes sprinkled with grey ashes



23. Funeral fair in a church, Arnhem.



24. Demonstrating the auditorium, Usselo.



25. Explaining cremation procedures, Usselo.



26. A visitor inspecting the cremation oven, Usselo.



27. Grinding and sifting ashes, Driehuis.



28. Urns, scattering case, urn bag and ash sprinkler, Usselo.

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and offered her his pocket-handkerchief to clean her shoes. Puzzled she looked up and said, 'Why clean it? What does it matter?'

Another way of distancing mourners from the ashes, was through all kinds of coverings. Moreover, when the bereaved come to collect ashes at the crematorium, all four crematoriums supply special bags or boxes to carry the urn (see picture 28). While handing out the bag, I often heard employees say: 'Would you like a bag, that is more neutral when you go out', assuming that people would want to hide the ashes. These gestures of covering the ashes have a rather taken for granted character among professionals, but in fact they are directing rather than reflecting the bereaved's wishes and needs. In a similar vein, when ash sprinklers are carried to the scattering grounds, in most crematoriums a piece of cloth is used as a cover. When I asked why the ash sprinkler was covered, an employee explained: 'I think it is more beautiful, I like this piece of cloth (a red silky cloth MH). Besides, the container is always very cold, so it feels warmer this way.' Finally, some days later he said, it also prevents little flakes of ashes from falling out of the ash sprinkler when putting it on the table. Again I have not witnessed employees giving the bereaved a choice whether or not they wanted to use such a cover.

Contrary to the ideal of facilitating among equals that employees truly believe in and work by, unwaveringly they maintained their position as director. I observed that while there was space enough on the soft, fluffy furniture in the department of ash disposal, the employees were inclined to choose a 'hard' wooden chair, instead of taking place on the couch between the mourners. These practices, counterparts of the ideal images, demonstrate how professionals recommend certain practices and discourage, are unaware of or even deny others. Despite the ideal of professionals as facilitators their directive role continues implicitly in some aspects.

Professionals versus mourners: whose values reign?

During their work employees strive to neatly perform the ideal images of singularity and their role as facilitators. Yet, actual practice does not always fit their ideal images. During my fieldwork, I gradually realized that particularly with regard to ash disposal, employees had no idea how their colleagues operated. At every location, colleagues asked me about each other's way of working and often reacted surprised about each other's interpretations. When I explained Nicole that Remco, another employee at the department of ash disposal, always asks *if* someone wants to scatter the ashes, she reacted surprised: 'Oh no, I always ask: *who* wants to scatter the ashes? And if they seem reluctant, I try it through the kids, who mostly react enthusiastically. Then the adults always follow. I think it is important for them to do this themselves, so I stimulate them.' Another colleague, Josien, who was also present during this conversation looked up from her work and said: 'On the contrary, I think it is important to leave it up to them. If they do not initiate it, I never push people.' This example makes clear that even when employees follow

same ideal images, their own interpretations and priorities among company ideals affect their performance.

All crematorium employees work within a company wide framework of ideal images. Yet, in practice, they explain the ideal images differently. Josien reasoned that the fact that people are present at a scattering already underlines the ideal of a participative ritual directed and carried out by bereaved. She decided to respect their wishes substantiating her choice with another ideal image, respectively of her role as a facilitator, instead of a director. Nicole, however, emphasized the ideal image of mourners taking part in the ritual. Therefore, she chose to investigate ways of involving the bereaved by gently pushing them a little bit further as she believed this would help them in the grieving process.

Personal convictions of employees influence the way they explain and carry out the company's ideal images. Sometimes the company's ideal images can even conflict with their individual convictions moving them to act on their own accord. Goffman (1959: 12) would probably have called this disruptive events, because they contradict, discredit or otherwise throw doubt upon the company-wide ideal image. In most cases, these events stay undiscussed as they remain hidden in seemingly trivial gestures. However, I found that they surface when employees disagree with the requests of the company or the bereaved or when they have to improvise as a result of new services. In these instances, employees deviate from their company's or their clients ideals, because of conflicting views on what is considered appropriate in that situation.

As Ute Hüsken (2007b), anthropologist and scholar of ritual, argues, when rituals go wrong beliefs that would otherwise remain hidden are revealed. 'Ritual mistakes', as Hüsken calls them, are insightful, because conflicting views on what is considered appropriate to the ritual are acted out and made visible. Deviations of the ideal image occur every time a ritual is performed, but the evaluation by certain participants makes them 'ritual mistakes' (ibid.). The analysis of ritual mistakes is helpful in detecting which deviation matters to which participants (Hüsken 2007a: 343). Not all deviations are reported, conflicted upon or corrected. Therefore, investigating which ones are reacted upon enriches the description of the ideal images of the different participants.

A situation in which I witnessed many employees disagreed with their manager as well as with national law occurred in explaining scatterings on a self-chosen spot. Officially, in the case of a scattering outside of crematorium fields, permission of the landowner is required. In practice, however, this permission is often not requested. Crematorium employees are aware of this fact but most of them stated that it is out of their hands. They confided to me that they understood people who did not ask for permission, as they would do, or sometimes even had done, the same with the ashes of their own relatives. In fact, I even witnessed employees informing mourners how they could best scatter ashes in case they did not want to ask permission. In these

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cases, employees reasoned that stimulating mourners in choosing the right place of disposal and carrying that out themselves overruled bureaucracy and official rules.

A conflict over what is considered an appropriate ritual could also occur when professionals find it difficult to accept the personal wishes of the bereaved and decide to act on their own accord. I assisted at a service in which the funeral director decided to alter the ritual. While at first sight, this seemed a minor event to me. Later I realized that this was one of these moments where an employee decides to deviate from the wishes of the mourners as these were in conflict with his personal convictions. A 'normal' deviation thus turns into a ritual mistake because the employee frames it as such. Before a service in the crematorium, the employee on auditorium shift normally goes through the details with the funeral director, as on this particular day. 'Three musical pieces, as usual?', the employee Jolanda asked the funeral director. 'Yep', he replied. 'But', he continued, 'it is a very modest funeral. They are simple people. I do not mean that in a wrong way. It is just a very simple funeral. Three musical pieces, no speakers, that is all.' Jolanda replied, 'What about obituary cards?' 'Nope', the funeral director replied shortly. 'A book of condolence?', she asked. 'No', and he shook his head. 'Not even that? Oh my, that is so poor', she replied. 'I agree', he said, 'they even requested me to speak as little as possible.' The woman turned her attention to the candles as if to at least prepare something for this service. After a while the funeral director said: 'Wait, do not light them yet. I have an idea. I will welcome them and after the first piece of music I will ceremoniously light the candles. This way I will have a little ritual to put her (the deceased MH) into the light so there is at least something for the poor woman.' Jolanda sighed as if she was relieved, and said: 'That is a good idea.' During the service Jolanda and I sat in the back of the auditorium. When the service was over and all the bereaved had left, she turned to me and said evaluating the ritual: 'Only twelve minutes, that is so sad! I am happy that we have at least added something.'

I experienced a similar spontaneous initiative, when I accompanied a man who arranged scatterings at sea.¹⁸ On the deck, the ashes of approximately 300 deceased were piled up in boxes. During departure, the man explained his work in the saloon, when he suddenly said: 'Oh, wait, here comes the ceremonious part'. Swiftly he put on a black jacket and walked to the front deck where he stood straight up with his hands formally folded in front of him. While taking off his jacket afterwards, he explained that he did this for bereaved that might watch the boat depart from shore. Soon, the atmosphere changed into one unremitting labour. We threw the brown paper bags with ashes overboard through a pipe, one after another, while he cracked a joke every now and then. Suddenly, I saw him put away a bag. I asked him what he was doing. He said: 'The bags with only a tiny bit of ashes are the remains from deceased children. We scatter those at the very end. Today, accidentally, an extra bouquet of flowers was delivered for people who ordered a separate scattering with

¹⁸ With many thanks to Sophie Bolt who took me along on this trip.

a flower greeting. We will use that for the babies.' He turned back to work, as we still had dozens of boxes to go. When everything but the two little bags was scattered, he took the two bags and said: 'We do not throw the little babies through the pipe, we scatter them freely. You can throw the bouquet in the sea afterwards.' Carefully he emptied the bags, while mumbling: 'Rest in peace little ones, now you are free.' I threw the flowers in the sea. Together we stood still, looking at the floating ashes and flowers in the water, drifting further and further away. I was touched by the sudden gesture of this sturdy man who had just routinely scattered hundreds of bags of ashes. 'Sad isn't it?', he said and started to tidy up.

The employees do not only perform their tasks, but also evaluate and adapt the rituals on their own initiative on the basis of what they feel is appropriate. In the mind of the funeral director as well as the captain, the ceremonies did not honour the deceased's lives sufficiently. Therefore, despite the personal wishes of the bereaved, they decided to alter the rituals and improvised 'a small candle lighting ritual' and 'a flower ritual', as they called it.

During a scattering appointment I witnessed another action in which a professional showed his own ideas about a proper ritual and tried to add these to the scattering. Since January 2008, the crematorium in Usselo introduced a red plastic candle with every scattering. As it was a new service the candle forced the professionals to improvise in presenting and explaining the value this object. Before leaving to the field, Remco asked the bereaved if they took flowers, while they obviously did not have any with them. 'No', a bereaved woman answered, 'I did not think about that, I did not know we had to.' 'Well, I ask that', Remco said, 'because sometimes people have flowers in the car. But if you don't, it will probably be a bit meagre. So if you would appreciate it, I can offer you a funeral candle from our crematorium. It is no necessity of course, it is just an extra service from us.' 'Yes?' he asked. The bereaved, a niece and two neighbours of the deceased looked at each other. 'Okay then', one of them replied and accepted the candle. This event shows how Remco evaluated the ritual as 'meagre' and improvised to fit in the candle. In his eyes a good scattering is personalized and rich in ritual, so not taking flowers or candles was a ritual mistake. In this case, while acting out of their idea of what is proper he overlooked that the preference of a sober scattering can also be part of a personalized ritual. What professionals consider a scant action might exactly be in the spirit of the deceased, and thus a personally meaningful ritual.

The definition of what counts as a ritual mistake depends on the point of view of the interpreter, but also on the character of the ritual, whether it is loosely structured or rule-governed (Hüsken 2007a: 347). Professionals involved in ash disposal are forced to improvise together with the mourners. Ash disposal rituals are an emergent tradition. They are what Grimes (1982: 60-61) calls acts of ritualizing. Since there is no ritual script, traditions are created in the here and now. Henceforth, the performance of ash disposals has a trial and error kind of character, for professionals

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as well as for mourners. What is considered appropriate or inappropriate is discovered by doing it, by taking the risk of conducting a ritual mistake.

Improvising on the basis of personal convictions about ritual can work both ways. Sometimes employees' ideas were accepted by the bereaved, while in other cases they were ignored or rejected. The bereaved do not indiscriminately follow every idea of the professionals. Rather, this is a process of constant negotiation in which different parties, the professionals and mourners involved, try to implement their visions of what is an appropriate ritual. This became clear, when Remco suggested to scatter the ashes in a particular shape. I had already seen these forms on the scattering lanes and was very curious as to how these had come into being. One day, Remco handed the ash container to a bereaved man and suggested that they could scatter the ashes in the form of a heart or a circle. But the man had already started to scatter the ashes in a line in the corner of the scattering field. Remco shook his head silently in disdain. Afterwards he explained to me that he had guided a scattering years ago where a family dispersed the ashes in the shape of a heart and then surrounded the ashes holding hands. He was so impressed by this gesture that he uses it, when he thinks a family is receptive for such a suggestion.

While this particular family did not respond to his suggestion, another family listened attentively and then applied his suggestion in their own way. A Chinese woman and her two children came to scatter the ashes of their husband and father. At the field, Remco said that they could scatter the ashes however they wanted. 'What do you mean?', the son said. 'Well sometimes people scatter in a certain form for example', said Remco. Afterwards, the children scattered the ashes in the shape of the initials of their father and a Chinese sign for tree, because he loved nature. On another occasion, a woman replied at Remco's suggestion to scatter the ashes in the shape of a heart: 'Oh no, not in the shape of a heart. That is way too sweet for our parents.' Remco stood still and after a while he said: 'Maybe two circles, like wedding rings?' (see pictures 29 and 30). 'Yes, that is a good idea', the woman replied to his suggestion, 'but overlapping only for a small area. Because they were together but they also very much had their own life.' Just as the candle, the ritual gesture of scattering in a certain shape resulted in an active negotiation of suiting symbols in which personal convictions of both professionals and bereaved were central.

The emergent character of ash disposal rituals results in more than a process of professionals facilitating the wishes of the bereaved, as the ideal image of funerary companies prescribes. But in exploring and imagining together in which the professionals' individual convictions inevitably play an important role. This ultimately shows that professionals do not only reproduce the ideal images defined by the company they work for. They interpret these in their own way and add their personal ideas to the process picking up some deviations along the way, while leaving others.



29. Candles and flowers after a scattering, Nijmegen.



30. Scattered ashes in two overlapping circles, Usselo.

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In conclusion, an analysis using Goffmanns concept (1959) of idealized performances shows that the performance of funeral professionals is always guided by their companies' messages about 'a proper cremation ritual'. Cremation rituals were displayed as singular and unique with the bereaved as the directors of 'their own ritual'. However by analyzing promotional material and job instructions alongside actual practices, it became clear how much work it is to keep up the ideal image of a unique and personal farewell organized by the bereaved. It disclosed that, in fact, professionals made a subtle, but sure effort to direct mourners.

With the ideal images revealed, I was able to look at cremation rituals on a micro level. Professionals do not indiscriminately follow the company-wide ideals. The personal convictions of professionals play a decisive role in the creation of cremation rituals. When employees feel that the barriers of what they consider appropriate are crossed, they sometimes oppose the companies' as well as the mourners' ideal images.

These deviations can result in 'ritual mistakes' (Hüsken 2007b). Especially with regard to ash disposal, professionals improvise together with mourners, forcing both parties to rely on their individual convictions and to defend their vision of an appropriate ritual. Since ash disposal rituals are emergent rituals, mourners as well as professionals discover the rules by breaking them and henceforth learning what the decisive aspects of ash disposal are to the different participants. Both parties have an active role in this process. Professionals are often very dedicated to their job and dare to take risks in improvising rituals by contributing. In turn, the bereaved are not a passive audience but rather respond actively to the suggestions of professionals by acceptance, adaptation or rejection.

3

In touch with the deceased¹⁹

In contrast to funerals, ash disposals are usually private occasions. Sometimes disposal is assisted by a professional, but just as often the bereaved conduct this action on their own initiative, scattering the ashes on a self-chosen spot or taking the ashes home. Only in exceptional cases an ash disposal is public.

One such case was that of Dutch singer André Hazes in 2005. His death and the disposal of his ashes were ritualised in a series of widely publicised events described by anthropologist Irene Stengs (2009: 112-113). After the national broadcast of his funeral on television, people were informed about the serial disposal of his ashes through the newspapers. His widow Rachel, their two children and some of his best friends had tattoos done with some of André's ashes embedded in the ink. Next, the family buried some of his ashes in the garden of the House of Blues in Orlando, Florida, one of his favourite places. The widow had three small urns filled with ashes for herself and her two children. The rest of his ashes were inserted into firework. One rocket was fired in secrecy by family, informing the public the next day. The other ten were fired during a commemorative concert one year after André's death, which was again broadcasted nationally.

This example of an elaborate ash disposal shows the great variety of practices that bereaved undertake with great dedication and effort. Only recently have such practices have been recorded (Davies 1997; Hockey, et al. 2007; Kawano 2004; Kellaher, et al. 2005; 2010; Prothero 2001; Roberts 2010), but relatively little is known about the actual meaning of an ash disposal, and consequently of the ashes, to the bereaved.

With regard to the meaning of the disposal of André Hazes, the widow explained (Heessels, et al. f.c.; Poots 2009): 'The fact that André is not only in our thoughts and hearts but also in our bodies by means of the ash tattoos was what appealed to us most.' Here, Rachel addresses her ash tattoo as André, identifying the ashes with the deceased person.

A common premise of research on material culture is that objects signify ideas (Woodward 2007: 5). From this assumption it would follow that people's notions

¹⁹ Earlier versions of parts of this chapter were published in: Heessels, Meike., Fleur. Poots, and Eric. Venbrux (f.c.) In touch with the deceased: Animated objects and human ashes. *Material Religion*.

Heessels, Meike. (2010) From commercial goods to cherished ash objects. Mediating contact with the dead through the body. In *The body and food in ritual*. E. Venbrux, T. Quartier, and J. Wojtkowiak, eds. Pp. 249-263. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

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about the dead can be inferred from an investigation of objects with ashes, but the actual situation is more complex. Such an approach reduces objects to signs of abstract ideas, rather than recognising that objects also prompt thinking (Boivin 2008; 2009). The material world is not a mere prop for human thought. Cultural meanings do not precede material culture, but stem from human engagement with the world around them (ibid.). My research shows that ideas about the dead evolve in interaction with the ashes. The ashes *do* something: they co-create meaning, when people handle them and react to these objects.

Focusing on the interactions of people with human ashes helped me to get beyond the dualistic separation of things from ideas. By asking over and over again what ashes mean, thus segregating material things from abstract ideas, as if ideas can be easily abstracted from their material 'vessels', researchers might come up against a wall as the anthropologist Bloch (1995) discovered in his research on wood carvings.

Objects become meaningful in specific contexts (Kopytoff 1986), their meanings differ along with their owner and along with the person whom the owner interacts with (Komter 2001; McDannell 1995; Miller 2008). In the 'life history' of the objects different people ascribe different meanings to them (Grimes 1992; Kopytoff 1986). The ashes are collected, dispersed, divided among family members, discussed, given away, inherited or fought over. Throughout this process of becoming part of human relations, ashes are attributed various meanings. In this chapter I analyze the way people react to the ashes, when first confronted in the crematorium. Subsequently, I consider ongoing practices with ashes in daily life, when bereaved people handle ash-filled objects ranging from urns to glass objects and tattoos.

Animate dead matter

In 2007, an article appeared in a local Dutch newspaper. It was entitled *Ashes mistakenly switched after cremation*.²⁰ The article describes how a group of mourners made a puzzling discovery one day after they disposed of their mother's ashes on a scattering lane. The identification number on the cremation forms did not match the number on the fireproof identification stone that they received from the employee. After questioning crematorium personnel, one employee eventually had to admit that they had made a mistake. Shortly before disposal the ash sprinklers had been switched. As a result, the bereaved had scattered someone else's ashes. The employee told the mourners that according to the administration of the crematorium, their mother's ashes were scattered that same day and on the same field, but by another group of mourners.

²⁰ Mevissen (2005). As verwisseld na crematie in Blerick. Natuurlijk Dood Centrum, http://www.natuurlijkdoodcentrum.org/Nieuws/Teksten/24_asverwisseld.html as accessed on 13 March 2008.

At first sight, this seemed a tragic ritual mistake to me. However, pondering on the meaning of this mistake, I asked myself what was lost according to the bereaved family? A distant observer might wonder whether it matters if the bereaved disperse the remains of another deceased person, when in the end the ashes of both deceased are scattered on the same grounds? After analyzing the reactions of many bereaved people, I realized that there is more at stake than merely placing the ashes. Even when people dispose of ashes on a scattering lane where hundreds of people's cremated remains are dispersed every year, the actual performance of the scattering, the witnessing and the handling of the ashes and the exact place of scattering behold meaning to the bereaved.

A family member involved in the incident stated: 'We want to bring closure to this situation. Our father was scattered years ago on the same field and we want to make sure that he is now reunited with his wife. After this, we do not believe the crematorium anymore, so we are looking for answers from the other duped family.' This reaction points to the crux of ash disposal. The bereaved came to scatter *their mother*, not *the remains of their mother*, at the place where their *father* was dispersed years earlier. From their emotional reactions and the intensive quest for the other family follows that this is not merely a matter of speech.

Many mourners relate to the ashes of their loved ones as they related to that person during life. As sociologist Margaret Gibson (2008) puts it, with regard to the objects that a deceased leaves behind, for mourners objects of the dead can transform into quasi-subjects. This means that an object gains value over time as it has been in contact with the deceased throughout his or her life, such as a favourite chair. However, there is a crucial difference between the objects of the dead that Gibson (2008) describes and objects containing ashes. Objects previously owned by the dead are associated with the person as a result of prolonged contact, whereas ashes somehow *are* the deceased to many mourners. There is a difference between grandmother's chair, the one she used to sit in, and a chair that incorporates her ashes into the cushion.

For mourners the distinction between human ashes, possibly in the shape of an urn, ash object or tattoo, and the person from whom the dead material derives is not clear-cut. In fact, for some mourners there is no difference. I call this process subjectification, meaning that an object becomes identified with a particular person and the borders between object and subject blur. This occurs in the case of objects that belonged to the dead as well as in the case of objects that actually contain parts of a deceased. But in the second instance the process of subjectification is immediate and more pronounced. From the moment that an urn is filled with ashes the borders between object and person blur or even vanish.

During ash disposals at the crematorium people not only referred to the ashes with the name of the deceased, but also reacted physically as they would have reacted towards the deceased. One morning in the crematorium when I assisted Ans, a fifty-plus woman with greyish hair and a friendly face, a family came to place an

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urn in a grave. The aged widower walked with a cane. Before the burial of the urn, Ans said to him: 'Normally, I ask if people want to carry the urn to the grave, but as that is not possible I was wondering if you would like to hold the urn beforehand?' Immediately, tears welled up in the widower's eyes. While he made frantic efforts to find his pocket-handkerchief, he said: 'Yes, I would like to hold her.' The employee and I went to get the urn from the niche. When we got back, Ans carried the urn in her hands. While she explained the family that their (grand)mother and wife's maiden name and date of cremation were written on the lid, the widower stretched his hands towards the urn. Quickly Ans ended her explanation and handed the urn to him. While trying to catch his tears with the handkerchief, he held the urn tight, as if embracing a human being after a long separation.

The widower not only addressed the urn as 'her', meaning his wife, but also reacted towards the urn as if it was her. It seemed that to him, at that moment, there was no strict line between the living and the dead. While another person might only see the cremated remains of what once was a person, to him they were both his wife and her ashes. I observed other mourners kiss the lid of an urn when receiving it, caressing an urn during an information talk by an employee, or holding a container on their lap during an interview. At these moments, a material that is unrecognizable as human and even as bone²¹ to outsiders is recognized as a person in the eyes of the bereaved.

While I encountered mourners holding, caressing, kissing or hugging an urn every now and then, these physical reactions were not typical for all disposals. Other practices expressing the personal identity of the deceased were carried out by virtually all bereaved. Mourners emphasized the personal identity of the deceased by means of choosing a certain type of disposal as well as a certain place and time. In addition, the manner of scattering the ashes, for example in a certain shape, as well as the placement of objects with the ashes were used by mourners to express the deceased's characteristics.

The bereaved often determined the type of ash disposal, for instance, a scattering, the placing in a grave, or taking the ashes home, by thinking over what would have best suited the deceased person. Betsie explained why they chose to scatter the ashes of her daughter in nature:

Marieke was not the kind of child to put in an urn. She loved her freedom and was averse to rules. Sometimes, we just knew that we could forget about her arriving at home on time or cleaning up her room. Even if we would stand on our heads, she would not do it. So putting her in an urn did not feel right. Scattering her ashes at her favourite spot in the open air gave us the feeling to grant her the freedom she enjoyed in life.

²¹ After a cremation, the remains are crushed into a substance that looks the same for every deceased except for slight differences in colour, quantity and odour that can only be detected by people who often handle ashes.

In some cases the deceased had actually pointed out their wishes, in other cases mourners strived to dispose of the deceased's ashes in a way and on a spot they considered in line with the character and life of the deceased.

Most mourners had specific ideas about the place of disposal. The importance of the location is evident, when the ashes are taken home or when a scattering is performed outside of crematorium grounds. The bereaved often choose a destination with which the deceased had a special bond, such as a favourite fishing spot, a beloved holiday location or a place where the deceased had always wanted to go. But even on scattering fields, mourners often had specific ideas about the place. Once an employee asked a bereaved woman, 'Would you like to scatter his ashes near the pond?' she replied: 'Oh no! He could not swim!' After a short silence, she said: 'A place close to a tree would be nice. He loved trees.'

In many cases the place of an ash disposal remains important. Often the bereaved return to commemorate the deceased. For example at scattering grounds, people often try to find a spot that is easy to recognize and come back to. While their considerations are unique and personal, this results in the clustering of ashes around trees or other recognizable places (see picture 31). This often leads to complex situations for professionals, who have to supervise these shared spaces of the dead and try to keep to the rules. One of these rules is that 'it is not permitted to leave objects on the scattering lanes (see picture 32).' This rule proved to be one of the hardest to control, as the administrator of a natural burial site said:

We used to permit scatterings at our terrain, with the idea that the ashes disappear in nature, but we don't permit that anymore. We have noticed that people return to the place of scattering and unofficially create a small grave. However, they did not rent a space. This is unfair towards people who pay yearly for an urn grave. We try constantly to stay in communication with people, but sometimes it is difficult to reach them, because they are so emotional.

Hence it is a misconception that mourners opting for a scattering at crematorium grounds aim for a disappearance of the ashes. On the contrary, bereaved people generally return and mark these locations creatively (see pictures 33 to 36).

Choosing a specific moment for an ash disposal, instead of leaving it up to an employee to randomly plan an appointment at the crematorium, is another way of personalizing the event. In some cases the bereaved plan a scattering on the birthday of the deceased, emphasizing his or her personal characteristics or exactly a year after death, commemorating the life as well as the death of a deceased. But even the moment on the day itself can have a symbolic value. When recounting the disposal of her partner's ashes, one of my informants said: 'At the crematorium they proposed to make an appointment at eight or nine in the morning. I immediately



31. Clustering of ashes around a tree, Amsterdam.



32. Rules on a signpost, Amsterdam.



33. Going against the rules, Amsterdam.



34. Leaving flowers and marking the trees, Driehtuis.



35. Weathered picture of a child stuck to a tree, Driehuis.



36. Christmas bouquet with a picture in a tree, Amsterdam.



37. Ashes scattered in the shape of a J, Usselo.



38. Ashes scattered in the shape of a heart, Usselo.



39. *Flowers in between scattered ashes, Groningen.*



40. *Bouquet left after a scattering, Usselo.*



41. Nest box above an urn grave, Usselo.



42. Creating some extra room in a columbarium, Usselo.

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said that that was impossible. We cannot scatter his ashes early in the morning, he would not even be awake by then!’

Another strategy of connecting an ash disposal to a deceased is by scattering ashes in certain shapes. During scatterings at crematorium grounds I regularly witnessed the bereaved write the name, initials or a symbol representing the deceased with ashes (see pictures 37 to 40). The choice for a columbarium, an urn or an urn grave is also personally motivated. When choosing an urn bereaved people opt for colours, materials, or shapes that matched the deceased’s characteristics, such as ‘an urn with images of fishes, because the deceased was a Pisces’. Some people even create their own monument.

Finally, the bereaved express the personal characteristics of a deceased by means of bringing objects to a disposal. Often certain flowers are chosen, because they were the deceased’s favourite or in the colour he or she liked best. Urn graves and places of scattering are decorated with personal objects such as cuddly toys, football caps or pencils (see pictures 41 and 42). In turn, the bereaved sometimes take objects from the scattering lane or grave back home. One informant grew oak trees in her garden, which had grown from an acorn lying at the place where her father was scattered. When the trees would be strong and big enough to survive, she wanted to distribute them among her relatives in commemoration of her father.

Throughout the whole process of ash disposal, ashes are constantly connected with the deceased. To the bereaved ashes, and the object or place of disposal, are and often continue to be closely associated with the deceased making it of vital importance to dispose of them in a way that matches the deceased’s life.

The meaning of human ashes

Ashes are in a liminal, in-between category. Bereaved people do not consider ashes human anymore, at least not in the usual way as in soft, fleshy and living. Yet they are neither considered pure matter as in lifeless, non-responsive material. The way ashes are viewed is reflected in the way the bereaved handle ash objects, as they are treated and referred to as persons. To further investigate the meaning of ashes, ash objects are an interesting case as the ashes are handled throughout daily life, in the homes of mourners or on the body of the bereaved.

Ash objects are objects made to contain a small amount of cremation ash such as jewels, paintings, statues or tattoos (see pictures 43 and 44). On the websites of producers ash objects are also called remembrance objects, memory objects, remembrance relics, ash relics or urn objects. I have chosen the term ‘ash object’ as it is the most matter-of-fact. Instead of stating the memorial or relic-like qualities of these objects, this term enables me to question these features. While such objects are known in the Netherlands, Switzerland, England and the United States (Cutting 2009; Davies 2005; Fahrni and Wuster 2000; Gibson 2008; Prendergast, et al. 2006), they have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Hallam and Hockey’s book *Death, memory and material culture* (2001) thoroughly analyses the use

of bones, hair and pictures as memorial material, but human ashes are only discussed in the context of scattering (2001: 93-97) and not as part of domestic objects.

Although bereaved people attributed a sense of animation to the ashes, when I asked informants directly about the meaning of their ash objects they often stated that they were not religious and led a *nuchter* (down-to-earth) life. Their responses seemed contradictory to their practices of talking to the ashes and of caressing and caring for the objects. How is this contradiction to be explained?

After re-reading the interviews and re-approaching some bereaved about the question, I realized that the interviewees equalled 'non-religious' to 'non-churchgoing'. For example, when I asked Betsie if she was religious she said:

No, I never go to church, but sometimes I think, well.. Who knows if it is possible. Why would everything be pointless? If you die, your body is your coat, if you take off your coat, maybe then some kind of energy, your feelings and what you have experienced throughout your life.. Maybe that stays in some way. That's why sometimes when I see a rainbow starting in the peat bogs I think that it is a sign from Marieke. On the other hand, it makes me laugh inside, how big do I make Marieke if I believe that she can create a rainbow?

Margriet, another bereaved woman that has lost her son answered, after a long silence:

Well, what should I say? I was raised as a Catholic. My mother was a strict believer, so strict that the religious images of hell scared her when she was about to die. My father was more relaxed, he always said to me "Margriet, there is only one god". That's how I see it too, for me all those religions, Protestantism, Islam, honour the same, one God. So I have some sense of believing, but I almost never go to church.

My informants' views do not correspond with traditional religious teachings and are fairly diffuse, ranging from atheist, to some sense of believing in a universal God or Good-ness, to a belief in nature. However, their responses did have one thing in common. All interviewees openly questioned their own beliefs and creatively assembled their viewpoints from the religion they grew up with as well as current experiences. Another thing that all informants shared was the fact that they considered ash objects to be more than 'ordinary stuff', as they are experienced as closely connected to the deceased. Yet, what that connection means needs more clarification in thick descriptions of interviews as well as practices.



43. Detail of an ash painting by funerary artist Renate Rolefes (by Renate Rolefes 2011).



44. Ash tattoo (by Fleur Poots 2011).

In many ways the bereaved treat ash objects as they treated their deceased loved one. Maria, for example, a 59-year-old widow living in the southern Netherlands, lost her husband when he was 48. Like many informants, Maria distributed her husband's ashes among several places. She kept the greater part of his ashes in an urn in her bedroom. Some time ago, she scattered the ashes that did not fit into the urn at the crematorium field where her parents' ashes were scattered. Also, Maria has two ash objects: a bracelet and a small jar bearing her husband's name.

Maria placed the small jar with her husband's ashes on a triangular shelf in the corner of her kitchen. The shelf is decorated with a candle, fresh flowers and a picture of her deceased husband. 'And another crazy thing always lies there,' Maria said, 'a pen. I have a pen lying there so he can write to me, I always say jokingly to my friends.' During the interview Maria often referred to the 'corner' by her husband's name, Martien, while looking towards the shelf. She explained that every day when she came home, she greeted her husband and kissed his picture. Then she lighted a candle and checked if the flowers needed freshening. She described how she kept him informed of her sorrows and pleasures throughout the day. When Martien was still alive they used to go on many trips in their mobile home. Today when she goes on holiday Maria takes the jar with her, still sharing his company on the trip. Symbolically as well as literally, Maria maintains the bond with her deceased husband by conducting practices with his ashes. Though she is well aware that Martien is dead, by kissing his portrait, taking his ashes with her and confiding in him in many ways, she treats him now as she did during life.

When I asked if she considered herself religious, Maria responded: 'I am not a regular churchgoer.' She first distanced herself from the church, as did most informants. But subsequently she asked herself out loud: 'But I do believe in something. I often go to a small chapel to venerate Mary. And I always have this candle burning for Martien, with the ashes and his picture. What do I actually believe? I don't know.' She got up from her chair and made some more coffee. After a while she said: 'You just do these things, I suppose. Yeah, why? Just because I believe he is here and that we will be together later. I know that some people do not believe that, but why would they want to take that from me if it comforts me?' Although the practices are central to her daily life, and she politely formulated an answer, Maria seemed uncomfortable when I asked her to explain the ideas behind her practices.

The story of Henny, a bereaved woman in her sixties working as a funeral lecturer, who lost her mother after taking care of her during old age, elaborates on this seemingly strained relation between her practices and her beliefs. After her death, Henny scattered her mother's ashes in front of the house where she was born. She also cherishes a small, silver, heart-shaped box with some of her ashes. Henny carefully preserves the heart in a glass cupboard upstairs, together with her mother's rosary. For the interview she especially brought the objects down to the living room. In the interview sessions Henny explained that when she missed her mother she

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took the box in her hands. She said: 'Sometimes it feels weird that she has been here so long and that she is gone now. Then I rub the silver or when the silver tarnishes I polish the heart.' After a short pause Henny added: 'I guess I do these things at moments when I long for contact with her. Then I have her in my hands again. I take the heart in my hands and gently shake it. Sometimes I even tell her jokingly that I want to wake her up. And I don't mind doing that. Oh no. Even though it may sound weird, as I do not believe that she really is in the object.' Despite emphasising not *believing* that her mother is really present in the object, treasuring the object and looking after it properly is very important to Henny. She remarked: 'Imagine, it is so important to me that I even put the heart box in the safe when I go away for a lengthy period as I am scared that it might get damaged or stolen.'

Both Henny and Maria express their ambivalence about the ideas behind their practices explicitly, but also more indirectly by phrasing their practices as 'I say jokingly to my friends', 'I guess I do these things because...' or 'even though it may sound weird'. Interviewees feel uncomfortable for two reasons. Firstly, these practices are considered very intimate. Sometimes they are not even discussed in their own household, let alone with relatives, friends or outsiders. Often the interview was the first time the bereaved verbalised their ideas about their objects to an outsider. The bereaved are not uncomfortable because they had not thought about it, but rather because they are usually focused on the practices instead of underlying ideas that sociologists of religion assume are central. The criteria of informants are practical rather than logical (McGuire 2008). I am convinced that researchers should not impose their own scholarly dualisms - idea versus practice, profane versus sacred, religious versus non-religious - on their informants. Whereas I was looking for an abstraction of ideas about the meaning of the ashes, Henny and Maria were concerned about the whole of interactions with their precious objects and hence with their deceased loved ones.

For bereaved people, practices and beliefs belong together. Mourners do not become uncomfortable because they cannot verbalise their ideas or that they do not know what they are doing. After some time, I realized that it was me who caused the ambivalence, because my question was silly. My experience was similar to that of anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1995), who studied wood carvings in Madagascar. When Bloch asked his informants about the meaning of the carvings, people offered only one seemingly simple answer: 'to beautify the wood'. This frustrated him as he was looking for an abstracted meaning. In the end Bloch realised that the carvings did not *represent* something. The carvings *were* part of the task of making a house and thus of the growth of a marriage. So, to beautify the wood is to build on family life. Similarly, the meaning of ash objects is caught up with a person's interactions with the object and cannot be separated from it. The ideas and practices are part of the same whole.

The bereaved express their beliefs not necessarily in a verbal way, but mainly through material and bodily expression. Their practices are a performance of a

continuing bond with a deceased person, of feeling close to this person and of honouring the relation. Because of my bias towards verbal language, I initially overlooked the messages of material culture and bodily understanding. Apparently, this is a broader tendency among social scientists (see also Boivin 2009: 284).

For mourners, the meaning of ash objects lies in the actual practices, in the fact that the object is literally as well as symbolically their deceased loved one. Practices with ash objects connect the body of the deceased with the body of the bereaved. The objects not only contain material that once was part of the deceased's body, they are also worn on the body or held in the hands of the bereaved. By wearing, holding or touching the object the bereaved experience their bond with the deceased. By wearing an ash jewel or carrying a cuddle stone in one's pocket the object moves along with its owner. Maria still takes her husband with her on a holiday and Henny takes care of her mother just as she did during her lifetime by polishing the heart, symbolically shaking up her pillow and making sure that the object is safe when she is away from home.

In the case of an ash tattoo the bodies of the deceased and the bereaved are literally interconnected. The border between living and dead matter is crossed as the living body is injected with ink and human ashes. The tattoo is a constant reminder of the deceased loved one, turning the bearer of the tattoo into a human ash container. When the bereaved touch their tattooed skin they also symbolically touch their deceased relative. Moreover, tattoos are permanent, counteracting the transience of life. Whereas a loved one can suddenly be taken away by death, a tattoo remains part of its bearer. Being tattooed with ashes entails a transformation process. The needles pierce the skin, make it bleed and leave a mark that is essentially indelible. Hennie, a mother in her forties, who lost her eighteen-year-old son Stefan in a car accident, explained that she values her ash tattoo because it can never go away – 'it feels as if he is always with me'. Hence the meaning of ash objects is intrinsic to the way they are treated. The bond between a bereaved and a deceased is physically as well as symbolically perpetuated through practices with ashes.

Bones, hair and ashes: ash objects as relics

Ash objects are considered to be different from other objects, because they are in-between living and dead matter. In this respect, they are similar to other animated objects in which human remains are incorporated such as relics, but also fetishes and hair ornaments (Heessels 2010). Several producers refer to ash objects as relics. Glass sculptures with ashes are called 'mourning relics that translate the feelings of the bereaved into a unique memorial.'²² By referring to ash objects as relics producers seem to claim a ring of tradition, even though these handicrafts are in fact novelties. I view ascribing relic-like qualities to such goods, without actually calling them

²² <http://www.kroesglasblazerij.nl> as accessed on 31 March 2009.

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religious, which could offend their mostly secular clients, as a strategy of producers hoping that clients will assign a special status to the objects. However, manufacturers leave the term 'relic' unexplained. By comparing ash objects and relics I aim to further unravel the special character of ash objects.

The term relic stems from *reliquiae*, meaning remains. In Christian culture relics were understood to be former body parts of a saint or martyr, such as bones or blood, which were considered primary relics (Van Cauteren 1985). But relics could also be clothing or some other object that had been in contact with a saint or with a saint's relics, which were seen as secondary relics (ibid.). Christians venerated relics as physically representing people who led exceptionally spiritual lives and who were now supposed to be in heaven (McDannell 1995: 42). Indeed, as soon as ash objects are filled with ashes and arrive in the hands of mourners, they receive a special status. Just as certain pieces of wood are saved all over the world and considered to be the holy cross of Jesus. To mourners a little bit of ashes reworked into a jewel or a precious stone comes to be the person as a whole.

Relics of saints were not mere repositories of memory. The often extensively decorated remains were considered means of direct contact with the hereafter (Van Cauteren 1985). As saints were believed to be present both in heaven and on earth, they were deemed capable of intervening among the living. Since the body of the saint once carried his or her righteous soul, it was believed that after death the body still possessed a certain holy power (Geary 1986: 169; McDannell 1995: 43; Rooijackers 1996; Van Cauteren 1985: 11). By touching relics people sought to participate in these powers. In a similar fashion, fetishes, in which blood and other human remains can be incorporated, are also regarded as powerful, even as having the power to act on others (Pels 1998).

Bereaved relatives who possess an ash object also touch it with an intention to get into contact with the deceased person or to participate in their powers. Hennie lost her eighteen-year-old son in a car accident three years ago. Today she and her husband wear a collar with a pendant containing a bit of his ashes. During my interview with her she emphasised that they put it on the day they received it and have never taken it off. While talking she held the pendant every now and then. She explained that she is always in close physical contact with it. It touches her skin and if she feels worried or upset, she takes it in her hand. Hennie said that touching the pendant, hence her son, makes her feel at ease. In similar fashion Dreetje, the son of folk singer André Hazes, said that he looks at his ash tattoo every time he has to do something important.²³ He then thinks about his father and feels supported by him. Just as relics and fetishes are considered to have a power of their own, bereaved people ascribe power to ash objects. Touching an ash object or tattoo can give the bearer a feeling of calmness or strength as for him or her it still radiates the power of the deceased person.

²³ 'Uit het hart. Dreetje: "Ik heb nog steeds steun aan mijn vader"'. *De Telegraaf*, 23-9-2007, p. 11.

A crucial difference between Christian relics and ash objects is that of the public versus private origin of the remains. The persons symbolised by ash objects are not famous figures such as saints. The fact that the ashes stem from close relatives or friends implies a difference in the meaning and function of the objects. Christian relics were, and some still are, continually or periodically on public display (Geary 1986). In order to be deemed powerful a medieval relic preferably had to be recognised by the devotees as well as by the church.²⁴ In fact, the Church issued certificates recognising the authenticity of a relic, naming the source and place where it was found. Even lay relics, such as scapulars that are worn individually, are meaningful to a community of devotees that recognise their meaning (Spaans 2003). By contrast, ash objects mostly keep their content hidden from the outside world (Heessels 2008). They are considered private, intimate objects oriented towards the owners. In most cases, they do not have a public function and are designed to hide rather than exhibit the human remains.

In contrast to relics, my findings reveal that in the production of ash objects discretion is a central value. The identity of the contained matter is deliberately concealed. Ashes are contained in objects by means of two techniques: they are either mixed with metal, pottery, glass, paint or ink, or they are contained in a hollow vessel. Producers stress that the objects should be discreet. LifeGem, a company that makes remembrance diamonds out of cremation ashes, advertises the product as 'a discreet way to keep your loved one close'.²⁵ Most ash objects are explicitly designed to make the ashes invisible. As a result, in almost all cases the appearance of ash objects does not give away their content and, with that, their meanings to outsiders. I have encountered only one jeweller who made a line of jewels explicitly showing the ashes, called 'See You' memory jewels. The other line, concealing their contents, was aptly called 'Secret You'.²⁶

The makers explicitly design ash objects so that the objects can occupy a central place in the home and have personal meaning to the mourners involved, without confronting visitors with the human remains. Or, as glass artist Van der Schaaff explains:

It is a remembrance object for the future. It is not a sad domestic object. You are sad enough already. Therefore, we do not design a so-called sad mourning relic that shocks every one. On the contrary, we design a glass object that is a pleasure to look at. You can pick the model and the colour and we will process two or three teaspoons of ashes into it. No one but you needs to know. It is your little monument. And to outsiders, it is a beautiful glass object matching your home interior.²⁷

²⁴ Please note that numerous relics exist that were not officially recognized or that are in the process of getting this recognition, but which have great importance to their followers (Orsi 2011).

²⁵ <http://www.lifegem.nl/index3.php?p=5-25-73> as accessed on 31 March 2009.

²⁶ <http://www.seeyougedenksieraden.nl/> as accessed on 19 April 2011.

²⁷ <http://www.asbestemming.com/> as accessed on 31 March 2009.

In an interview artist Renate from *Doodgewone Zaak* (Ordinary Business or literally Dead-normal Business), who makes paintings with ashes, explained that 'her product enables people to share their story of loss, if they wish, but also leaves room to keep it to themselves, as one would not associate a beautiful painting with death as quickly as one would an urn.' Crematorium employees selling ash objects echoed this idea of discretion. In conversation with bereaved families certain ash objects were praised for the fact that they did not show their contents. One employee explained that she liked the colourful ash jewellery best, 'because it looks young and trendy. These jewels are not recognisable as ash pendants, in contrast to the metal ash cylinders that have become more common nowadays.'

Discretion is also a key characteristic of ash tattoos. In a forum from the women's magazine *Viva* a bereaved mother posted a question to the readers about the proper place for her ash tattoo.²⁸ A discussion arose about the visibility of ash tattoos: 'I would choose a place for yourself, such as your belly, your groin or maybe your upper arm' and 'To me this seems like a tattoo that you do not want to show to everybody.' Most participants in the forum considered it necessary to be able to hide the tattoo from the view of other people. Others advised hiding the meaning and not the tattoo per se, by using symbols that are only recognisable to the carrier and his or her immediate circle. Still others took the opportunity to state their disapproval of the practice as a whole, considering it scary, dangerous or even dirty. These reactions show that ash tattoos are not only considered something for yourself, for some they are explicitly something that you should not confront others with. In fact, most people choose a more personal kind of symbolism which meaning is known only to a select group of friends and family. Ash tattoos are considered intimate, as a bereaved mother wrote in a forum: 'I have a little butterfly in my groin, precisely there, because it is my tattoo and I really have it for myself. There are only very few people who know that I have it and that is good. It is my memorial for Rick and not for the people around me.'²⁹

Ashes are hidden behind glass, stone or metal or rendered invisible by mixing them with ink or paint and the use personal symbols that are only recognizable to the owner and his or her direct surroundings. In this respect ash objects resemble hair ornaments (Heessels 2010; Heessels, et al. accepted). Hair objects were created and used in Europe from the seventeenth to the twentieth century (Heessels et. al f.c.; Holm 2004; Pointon 1999).³⁰ Often a lock of hair was hidden behind a photographic portrait of the deceased or concealed in a locket or pendant, the contents being known only to the wearer (Batchen 2004). These objects were worn as jewels or in the case of frames, they could be displayed in private spaces such as the

²⁸http://forum.viva.nl/forum/Overig/Tattoo_voor_mn_meisje/list_messages/36252/0 as accessed on 31 January 2011.

²⁹<http://achterderegenboog.nl/forum/viewtopic.php?t=3516> as accessed on 4 October 2010.

³⁰ Dutch funerary objects with hair can be found at the Limburgs Museum, Venlo; Nederlands Openluchtmuseum, Arnhem; and Nederlands Uitvaart Museum Tot Zover, Amsterdam.

living room (Christen 2010). Just as ash objects, the owners of hair objects played with the characteristics of the objects hiding their contents to some, while showing them to others (Postema, et al. 2012).

A difference between ash objects and hair objects stems from the origin of the material. While hair can be cut during life as well as after death, ashes always originate from a dead body. The fact that a jewel containing hair could be a mourning object as well as a token of love or friendship (Batchen 2004: 67) adds to the invisibility of its meaning. This also accounts for ash diamonds that look exactly like natural diamonds and ash tattoos that do not visibly differ from a regular tattoo.

While the relics of saints were accessible to the whole community and public recognition strengthened their devotion, the identity of ash objects is anonymous to all but their intended bearer and his or her intimate circle. For an ash object public recognition is not necessary in order to be effective. In fact, the meaning of a memorial object can change or even disappear if it is recognised by an outsider. Betsie, whose adolescent daughter died, took off the small heart-shaped pendant containing her daughter's ashes.

In the beginning I wore the necklace at special occasions where Marieke also should have been, like a wedding of one of her nieces or a birthday of one of her friends. Nobody saw that. And I felt that need in the beginning. But now I don't wear it anymore, not even at special occasions. Now, I think, I know what it looks like so others know that too. Not that I am ashamed of it, but still you confront others, and I mean, I think of her anyway.

Exposure led Betsie to withdrawal, instead of leading her to share a personal story of loss. Another interviewee with a memorial tattoo, a young woman who lost her mother, is now considering concealing or even erasing her tattoo because she was unpleasantly surprised by confrontational questions about the tattoo on her wrist during her work as a nurse.

The special meaning of ash objects can fade as a result of unexpected reactions from outsiders, but also as a result of inner changes. After a while some bereaved people for example take off their ash jewels as they no longer feel the need to wear it. Sometimes change is expressed literally by moving the object, as is illustrated by Daniëlle's story about the three pyramid-shaped urns that hold her dogs' ashes. At first the urns were placed in the living room, then in the bedroom and some years later she moved them to the attic. Over the years, she literally distanced herself from the objects. However, this does not mean that the meaning of the objects has irrevocably faded. As a result of a new demise, a personal crisis, a birth of or another change in the life of the living, objects can also be taken up again.

The meaning and power of an ash object does not exist in isolation but solely in interaction with the bereaved owner. When the owner of an ash object loses it or dies without sharing its intimate significance, the meaning of the object is lost. Some

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bereaved people, like Henny, take explicit measures to prevent the object from getting isolated and becoming an ordinary object again.

I have already told my husband that when I am not here anymore, one day, you never know. If nobody asks for it (the little heart-shaped box with her mother's ashes MH), then he will entrust it to me in my grave. Imagine what I am thinking about already, only because I do not want anything to happen to it.

Henny recorded in her will that when she dies and none of her kin will care for the object, the heart with her mother's ashes should be buried in her grave. In this way, she felt, her mother's ashes would be secure and their singular status guaranteed.

In sum, the meanings of ash objects cannot be 'read' directly from the objects. Objects are not hollow vessels to which people ascribe meanings that can be abstracted and described for research purposes. Elaborating on the work of Bloch (1995) and Boivin (2008; 2009) I maintain that the ideas about objects are to be found in the practices and in the way these are experienced. This means that mourners' beliefs about the deceased do not exist in separation from their interactions with their ash objects. Rather, these ideas develop throughout the process of handling the ashes. Practices and ideas form a whole that come to life in people's interactions with the object. As such, people's beliefs about the dead that can only be investigated by considering not only what people say, but also what they bodily and materially express through their practices with ash objects.

From the ways that people deal with ashes and ash objects in the Netherlands follows that they are not merely objects to them. My findings show that the borders between object and subject, between dead and living matter, and between things and persons are not self-evident. Ash objects occupy a liminal category of animate things-beings that are strongly connected to a living person. The objects do not merely represent the dead symbolically. When looking at what people did with human ashes, I learned that people relate to a person's ashes as they related to that living person by means of touching an ash object, talking to the ashes and assembling certain objects around the ashes or the place of disposal.

The intimate interactions with ash objects, hence with the deceased, suggest that a sense of animation is attributed to the ashes. However, when mourners were asked directly about their beliefs about the dead, mourners reacted by stating that they were not religious. Throughout my fieldwork, it became clear that the mourners' declarations of not being religious pointed to the fact that they did not consider themselves practicing Christians. However, by staying close to people's practices, instead of trying to analytically separate practices from ideas, and by embracing the complexities of religion, I learned that the interviewees did believe in some kind of enduring existence of the dead.

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Comparable to relics and fetishes, ash objects are endowed with a power to influence the bereaved as much as the bereaved influence the objects. Whether or not the interviewees are believers in an afterlife, as some are but others aren't, real presence is implied by their actions. Contact with an object in which the remains of a deceased loved one is incorporated is a literal, material and bodily continuation of a bond.

4

Performing relations between the living and the dead

In the third chapter I have argued that ashes are a liminal material that is situated between person and object. From the practices of mourners follows that in many ways mourners approach the ashes as they approached the deceased during life. This points to an enduring relation between the living and the dead. Other authors have also noted that current death rituals emphasize enduring relations between the living and the dead (Davies 1997: 141; Gibson 2008: 162; Howarth 2007; Prendergast, et al. 2006: 889). However, little is known about the consequences of such an emphasis for people's worldviews. If people maintain relations with the deceased, then where do they believe the dead reside? In this chapter I analyze which afterlife concepts go together with these practices of continuing bonds. I will do so by investigating how the passage to another world is performed in Dutch cremation rituals.

According to Van Gennep (1960) death rituals are rites of passage, consisting of three phases, namely separation, transformation and incorporation. In the case of a funeral this means that first a separation of the deceased from his or her status as living parent, spouse, sibling and other roles is performed. Then a transition phase is set in during which the deceased is viewed as neither living nor dead. Thirdly, the deceased is incorporated into the world of the dead. As stated by Van Gennep (1960: 11), rites of separation are prominent in funerals. The last phase, namely the incorporation of the deceased into the world of the dead, is also a separation from the world of the living.

To people in the Netherlands the world of the living and the world of the dead do not seem so neatly separated. Mourners experience the presence of the deceased in the ashes and maintain relations with the deceased through practices with the remains. In that sense, the emphasis in ash disposal is not so overtly on separation, but rather on incorporation.

With that in mind, ash disposal rituals rather resemble what Van Gennep (1960) calls welcoming rituals for newcomers. As a category of 'beings', the deceased and the newcomer have striking similarities. They both belong to a category of persons that is at once recognizable and different. Ashes remain strongly connected to a deceased person. However, at the same time the deceased's ashes are dead matter, and by no means look like the person anymore. Similarly, a newcomer is the same in some respects, but radically different and unknown in others. Besides, just as newcomers are asked to wait outside of a community until they are allowed to enter,

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the ashes are saved in the crematorium awaiting their final destination. After this waiting period, the ashes are passed back into the hands of the mourners.

I argue that this particular structure of Dutch cremation rituals, in which the ashes fall back in the hands of the bereaved minimally one month after the funeral, causes a particular focus of ash disposal rituals, namely one on incorporation instead of separation. To demonstrate this, I will first investigate the whole process of passages that are performed in Dutch cremation rituals from death, to the funeral and to the disposal of the ashes. Then, I will demonstrate how the welcoming back of the ashes is performed by mourners in ritual gestures, words and objects that reunite the living and the dead. Finally, I will analyse the afterlife concepts that are part of these rituals.

Elements of separation and incorporation from funeral to ash disposal

By analyzing Dutch cremation rituals as rites of passage, I will demonstrate how the moments of separation, transformation and incorporation are performed throughout this process.

Shortly after the physical moment of death, the body of the deceased is separated from the bereaved in several phases. Before the 1980's the corpse was generally transported to a mortuary, consisting of a fairly radical separation between the living and the dead. Nowadays, there is more variation. After citizen's protests against the directing role of funeral directors, the funeral industry came up with new developments that counter this radical separation. Firstly, people are increasingly laid in state at home. Secondly, in case a body is entrusted to a mortuary, the separation between the dead and the living can also be bridged by means of twenty-four-hour-services. These services make it possible to visit the deceased night and day with a personal key, instead of only on set times and under the vigilance of a professional. Moreover, often these rooms are decorated in a 'warm', living room kind of style, with a small kitchen and chairs for the mourners. A funeral director from a small company explained how they created what she calls a mourning living room by mixing warm colours and different styles, combining a modern red couch with antique wooden furniture from an auctioneering firm to create the atmosphere of a home.

At the day of the funeral, the coffin is generally closed before the funeral by professionals or by the bereaved. Many informants indicated that this moment felt as a final separation from the deceased. In some cases, the coffin is left open during the service, so all visitors can view the deceased for a last time. Next, the inner circle of bereaved closes the coffin and takes leave of the deceased in the auditorium.

After the funeral service, the bereaved usually leave the coffin behind in the auditorium, leaving it up to the employees to bring the coffin to the oven. However, as of late, mourners can accompany the coffin to the oven as many informants did. Explaining why she went to the oven room, Paulien said: 'I wanted to accompany him until the very end. Instead of leaving him in the hands of the employees I stayed

with him as long as I could.' Hans described his choice as follows: 'I wanted to push her in the oven myself. Together with the children I accompanied Marijn to the cremation oven. Moreover, in order to include the other mourners, I informed the people that stayed behind at the open-air ceremony of the exact moment that the coffin would enter the oven. So they could fire a rocket at that moment, connecting us and Marijn to the people there.' The accompaniment to the oven, prolonging the intermediate phase before the ultimate separation, is followed by the closing of the oven doors subjecting the corpse to the fire.

In sum, from death to the cremation service, the body is increasingly separated from the mourners. The separation occurs in little steps that vary along the choices and preferences of the bereaved, who can opt for laying the deceased in state at home or at a mortuary, whether or not allowing the bereaved access with their own key, choosing the moment of closing the coffin before or after the funeral, and opting whether or not to accompany the body to the oven.

During ash disposal the opposite occurs. Approximately two to three weeks after the cremation, a letter arrives from the crematorium asking what the mourners would like to undertake with the deceased's ashes. In such a way, after taking leave of the deceased at the crematorium, the cremated remains, or at the least the decision about the remains, come back to the bereaved. In contrast to Dutch burial rituals in which the funeral as well as the disposal of the body take place in one day, there is at least a month between the funeral and the day of the ash disposal. Professionals describe this period as the waiting period or the contemplation period, during which mourners can contemplate on the loss as well as the destination for the ashes. During this time the ashes cannot be reached by the bereaved.³¹

While the ash disposal used to be performed by professionals anonymously scattering the ashes, nowadays most bereaved take part in the ash disposal. There are no official, national percentages on the types of disposal chosen in the Netherlands, but from the data of recent ash disposals conducted by the crematoriums where I worked I could infer some trends. In Usselo and Almelo the total amount of scatterings dropped between 2000 and 2007, as more people took the ashes home or scattered them themselves. At the same time, the percentage of mourners that chose to be present during scattering grew to approximately one third. In Driehuis in 2009, in over half of all cremations, the ashes were either taken home or scattered in the presence of mourners. When the ashes are carried and disposed of by the mourners themselves, the remains of the deceased come back in the midst of relatives and friends. Temporarily, the group of mourners is physically reunited with the remains of the deceased. While the funeral culminates in a separation from the corpse, the ash disposal represents a renewed confrontation with the remains of the deceased. Instead of increasing levels of separation, movements of incorporation prevail.

³¹ Except in Usselo, where they created an accessible storage room for urns.

Performing relations between the living and the dead

In his chapter on death rituals Van Gennep (1960) primarily emphasizes how the separation from the deceased to the realm of the dead is performed during funerals. Up to the cremation service, the process of cremation rituals in the Netherlands indeed consists of several phases of separation of the deceased from the living. But after the cremation itself, the ashes are introduced among the living again after a waiting period of thirty days. While the dead do not literally come back to the bereaved, ash disposals are not about performing a further separation from the deceased to the realm of the dead. Dutch ash disposal rituals emphasize integration of the deceased among the living rather than separation from them.

In that sense, rituals of ash disposal resemble welcoming rituals. When Van Gennep (1960) analyzes welcoming rituals, he describes how upon arrival newcomers are incorporated into the community by means of rites of exchange such as gift-giving and rites of physical union such as sharing food or touching the newcomer. Just as these newcomers are asked to wait outside of the community, the ashes are saved in the crematorium, after which they are re-incorporated among the bereaved. Moreover, when looking at ash disposal rituals from up close, rituals of physical union that Van Gennep (1960) describes as characteristic to welcoming rituals, and not to death rituals, are abundant.

Performing a re-incorporation among the living

Although separation from the living is very much a part of cremation rituals, my findings suggest that ash disposal rituals are directed towards integration by emphasizing physical re-union with the deceased rather than separation. Throughout ash disposal rituals different types of reunion are performed, namely the reunion of the living and the deceased, the reunion between different dead and the reunion between the living.

Firstly, in some cases, the connection between the dead and the living is expressed through emphasizing one particular social role of a deceased, which encloses a whole web of relations. During one scattering of an elderly man at a crematorium, the deceased's grandchildren were prominently present. Before the actual scattering took place, the deceased's children and the widow told the employee and me that their father and husband had been very sick, but that at all costs, he had wanted to go on a holiday with his wife and all his children and grandchildren one more time. During this holiday he had thoroughly enjoyed himself and died soon after. Then, the family explained the grandchildren what was going to happen that day. 'Remember that holiday when grandpa was still alive, but very sick?', a mother said to her son, 'Just like that time, we are all together again to scatter grandpa's ashes.' The boy nodded and clasped his drawing. At the scattering lane, one after another, the widow and the deceased's children scattered some of the ashes. Afterwards, the grandchildren laid down drawings and shells they had collected during the family trip. The emphasis on the deceased's role as grandfather tells something about the deceased, as well as about his pivotal role within the

family. The grandchildren took homemade presents for him as they did when he was still alive. Besides, the shells they brought symbolized the time when they were still together as a family. As in life, so in death grandpa brought everybody together that day. The relations with (grand)father were symbolically continued, emphasizing reunion rather than the final separation.

During ash disposals, the bereaved generally divided up tasks so every participant got the chance to perform his or her part (see pictures 45 and 46). In some cases, the bereaved carried the scattering urn together or one after another, passing the urn as they walked. As Paulien explained about the scattering of her partner Luud that she conducted with their young children; 'When walking to the place that we picked out on the scattering lane, we passed on the ash sprinkler amongst us so everybody would have the chance to carry him. We really did it all together.' By giving everybody a chance to participate, Paulien tried to stimulate the children to all perform their care for Luud.

In other cases, one person took flowers, another carried the urn, while still another scattered the ashes. Sometimes the division of labour was arranged beforehand, but often this division was negotiated on the spot. On one occasion a family came to scatter the ashes of their mother at the field where the ashes of their father had been previously scattered. The family of four sisters, a brother and their partners and children came well prepared. Beforehand they had visited the scattering lanes to make sure they would scatter the ashes at the same place where their mother's ashes had been dispersed years before. They had chosen a special date for the disposal, namely their parents' wedding anniversary. Everybody knew their role and announced that to the crematorium employee. One daughter carried the urn, another laid down five roses representing all children, another sister placed two candles, one for each parent. The eldest daughter ended the ritual by reciting a poem called 'Two Parents' that she had composed for the occasion. All children were represented in the ritual by dividing the roles among the siblings and by means of roses and candles and a poem for both parents. By creating these ritual gestures, words and objects, the relations of the group of mourners with their parents were performed.

Next to the relations of the mourners towards the deceased, the relations among the dead are part of ash disposal rituals. By scattering their father's ashes at the place where their mother's ashes were once scattered, by addressing their loving relationship in a poem and by scattering on the date of their wedding anniversary, the siblings also performed the relation between their parents. The reunion of a deceased person with other previously deceased family members or friends was a general theme during my fieldwork. From all e-mails sent to the website of the crematorium in Usselo between 2005 and 2009, the greatest number concerned questions about the location of former ash disposals. Authors of the notes aimed to locate the place of an earlier disposal in order to disperse the ashes of a recently



45. Woman tending an urn grave, Nijmegen.



46. A bereaved family scattering ashes, Usselo.



47. Visiting a scattering field, Usselo.



48. Having a picnic between the graves, London.

Performing relations between the living and the dead

deceased person on the same spot. One email excerpt that underlined the importance of relocating the dead read: 'We have had the ashes at home for several months and now we would like to scatter the ashes in Usselo, as other family members' ashes also lie there'. In the storage rooms of several crematoriums I encountered urns that had already been saved for years, in most cases awaiting their still living partner for a joint scattering.

The importance that mourners attribute to a reunion of deceased relatives is demonstrated by the story of Paula, a woman in her late sixties. Paula told me about what she called a terrible accident with the disposal of her father's ashes. 'Our mother had died nineteen years earlier and my father had always said that he wanted to be cremated and dispersed with her', Paula said. 'To be dispersed with her' meant that Paula and her siblings had to scatter his ashes under a tree at a scattering lane, where he and two of his children had scattered his wife's ashes. One day all children had gathered at the crematorium for the scattering of their father's ashes. Paula's sister, who had been present at the dispersal of their mother's ashes, had already searched for the right tree. Together the siblings scattered their father's ashes, laid down flowers and were silent for some time. When they walked back to their cars, chatting amongst each other, something happened. Paula continued:

My sister suddenly stopped in terror and said "Oh no, that tree over there is the real tree, we took the wrong place!" She was devastated. My siblings and I kept telling her that we did the best we could and that we had meant well. But she could not let go.

When recalling this moment, Paula shook her head. She continued: 'The next day, my sister went back to the information desk of the crematorium and explained the situation. She said that she had barely slept that night, because her parents were not together.' Paula looked at me and said: 'You cannot imagine what happened then. The people from the crematorium gave her a dustpan and brush! How awful is that? You cannot just sweep up your father like dirt! Rightly, my sister asked for something else. Eventually, they gave her a spoon and a little tube, you know like the ones they used to use for rolls of film? She went back to the tree, filled the tube and brought a little bit of ashes of my father to the other tree, where my mother was scattered. So now they are indeed together after all. Well, at least as much as possible I would say. Later, we placed a memorial plaque with both their names at that spot, where my mother and father are scattered.' As the bereaved perceive the ashes as closely identified with the person, the dead are considered symbolically reunited by placing the ashes together. Even though people state that the reunion is symbolical, from this accident follows that the ashes remain so closely connected to the person in the eyes of the bereaved that when a scattering goes wrong, mourners can lose sleep over it and go through great lengths to correct the mistake.

Performing relations between the living and the dead

A third set of relations that is performed in ash disposal rituals consists of the relations between the living. During my work at the crematorium, I was struck by two bereaved sisters, who scattered the ashes of their father. They held the ash sprinkler with their four hands and moved fully synchronized as if they were one being. Their husbands were watching them from the side. When all ashes were scattered, one of their partners took over the sprinkler and handed over a bouquet. Again they took hold of it together and laid it down in one movement. They literally scattered their father's ashes together performing their bond with each other as with their father.

Not only during disposal, but also afterwards, the place of disposal can serve to bring the living together (see pictures 47 and 48). Betsie and Harrie scattered their daughter's ashes, together with her boyfriend Bart in the peat bogs. Nine years after her death, Harrie, Betsie and Bart still return to 'her place' annually. This repeating ritual connects them not only with Marieke, but also with each other. Another family performed their bond with the deceased as well as with each other on a daily level, even if this is not always intentionally. Hennie and her family, who lost their eighteen-year-old son and brother, all carry an ash tattoo. During the interview Hennie explained how they had come to that idea:

It was an exciting day, because we are not really a "tattoo family", but despite my protests Stefan had always wanted a tattoo and now, in his honour, we would all place one. So even though it was scary, we knew why we did it and we all wanted it very badly. In the end, we were all cheered on by the people in the store who heard our story. It was a beautiful experience. We all carry Stefan with us in a tattoo with a personal symbol referring to him.

Hennie has a turtle with eyes reminding her of her son, Stefan's sister designed her own tribal and his brother has a Chinese sign for S on his back. Stefan's father has a tattoo with a B-clef, symbolizing their shared passion for music. Next to the tattoos, they each have their own jewel with some of Stefan's ashes. While the parents wear their ash pendants all the time, Stefan's brother and sister especially put them on with family gatherings. Hennie explained that, to them, the tattoos and the jewels give them the feeling that they make Stefan present. At the same time these jewels and tattoos, as well as the experience of getting them, unite them as a family sharing this loss. I have encountered many different practices with cremated remains throughout my fieldwork, but what united them all was the performance of the bonds between the mourners as well as with the deceased.

However, these bonds are not always experienced as positive as in the abovementioned example. One time, right before the scattering of an older man's ashes, to be carried out by his wife and son, another man came rushing into the disposal room. When my colleague asked the man who he was, he bluntly announced himself as Jan, the oldest son of the deceased. He said that he had not

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been invited but that he had found out about the scattering anyway. He literally demanded his place by taking a chair and declaring with a loud voice that he was, and always would, be part of this family, even though they were on non-speaking terms. His account met with silence. His mother and brother did not protest. Instead, they nodded in agreement when the employee asked if the man could stay. During the scattering the youngest son supported his mother, who had difficulty walking, while they scattered a part of the deceased's ashes together. After a while, the youngest son handed the scattering urn to his brother. The youngest son and his mother took a step back, literally distancing themselves from this part of the ritual. In silence, they looked at their son and brother, who scattered the rest of the ashes while crying loudly. Even though his family members had not invited him, the oldest son took part, demanding room for the performance of his relation with his father.

Ash disposal rituals reflect and continue the relations surrounding a deceased person. Throughout ash disposal rituals the relations between different dead persons, between the living and the dead as well as among the living are performed. Generally, emphasis is laid on continuity instead of discontinuity, favouring the positive aspects of these relations. By carrying an urn, touching the ashes or talking to the ashes, the bereaved continue their care for and relation with the deceased as they did during life.

Bringing home the dead

From stories of bereaved people follows that the end of the process of cremation rituals is not about putting the dead away in another realm. Rather, during ash disposal rituals emphasis lays on taking the dead back by performing continuing relations. If the dead are perceived as welcomed back in this world, then which afterlife concepts do mourners behold?

When asking mourners, most of whom are non-religiously affiliated, about the meaning of this continuity of relations with the dead, I learned that most of them did not believe in a Christian heaven. Yet a more broad notion of a good place for the dead, in which they are together with other relatives, was regularly mentioned. As was the case with Henny, who brought the ashes of her mother back to her mother's former home. At her mother's deathbed Henny asked her what she wanted her to do with her ashes. Her mother replied shortly, 'I want to go back to the Aalsmeerweg.' Henny's mother used to live along that road in Amsterdam. Henny explained, 'my mother lived in Rotterdam, but in her heart she was and would always stay an *Amsterdammer* (an inhabitant of Amsterdam).' However, other people lived in that house now. After her mother's death, Henny doubted about the best way of fulfilling her mother's wish. Finally, she decided to mix her mother's ashes with earth of her garden, so people would not recognize the substance as ashes. At the same time, Henny said that it gave her a good feeling to do this: 'I ran the ashes through my hands meanwhile thinking loving thoughts about her to let it go

through my heart too.' The next day, she brought the ash-earth mix to Amsterdam and scattered it in front of their old house under the tree that used to be part of her mother's view from the house. Seeing her old house afterwards, Henny decided to ring the bell:

In a spur I rang the front door of the house and explained that I used to live there, but not that I just scattered my mother's ashes. Welcome, said the man as he spread his arms. I was literally received with open arms! When I sat in my old bedroom upstairs I said to my mother, in my head: "Well mom, I did it, I brought you home to the place where you experienced the happiest period of your life."

Henny ended her story saying, 'in my heart and soul I connected the ashes and her house and that felt good.' Henny's story demonstrates that finding the right place for the deceased's remains strongly corresponds with finding rest for the dead spiritually. Bringing her mother's ashes home is not only about the literal place that once was her mother's home, but also about giving the remains of a deceased a positive place that was associated with a good period of her mother's life.

After this interview, I realized that the association of bringing the dead home recurred often throughout the stories of my informants. Sometimes, bringing home transpired literally, when the bereaved take ashes home and give them a place in a cupboard, in the garden or in a jewel. In other occasions bringing home was performed by scattering the ashes on a place where the deceased had felt at home. Rob for example brought his parents 'home' through scattering their ashes at their favourite campsite in France, where they went every year, 'the bare bottom beach' as his father called it jokingly. He explained that he brought his parents 'back to their home away from home, where they experienced many happy times.' Rob and his family spent and still spend many summers there. While they used to meet each other there, now they meet symbolically when Rob goes back to the place of scattering at the beach. 'I always find the place, I can find it with my eyes closed if I must. So often have I been there. To me the place has become some sort of pilgrimage place', Rob explained. Mourners thus creatively apply different strategies to achieve this feeling of bringing home the dead, either literally in the home or at a self-chosen place that felt like home or once was a home.

While opting for a scattering at funerary grounds seems to indicate a looser connection with the home, mourners often do relate to this notion in the sense that the dead are brought home by reuniting them with others who were already scattered there. In these cases, home is defined as being together with other dead with whom the deceased had close relations during their lives.

The way non-religiously affiliated people express ideas about bringing home the dead reminded me of the way Catholics pray for the dead so they would be safe and together in heaven. Since most of the mourners I interviewed do not or no longer

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believe in a Christian heaven, they strive to find a positive place for the dead in other ways. The idea of 'bringing home the dead' is about giving them a place that is experienced as safe and pleasant. The home is ideally viewed as a safe haven and a place of love and friendship. By stating that the dead are brought home, mourners express a continuing care for the dead.

Just as Gibson (2008: 162) experienced with regard to non-religiously affiliated mourners in Australia, I found that notions of the ongoing connection between the living and the dead can be very powerful. With the decline of religious affiliation the notion of a heaven is rejected by most of my informants, but a sense of continuing connectedness seems to have 'survived'. Besides, the notion of reunification is also important for Christians. Since the nineteenth century, heaven is increasingly perceived as a place of reunion with other familiar dead, instead of a place of reunion with God alone (McDannell and Lang 2001).

These notions of bringing home, reuniting the dead and the living are generally performed through practices with the cremated remains. The majority of the bereaved in the Netherlands that opt for cremation may not believe in a Christian heaven, but it seems that they do believe in some sort of an afterlife that is increasingly placed on earth and connected to the remains of the deceased. Even though the bereaved emphasize that they do not go to church and their beliefs are dynamic and ambivalent, the existence of a place where the dead are reunited is of crucial importance to most of them. Many bereaved made an effort to unite the remains of the deceased with those of living or dead relatives and to do everything that is in their power to realize this, even if they claim this is 'just in case!'

To conclude, I have found that instead of echoing the structure of a funeral, in which separation is prominent, ash disposal rituals most closely resemble 'welcoming rites'. They are welcoming rites, although they also express a separation, as the ashes are welcomed *back* among the living. After the waiting period at the crematorium, the deceased is welcomed in a new appearance as ashes. For this reason, I call ash disposal rituals *re-incorporation* rituals.

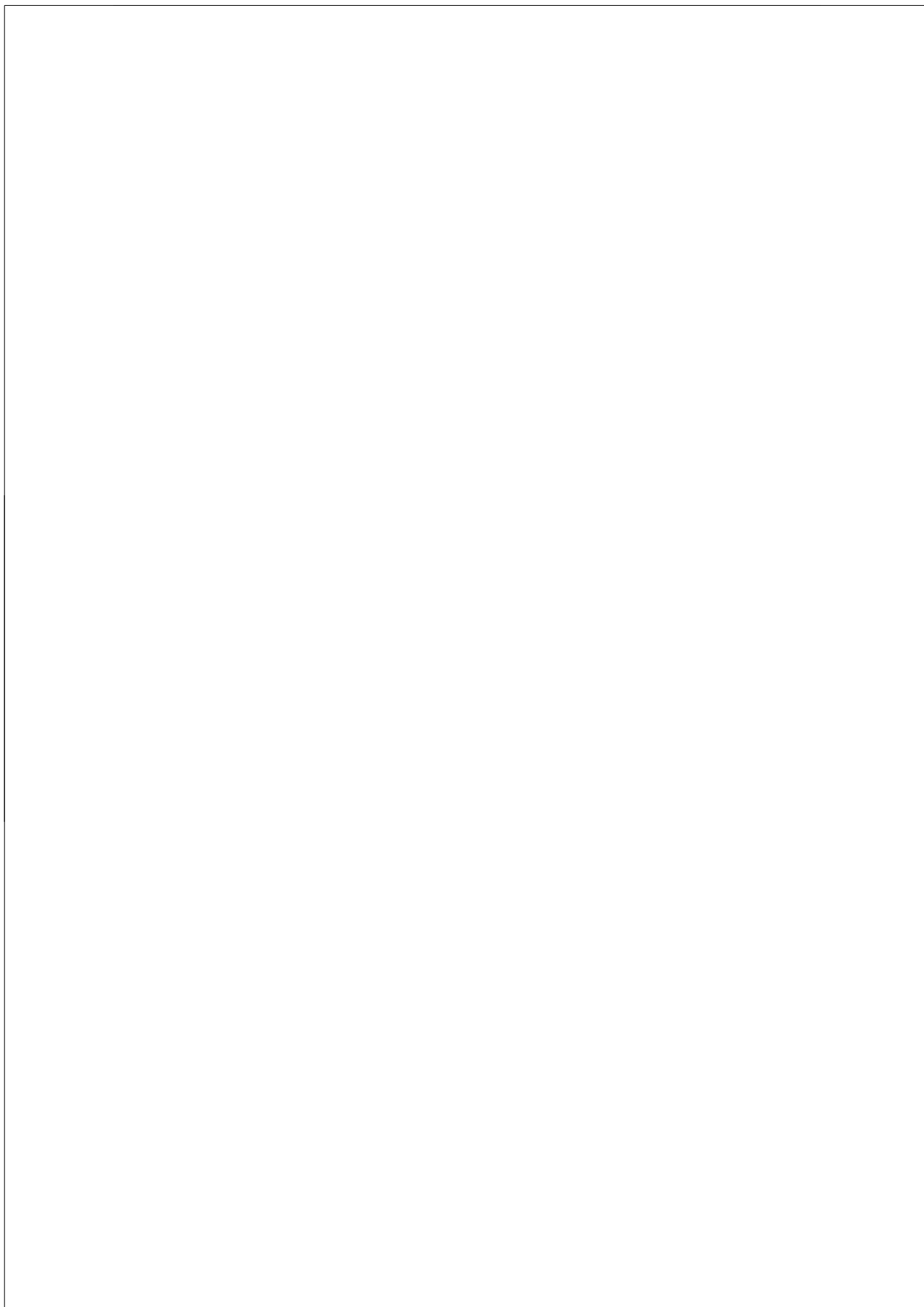
Considering the practices performed by bereaved at crematoriums as well as at home, I maintain that ash disposal rituals are a performance of continuing relations between the living and the dead. Ash disposal rituals re-connect the deceased with the other participants, the living as well as the dead family members and friends of the deceased. These relations are expressed verbally, but most importantly materially and bodily, concentrating on practices with the remains.

With regard to afterlife images, ash disposal practices indicate a strategy of mourners placing the final destination of the remains as well as the essence of the person on earth among the living, instead of a land of the dead or a heaven separated from this world. Here, the notion of home, instead of heaven or another institutionally religious afterlife concept, is used to express a safe and loving place for the dead. Home is understood in a relational sense, at home with familiar dead

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or living. Their statements about bringing the dead home refer to a process of re-incorporating the deceased in a safe place, among the living.

The notion of 'bringing home' can be literally expressed through taking the ashes home in an urn or ash object. But bringing home is also performed through bringing the ashes to a place that felt 'like home', or by bringing the dead back together with other living or dead, with whom he or she had a tight bond and felt at home with.



5

Carrying my father in bike panniers

Rob, a man in his fifties employed as a teacher at a primary school, is married to Godelieve with whom he has three sons and a daughter. Between 2006 and 2008 he lost both his parents. Since he is in the habit of photographically recording his whole life, he also photographed the events surrounding his parents' deaths. He pictured them during their last days, when they were lying in state, during their funerals and throughout the disposal of their ashes.

Instead of focussing on one aspect of cremation rituals, in this chapter I have created space to tell the story of one bereaved family from beginning to end. This series of photographs sketches the impact of the death of relatives on everyday life. The photographs picture the rituals performed and created within one family, who cared for their dying parents, organized their funerals, and discussed the disposal of their ashes. Though these rituals are performed within a family context, the pictures represent Rob's point of view. Most photographs are images seen and recorded through his eyes. When Rob himself appears, the pictures are taken with the self-timer function or by one of his sons.

Rob's account resembles the stories of other informants in many ways. Virtually all elements that I have analyzed throughout this book are touched upon: the personalization of funerals; the variety of worldviews occurring within one family; the creativity that is applied to create cremation rituals; a view of the ashes as a liminal category between dead and living matter; and the performance of enduring relations between the living and the dead. I invite readers first to look at the pictures Rob made and then read the story that I composed out of our interview sessions and e-mail conversations, in which these photographs were shown and discussed. After Rob's story, I will relate his account to Dutch mourners in general. Finally, I will reflect on the meaning of pictures in research on death rituals.

Carrying my father in bike panniers

Photographing life and death

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76.

Rob's story

Rob's mother Lucy was diagnosed with cancer. Describing the period of her illness Rob said, 'Her sickness was a real shock to all of us. Lucy was always so strong and vital. We never thought that Huib would be the one left behind.' During Lucy's sickbed Rob and his youngest sister, who lived closest to their parents' home, did most of the daily care. Rob told: 'It was very sad, but it was also a consolation. We were with her until the last moment when she fell into a coma and eventually died.'

6 October 2006, Lucy died. She was laid in state at home. Just as during her sickness, she was lying in her bed in the living room with her family gathered around her. Rob described the way he and his family organized the funeral as follows: 'We did everything we could ourselves. The day of the funeral we closed the coffin and put flowers on top it, and we carried her out of the house. You could say, we took care of her just as we did during life' (see picture 49). A painting of a cornflower made by Rob's wife is placed at the foot of the coffin.

On one of the pictures that Rob showed me I saw an image of Mary that was tucked into the coffin next to Lucy's face. When I asked him about the image, Rob said: 'Lucy was Catholic, but my father was not religious.' Over the interviews, Rob explained that he and his family had to find a way to conduct a ritual that addressed Lucy's Catholic background and practices in a way that suited her. He said: 'Well my mom was not religious in the sense that she visited the church on Sunday. She was not too strict, I mean she married a 'non-believer', which also might have influenced her practices. But she did regularly visit a Mary chapel to light a candle, so we wanted to give her personal beliefs a place.'

During Lucy's funeral, Huib spoke about Lucy and to Lucy (see picture 50). Lucy's children and grandchildren were also involved in organizing the funeral. Everybody had their own task. Some family members gave a speech, while others lighted the candles or carried the coffin. Rob collected family pictures and his brother made a compilation that was projected on a screen. A singer performed Ave Maria. A cross from the crematorium was positioned next to her coffin. On top of her coffin the family placed a Jewish chandelier that came from Huib's German grandmother. Lucy always lighted the candles during Christmas, meticulously making sure that the candles formed a pointed shape towards the middle. On Lucy's obituary card an image of Mary was printed next to a recent picture of her. Jewish, Christian and personal family traditions, that were all found in the family, had a place in this funeral. Afterwards, the inner circle of bereaved, Lucy's and Huib's siblings and her children with their families, went for dinner together to share some more time together and talk about the past events.

After some weeks Huib said to Rob: 'It took long enough now, I think we should go and get her. It is time that she came home.' Together with his father Rob went to the crematorium. Rob recounted that they were received kindly at the crematorium: 'We sat down at a table and talked about Lucy and about the cremation for a while.'

When we went back in the car my father held the urn. At home, he gave her a nice place until a monument would be created.'

Huib wanted to place Lucy's ashes in their garden. Lucy's younger sister, who is an artist, proposed to make an urn monument that could be put outside. She made a monument especially for Lucy's urn, with an added space for Huib, because he wanted to be reunited in the monument with her. Throughout the process of making it, Rob's aunt corresponded every detail of the monument by e-mailing her sketches and pictures of studies in clay asking them for their preferences and ideas. She called the monument *Casa Lucía*, meaning Lucy's home.

The Italian words refer to their Italian ancestry. Lucy's grandfather had come from Italy to the Netherlands in the beginning of the twentieth century with the first generation of foreign labourers to construct terazzo floors. Lucía means light and her last name Solaro derives from the word sun. Therefore Rob's aunt made a sun on the roof of Casa Lucia by means of orange round stone with engraved rays around it. On the monument is written: *Lucy Solaro in liefde verbonden met Huib* (Lucy Solaro connected with Huib through love).

By means of what Rob called 'a family ceremony' on the fifth of June 2007, which was Huib's birthday as well as their wedding anniversary, Lucy's ashes were placed in Casa Lucía. The monument was situated in a light, sunny place in the garden in front of his window as Huib wanted. The garden was refurbished and new flowers were planted in the flower boxes around the monument. The whole family, children and grandchildren, had gathered. According to Rob, it was an emotional event. Lucy's youngest daughter lighted the chandelier in Lucy's spirit, taking over her ceremonial task. Meanwhile Rob carried the urn and placed it in the monument together with a brother in law, one of his sons and a nephew (see picture 51 and 52). Carefully, the men placed the lid on the monument. In the picture, a piece of the chandelier can be seen behind Rob. Meanwhile Huib was sitting in a chair watching the event and crying heartfelt. Later, Rob stood by his father in an attempt to console him (see picture 53). Watching the picture Rob said: 'Huib could be so sad, so intensely sad. Sometimes I almost felt ashamed to make pictures, but I always do that, so then I did too.' After the ceremony, the whole family went for dinner in a nearby restaurant.

After Lucy's death Huib lived in grief. His physical conditions worsened quickly. According to Rob his father completely changed: 'He had always been a big and strong man, but now he often seemed defeated. There were days he couldn't get out of bed, but my wife, sister, and myself always tried to get him up and about again. During that period we took care of him intensively and visited him almost daily.' Rob explained that Huib and Lucy had been so close that Huib could not bear living without her: 'My mother had been together with Huib since the institution of a provincial orchestra on the 6th May of 1952. Huib played clarinet and Lucy was the executive secretary. They had a very close relationship that he seemed to continue after her death. When I visited him, he was often sitting at the table in front of the

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window looking over the garden and Casa Lucía. The table was covered with burning candles and pictures of Lucy and him on holiday, as well as a more recent picture that also featured on obituary card' (see picture 54). Besides pictures of Lucy and connecting Huib to her, other items are placed on the table: a little white alarm knob connecting him to the living, Huib's watch and pocket-handkerchiefs.

Huib and Lucy used to go to France for several months a year. Rob said, 'They were real travellers. Huib played the accordion and Lucy painted. Together, they had a wonderful life.' Their children often visited them in France, where they shared many childhood memories. In the summer of 2007 Huib visited his beloved France one last time with Rob, his wife and their youngest son (see picture 55). 'Huib revived, he thrived on the contact with our French friends. He even played the electronic piano for them, which he had not touched since Lucy died. That was a very special moment.'

In October 2007, the day came that Lucy had died one year ago. Rob and his youngest sister visited their father. Together, they had coffee and talked in the garden, sitting around the monument, commemorating Lucy's death.

30 September 2008, almost two years after Lucy's death, Huib died. Rob said: 'And, well, then the whole situation repeated itself, the funeral, the obituary cards, the picture compilation..' Rob and his son looked after Huib's body and Rob's sisters dressed him. He was laid in state at home just like Lucy, lying next to the same window, with the same paintings on the wall and vases of flowers and candles on the windowsill (see picture 56). Huib's hat was laid down next to him in the coffin and on his feet some husks were placed. In the picture Rob stood behind the coffin, looking over his dead father. When I asked what he thought of that moment Rob responded: 'What I thought about? I thanked him, I respected him'. Since Huib was a self-declared heathen, no picture of Mary was put in the coffin nor printed on the obituary.

Huib's funeral was conducted in the same crematorium where the service for Lucy was held. Again, the family gathered in the same hall and carried the coffin in themselves. The auditorium was adorned with flowers, paintings from Rob's wife, framed pictures of Huib and a new picture compilation made by Rob and his elder brother was projected. The chandelier was put on a small table next to the coffin, accompanying Huib's coffin as it had with Lucy. On the coffin, the family placed a plate with a patch of grass from Huib's garden as he loved to spend time in his garden. Respecting their father's beliefs, the golden cross from the crematorium was put aside. Among other speakers, Rob spoke for his father (see picture 57). Behind Rob stands a picture of the young Huib with his clarinet in his hands. Nowadays, the chandelier and the picture on the music stand reside in Rob's home. Rob explained that the music stand reminds him of his childhood. 'I must have heard the sound it makes when it is folded a thousand of times', Rob said with a smile. After the funeral, the family gathered for dinner in a restaurant again. Spontaneously, the manager, who knew them from former family dinners, had made little In Memoriam

posters with a picture of Huib announcing the event on the front door of the restaurant and at their table.

Some weeks later, Rob took a day off from work and took the bike to the crematorium to collect his father's ashes. Rob talked to 'the lady from the crematorium' for a while, before he received the urn in a white carrier box. He made some pictures at the crematorium and then took off with his bike. Looking at the picture (see picture 58), Rob said: 'This is when I went to pick up Huib at the crematorium. You see my bike with the urn? He is in there. I was carrying my father in the bike panniers.' Rob smiled and said: 'It gave me a special feeling. I biked through a nature area, put the bike on the side of the road, sat down on a bench and made another picture (see picture on front cover).'

Sitting on the bench, Rob had an idea, he said: 'I felt that I was actually quite hungry and decided to take my father to a restaurant where we used to go sometimes. I just placed the box with the urn on the table and ordered a glass of wine and a plate of food (see picture 59). You must understand that I had a laugh. There I sat between all kinds of business people with their laptops. Do you see them in the background of the picture? There I was sitting at a table with Huib.'

Holding one of his photo albums, Rob explained: 'At some point I even took Huib outside of the box. Looking at the urn and thinking about that day I spontaneously started to write, which is an old hobby of mine, but I had not done that for a long time. I guess it was just such a special moment, to eat together with my dad, that the story suddenly popped up. Here, in the picture you see the papers from the crematorium, and my story about the events of that day lying on the table (see picture 60).'

When Rob arrived at his parental house, he put the bike in the garden (see picture 61). About the picture where the urn of his father rests on Casa Lucía (see picture 62), Rob told: 'The first thing I did was to bring Huib together with Lucy for a while. She was already in there of course. I felt that I had to put them together.' He continued, 'That day was just. How can I explain that? I just permitted myself to openly yearn for them, just to feel what I felt. After a while, I put him in the house on the antique cupboard until me and my sister would come back to place the urn in Casa Lucía.'

The next Friday, Rob and his younger sister agreed to meet at their parental home. That day they would reunite their parents in Casa Lucía as Huib had wanted. However, when they opened the monument they found out that water had seeped into it. Together they dried the monument and Lucy's urn. Then, they put both urns on the living room table. In one of our last interview sessions, Rob explained what they were about to do: 'Huib was originally an atheist, but in the period after Lucy's death, he had many spiritual experiences. He became convinced that he was going to Luusje, as he called her lovingly.' Before he died, Huib had asked Rob and his sister if they mix some of their ashes before putting the urns in Casa Lucía.'

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So the siblings had a mission. They opened the urns and with a silver tablespoon they each scooped up some ashes and put some of Huib's ashes in Lucy's urn and some of hers into Huib's urn (see picture 63). Meanwhile Rob had placed the camera on the cupboard to make a picture with the self-timer. When looking at the pictures, he added: 'You see the candles on the table and a picture of my father behind me? I am not sure if we put that there for the moment or if we just moved it a bit closer. But I do know that we laughed. There we were opening the urns. I guess it gave us a positive, feeling of excitement and secrecy as if we were young again.' After closing the urns, Rob and his sister went outside to put the urns in the monument. When trying, they realized that the two did not fit in the monument together. The niche was a bit too small for both urns. Rob's sister, a practical woman according to him, found a rubber camping hammer and carefully dented both urns a bit so they fitted in. Together they closed the monument. Rob ended his story about the picture of that day saying, 'So now they were together in Casa Lucía. It felt good to do that together. We have always taken care of them during life and so we did that day.'

Meanwhile, the parental house was no longer inhabited. But neither was it desolate. All the stuff of their parents was still in the house as if they had never left. And, Casa Lucía, the little house in the garden was inhabited. A discussion arose among the siblings about the house, whether to rent or to sell it. This question was immediately connected to another question, namely the destination of the little house, Casa Lucía.

Throughout this period, every now and then Rob visited the house of his parents. He left some flowers or just stopped by to check on the house 'and on them of course', as Rob said. Huib had discussed with his youngest daughter that Casa Lucía would be placed in her garden, but she started to doubt if that was the right decision. Insecurity over the right destination of their parents' ashes arose among the siblings. Rob told, 'I thought about a cemetery in a small village nearby when I passed this on my bike. It is situated in a beautiful place in between the grasslands and showered with sun. But in the end, when I visited the place with my sister we decided that it was all too 'holy'. There were all nuns in a row buried there. That did not fit our parents, least of all my father.' In the end, it was decided that the monument would go back to their aunt and that the urns would pass among the siblings until they would agree on a place of disposal, most probably a joint scattering by all their children and grandchildren.

When Casa Lucía was given back, the urns of Huib and Lucy temporarily moved into their 'previous' house. Then, the house was sold. When the agreement was signed and all their belongings were moved, Rob held the urns before taking them out of the house to his own house (see picture 64). Putting this moment into words Rob said: 'I felt like, come with me, this is no longer your house. In that period, the urns travelled from home to home. Rob described that period as follows: 'Once I saw them at my sister's house, she had put them in the living room in a woven basket with flowers and ribbons. But another time, they were not placed so

prominently anymore, maybe she had moved them to a more private place, I don't know.' The discussion about the disposal of their parents' ashes endured. At one point in 2009 the siblings had agreed to scatter them in the village where they lived, at a place where Huib and his youngest daughter often went for a walk. The date was set, but shortly before it was cancelled.

Then it was Rob's turn to keep his parents' ashes at home. He received the urns from his sister in a bag. She had carefully wrapped the urns together with blue cloth and taped the obituary cards of Huib and Lucy on the lids. She also tucked a little statuette of two mice in the bag. One day, when Rob was home alone, he got curious and opened the lid of his father's urn to see the ashes. Upon opening the urn, he discovered that the ashes had become hard like cement because they had absorbed rain in the monument (see picture 65). Rob decided to take the ashes out and dry them in the sun in his garden. 'In the picture you see the ashes in the copper dish in my garden. I sat at the table, lit a candle and then softly and very carefully turned the ashes so they would dry in the sun' (see picture 66). Next to the dish on the picture, the empty urn is resting on the ground with the obituary card that Rob's sister taped on it. Rob explained: 'It was a very special moment. At one point, while stirring his ashes, I felt that I was close to him. It felt like we experienced this together. I was deeply in conversation with my old man. We have always done so many things together. We discussed everything that came up in our lives. I learned so much from him, from both of them, the travelling and the valuing of being together with your family. I would say that it was a spiritual experience. I was in communication with him and received, how shall I call it, three messages from him. I must say that this really suits the character of my father. He always had these funny, secret little plans. I immediately started to make preparations to fulfil his messages.'

After drying the ashes, Rob filled the urn with his father's ashes again. He put both urns on the garden table with the obituary cards in front of the urns (see picture 67). Though he didn't know what the statue of the mice meant, he also put that on the table, because it might be meaningful to his sister. Preparing to fulfil his father's wishes, Rob collected some small jars from the kitchen. Carefully, he filled the jars, some with Huib's ashes and some with Lucy's ashes. He tied the obituary cards of his parents to the jars, so he could distinguish them. Then, Rob closed the urns again and wrapped them in the blue cloth and put them on a table inside his house (see picture 68). In an e-mail he wrote about this picture, 'I tied the urns back together again and attached the mice, and, as always, I put the urns in a ceremonious sphere with flowers and candles.'

Later in an interview, Rob elaborated on the meaning of that moment of communication with his father: 'Even though that moment of drying Huib's ashes was very emotional, when I think of them now I am not sad that they are not here anymore. I know that they are together and in a good place.' After Rob's best friend died in an accident he came to think of the meaning of life more and more and

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eventually he was baptized at the age of twenty-five. When I asked him, where he thought his parents resided right now, he said: 'Sometimes I think I know, but at other moments I don't. However, I do always feel protected by my mother, as a guardian angel. She makes sure that eventually all will turn out well. Whatever happens, there are rough times in every family, in every house, but with her strength I feel it will be okay.'

Message one, summer 2009: France, *het blote billen strand* (the bare bottom beach) as Huib called it. Before leaving for France with his wife and son that summer, Rob took two of the small jars he filled with ashes and stored them between other stuff packed for the holiday. During the holiday, Rob told his family and the friends with whom they stayed there that he wanted to scatter some of his parents' ashes. He invited them to accompany him. Remembering the events while thumbing through a photo album, he said: 'I hadn't really planned it out. At some point I just spontaneously started to gather stuff. I was roaming around the campsite and the beach and collected some fisherman's rope, some nice branches, some pinecones and some long pine needles. I guess I collected stuff that I liked aesthetically, but also stuff that felt good. Then, I chose a place at the beach. A place that was recognizable and of course a very sunny place, where the sun rises and then disappears in the sea every day. It is a place that I can find back with my eyes closed if I must. I have been there so many times.' That evening, Rob and his family and friends went to the beach. Carefully Rob placed the pieces of rope, the pinecones, the branches and the needles on the beach (see picture 69). About the picture Rob said, 'Here I was taking all my stuff out of my bag and making a little monument for my parents.' Eventually, he added some candles he brought from the campsite, a small glowstick that he got from one of his pupils before summer, the obituary cards of his parents and, at the end, the jars with some of their ashes (see picture 70). When we went through the pictures on his computer again Rob added another detail to his story: 'I had an idea about these jars, you see, I put my father in the phallic-shaped herb jar and my mother in the round jar.'

Surrounded by his wife, one of his sons and his friends, Rob scattered some of his parents' ashes (see picture 71). Rob described: 'Even though it were only ten tablespoons, it feels as if I have scattered them there. I have a secret bond with my parents through fulfilling my fathers' messages. It felt as if I made sure that they would arrive where they wanted to be.' His son as well as the son of the befriended family made pictures of the scattering. About the event Rob said: 'I hardly cried throughout all those years, except for that moment. After we had done that, I was very emotional.' Rob left everything but the obituary cards on the beach (see picture 72). About the place Rob said: 'For me it is like some sort of pilgrimage place now. Well actually it already was, as it has always been a family place and we have been through quite a lot on that beach.' Upon seeing the picture of his son standing alone by the scattering, he said 'Here my son takes leave of his grandparents. Isn't that beautiful? (see picture 73)'. In the end a portrait is taken with all participants, except

for the son of Rob's friends who made the picture, reuniting the living and the dead in one frame (see picture 74).

Summarizing his feelings about the scattering Rob said, 'I am happy that I did the ash disposal my own way. It felt good doing that. I have done what my father wanted. For myself, I have said goodbye there. I had to do something and now it is done. Still nothing is arranged for the scattering with all siblings together, but I am in peace with that right now.'

Message two, December 2009: Egypt. Rob went on a holiday with the whole family, his wife, his three sons, his daughter and his daughter-in-law. During an interview Rob described how he went about the scattering this time: 'Nobody knew, but I had taken the other two jars with ashes in my backpack. I had been walking around with the idea to find a beautiful place to scatter their ashes. The pyramids are of course a beautiful and almost holy place, with the history of the pharaohs. It was an ideal moment, because we were all together. So when I had found a place, I explained that I had taken some of Huib and Lucy's ashes to commemorate them there all together.' In France, during the first scattering only one of his sons could be there, and now they were all together. 'Besides', Rob said, 'this was a special holiday, because it was made possible with the money we inherited from the sale of my parents' house. Another reason was that my parents were real travellers and a more sunny place, which was the wish of my father, can hardly be found', Rob added with a smile. He continued: 'I just had to find a place that was safe, so people wouldn't walk over the ashes and I guess it is forbidden, so we had to do it as discretely as possible'. Kneeling in the sand Rob pulled two small jars out of his backpack with his parents' name on them and the two obituary cards (see picture 75, 76). Rob joked: 'And well, a little bit more or less dust will hardly be noticed there.'

Message three, was not revealed to me by Rob, as he has not yet fulfilled it. The joint scattering was again postponed. To be continued...

Overarching themes

The pictures and Rob's detailed story demonstrate how a whole cycle of rituals is created within one family. The rituals vary from smaller to larger ones, from publicly accessible to private ones and from more orchestrated to rather intuitively organized ones. The creativity that Rob and his family applied to create the funeral rituals as well as the ash disposal rituals themselves correspond with the stories of many other informants. As ash disposal rituals are an emergent tradition, bereaved are forced to draw upon their own imaginations, worldviews and creativity. Rob explained that, while acting out his father's wishes, a sense of following his intuition was just as important as (religious) beliefs.

The story shows that the wishes of the deceased and the different bereaved involved do not always coincide. Rob and his family searched for cremation rituals that suited the wishes of his parents, as well as their own and their family members' wishes. While the deceased, Huib, and some bereaved viewed Casa Lucía as the

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final home for the ashes, others doubted this disposition. Within the family people beheld different ideal images of the best way and place of ash disposal. Eventually other options were sought after, in the hopes of finding a way of disposal that everyone could agree on. However, Rob and his siblings have not yet agreed on a place and date of scattering. In this case Rob decided to act on his own accord and handled part of the ash disposal in his own way.

Throughout this research I learned that worldviews differ among families as well as among spouses, as Huib and Lucy's example shows. Moreover, beliefs can also differ within one person. Beliefs can change throughout someone's life, as was the case with Huib who 'converted' from an atheist to a man with spiritual experiences of the presence of his wife, believing in their reunion after death. The other way around, his son Rob started his life as an atheist growing up with Marian Catholic practices of his mother and the atheist beliefs of his father, but converted to Catholicism at the age of twenty-five, in contrast to his siblings. These entangled life histories reveal how complex and ambiguous beliefs are in a daily context. The definition of someone's worldview is hard to pinpoint. While Rob is a convinced Catholic, from a religious studies scholars' perspective his ideas about his parents' death rituals could have just as well been held by a non-religiously affiliated person.

Rob's experiences show how strong the ashes stay connected to the deceased person. In many instances throughout the story Rob interchangeably refers to the urn of Huib or Lucy with their names, for example when stating that he took his father in his bike panniers. Rob and his siblings handle the urns with the same care they took for their parents.

Just as the other informants living in a non-religiously affiliated context and acting out their beliefs in their own, creative ways, what seemed central to Huib as well as Rob was reunion. Throughout the ash disposal the fact that Huib and Lucy would remain together as they were in life was central. The family performed this reunion by placing Lucy's urn in Casa Lucía in front of Huib's window, so he could watch her throughout the day. Next to that, Huib's place in Casa Lucía was already secured by a double urn niche. Even when the monument was given back to the maker and the urns had to move from Casa Lucía, Rob's sister literally tied the urns together with blue cloth, ensuring the reunion of the two deceased. The reunion with the deceased parents and their offspring is performed by the siblings taking turns to care for the remains.

On the role of photography

Taking pictures is a way of rescuing moments from oblivion. In many ways photographing can be viewed as a strategy to counter the irrevocable fading of memories (Gibson 2008: 93; Batchen 2006). One of the first things Rob said to me before he showed his pictures was: 'I am a photographer, I record everything.' Despite of the digital era he still prints all his pictures and glues them in albums, of

which he now possesses between two and three hundred exemplars. Later he elaborated on the role of photographing in his life: 'It is in my nature to want to have pictures of stuff that goes on in my life. When I can't do it myself, I ask others to make pictures. For example with the scatterings, I explicitly asked my sons to make pictures. I did so, because I wanted to have pictures, but also wanted to perform the scattering myself. Afterwards, I went back to make some pictures and a film of the exact place of the scattering myself, so I would not forget.'

Pictures enclose a complex dialectic process of collecting memories as well as the risk of reducing them to the pictured image. Since we cannot eternally hold on to memories. Pictures can function to help us remember. At the same time, the capturing of a certain moment in a picture frame can reduce memories to that one image (Barthes 1981). Regardless of their content, photos are corpses themselves, they may capture the living, but what is captured is also dead (Grimes and Venbrux 2010). The people in the picture do not move, you cannot turn them to have a peek behind them. One moment full of action is reduced to one image. I was able to observe parts of this process of remembering and forgetting as Rob and I discussed, watched, sorted out, and discussed his pictures over and over. While watching the pictures I noticed that he constantly revised his story. Sometimes I noticed that Rob saw things other in the picture than I did. He added details, stories and people that he reminded, but that or who had fell out of the picture frame. In other cases, the images triggered memories that he had forgotten.

But, pictures function as more than partial reflections of events. Photographs of death rituals remain part of an active process of ritualizing. Pictures are often part of commemoration rituals by bereaved, as they represent the deceased. During our first interview, I saw that Rob had lighted a candle next to a picture of his father on the living room table. He explained: 'I do not always light a candle, but I do on certain moments, when I think more about him or when I talk about him more consciously, because in fact I think about them every day.' In many homes I visited, pictures of the dead were on display. Sometimes these pictures were spread throughout the house, other created a special corner, cupboard or wall for the pictures of the dead.

Finally, taking a picture of a death ritual is not necessarily the end of the process of ritualizing. As Rob explained: 'It is all about saying goodbye. It is a long process with many little steps and some bigger steps. Even looking through the pictures, checking all my drives to collect the pictures for your book, that is all part of my parent's death rituals.' Looking over pictures, organizing them in digital albums or gluing them in an 'old-fashioned' paper album page after page, all these activities became part of a process of ritualizing for Rob. Moreover, by showing the pictures to family members or to me, as an anthropologist, and by telling about the pictures, others become part of this process of ritualizing. As this book, and with that the readers of this chapter, have now become part of the series of death rituals for Rob's parents.

6

Secondary burial and the meaning of post-funerary rituals³²

Contrary to what is often thought (Bendann 1930; Hertz 1960: 28; Mims 1998; Schroeder 2001), rites of reburial still exist in north-west Europe. While secondary burial is not standard practice in the Netherlands, burial is not necessarily accomplished in a single act. The temporary character of Dutch graves expiring after ten years confronts the relatives of an interred person with a new situation for which there is no established ritual. The grave rights can be prolonged or relinquished, but increasingly the remains are relocated. With regard to the character of the ritual, individual reburial is comparable to that of ash disposal. Therefore, throughout this chapter I will analyze these secondary burial rituals with secondary cremation rituals.

Except for the case of rural Greece (Danforth 1982; Seremetakis 1991), the literature dealing with secondary burial in Europe focuses on the rich and famous who are thought to deserve a more appropriate place of burial (de Cock 2006); the repatriation of fallen soldiers; disappeared civilians; ancestral remains (Fforde, et al. 2002; Verdery 1999; 2004); and collective reburial due to the clearing or relocation of a graveyard (de Cock 2006; Mims 1998). Since average mortals are barely mentioned in literature, one gets the impression that secondary burial is not a popular and widespread practice.

From my fieldwork, however, it was obvious that reburial initiated by private citizens is far more common than most people realize (Heessels 2011; Heessels and Suzuki 2009; Heessels and Venbrux 2009). Moreover, unlike the placing of skulls and bones in collective ossuaries, a practice in the Netherlands until the beginnings of the twentieth century, present-day secondary burials are designed to maintain the individual identity of the deceased.³³

Reburials, I found, do not conform to a standardized practice. They vary considerably, leaving room for the survivors to create their own rituals. As such, just as ash disposal rituals, secondary burial rituals in the Netherlands are acts of ritualizing, a term borrowed from Grimes (1982: 60-61). When the next of kin opt for exhumation, they often find themselves unable to turn to others for advice. The

³² Earlier versions of parts this chapter were published in:

Heessels, Meike., and Hikaru. Suzuki (2009). Second burial. In Clifton D. Bryant and Dennis L. Peck (eds.). *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*. Los Angeles: Sage. Pp. 855-858.

Heessels, Meike., and Eric. Venbrux (2009). Secondary burial in the Netherlands: Rights, rites and motivations. *Mortality* 14(2):119-132.

³³ O'Rourke (2007) shows that also in the case of collective reburial in Greece the individual identity of the deceased remains important.

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bereaved are forced to improvise, drawing on their knowledge of primary burial rites and on their own imaginations and beliefs. An analysis of current reburial practices serves to further contextualize beliefs concerning human remains in the Netherlands. In this chapter I will first shortly explain burial practices in the Netherlands. Then I will proceed by explaining new practices of collectively as well as individually marking reburials. Finally, I will detect beliefs about the dead as performed in individual reburials.

Transitory graves

In his analysis of secondary burial among the Dayak in Borneo, the French sociologist of religion Robert Hertz (1960) connected the decomposition of the corpse, the fate of the soul and the period of mourning. Hertz's emphasis on disposal as a process of transformation and transition is still valuable today (Davies 2000; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Suzuki 2000; Venbrux 2007b). He wondered 'why the body cannot be taken to its final resting place at once?' He found that the transition from the land of the living to the land of the dead can take place only after an intermediary period (Hertz 1960: 29). Emphasizing the processual aspects of disposal, Hertz claimed that mortuary rites are transitional rather than terminal.³⁴

While the importance of post-funeral ritualizing after cremation is broadly recognized, this is not the case for post burial practices. Sociologist Douglas Davies argues that it is difficult to relate Hertz's scheme to burial practices in contemporary Western societies (Davies 2000: 102). The tendency we find in Davies (1997; 2000) to disregard Hertz's scheme when it comes to burial practices in Europe may be explained by his research focus on the United Kingdom, where people perceive the dead as being buried in perpetuity. The very idea of disturbing or removing their remains is considered problematic.³⁵ However, in the Netherlands burial is not necessarily a final act.³⁶

Despite the concept of eternal rest propagated by the Christian church, actual graves have rarely conformed to that notion in the Netherlands. When the burial of the dead inside churches was prohibited in 1827, cemeteries had to be constructed outside the city walls. This prohibition resulted in the relocation and clearing of many graves. To this day, in the Netherlands, perpetual burial rights are rarely granted. In many cases the possibility does not even exist and, where it does, it would be unaffordable for most people. In contrast to the United Kingdom, survivors rarely retain permanent ownership of a grave (Enklaar 1995; Van Dijk and Mennen 2002).

³⁴ Hertz (1960) was not alone with this insight. His contemporary Van Gennep (1960: 146) noted that the intermediary period is generally the most important in funeral rites and may achieve a certain autonomy.

³⁵ Though the legislative reality often applies for a limited – but long – period.

³⁶ I refer here to a famous quote of Hertz (1960: 42), who states that cremation is usually neither a final act, nor sufficient in itself. It calls for a later and complementary rite.

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Two options exist in the Netherlands: people can be buried in a communal or a rented grave. A communal grave is shared with one to two other, unknown deceased. After a minimum of ten years these graves can be cleared without consent of the bereaved. Most graves in the Netherlands, however, are rented graves to which exclusive rights are temporarily held by the bereaved (Van Dijk and Mennen 2002). In such cases, burial rights have to be paid for a period of at least twenty years. After that, these rights can be extended by the bereaved in ten-year increments. If the rights are relinquished, the tombstone can be removed and the grave cleared (see pictures 77 and 78).

When a grave is cleared, the exhumed remains are typically stored in a communal grave, called a *knekelput* (bone pit) along with the human remains from other emptied graves. Every graveyard has its own communal graves in which the remains from cleared graves are collected. By law these remains have to be reburied rather than cremated, because the initial mode of disposal may not be altered except when authorized by the rightful claimant of the grave. When a rented grave is full, but relatives would like to bury a newly deceased person at that site, the grave can be 'shaken'. In that case, the remains are exhumed and reburied at the bottom to make room for another coffin.

At least ten years of undisturbed occupation of a grave are ensured by law, before a burial site can be cleared, shaken or replaced. This period is prescribed because, according to legislation, it allows sufficient time for complete decomposition (Van Dijk and Mennen 2002: 19). This way an intermediary period, the period of time that has to elapse before secondary disposal can be undertaken, is secured by national law. Secondary actions such as the extension of rights, a formal request for exhumation or the clearing of a grave are postponed until the bones are considered dry. In exceptional cases, permission can be asked to exhume the remains earlier. Dutch graveyards, then, are really decomposition sites rather than eternal resting-places.

In contrast to the way that second burial among the Dayak is explained, namely as a cultural phenomenon, the re-use of graves in the Netherlands is often considered in practical and economical terms. It is assumed that the practice is not determined by cultural or religious perceptions, but results from a shortage of land. Hertz, on the other hand, has been criticized for failing to consider the economic dimensions of Dayak secondary burials (Miles 1965). Both images of secondary burial as either highly ritualized or purely practical and economical are incomplete and reveal more about the representation of these practices than about the practices themselves. I argue that reburial in the Netherlands also reveals certain cultural values regarding the dead and their remains.

A closer look at burial sites in the Netherlands brings their transitional as well as their ritualized character to the fore. The absence of permanent burial rights and the assumption that graves will be cleared, illustrate the transitory character of burial. Although burial is generally spoken of as a single and final act, exhumation



77. Announcing expired grave rights, Nijmegen.



78. Destroyed gravestones, Best.

and subsequent reburial in a single or communal grave usually occur.

From bone pits to modern ossuaries

From the Middle Ages until the beginning of the twentieth century, exhumed bones from emptied graves were stored in *knekelhuizen* (bone houses), often located next to churches (Ariès 1981: 53-54; Kok 2005: 78). Since, many non-clerical graveyards have been realized and most ossuaries have been abolished. Until two decades a couple of decades ago, graves were cleared anonymously and the exhumed remains were reburied without public attention. Still, most communal graves are inaccessible to visitors. In most cases they are located at the margins of graveyards or on secluded terrain accessible only to graveyard personnel. But, not long ago, people began to object to the perceived indignity of this procedure.

From 2002 up to the time of writing, every so often the 'untidy and imprudent' clearing of graves causes uproar in the media and in Dutch politics. In 2002 a man named Hans Holdorp was confronted, near his wife's tomb, with an open communal grave containing bones, skulls, and the remains of coffins and clothing. He was so shocked by the sight of what he called 'a messy communal dump' that he founded the *Comité voor Waakzaamheid* (Vigilance Committee). This committee aims to draw attention to 'the presumptuous way in which human remains are dumped in communal graves in (some) Dutch graveyards.' In 2006, the committee succeeded in ensuring that, in the municipality where the founder resides, bones are exhumed carefully and reburied individually. This action drew renewed attention to the clearing of graves in other localities.

In response to Holdorp's complaint and earlier protests of other citizens, publicly accessible collective monuments have been raised for reburied human remains in several graveyards across the Netherlands.³⁷ The monuments are reminiscent of the earlier bone houses, where mourners could commemorate the collective of ancestors and their own mortality, as exemplified by the text written on most ossuaries: '*memento mori*'. In the case of present-day monuments, however, mourners consider it important to engrave the individual names of the deceased so that their forebears will not be lost in the collective. Sometimes even the actual tombstones are included in the monument.

The following story of the construction of a monument in Oost Souburg, a town in the South-west Netherlands, illustrates the kind of circumstances in which monuments for the reburied dead are erected. In 2007 part of the municipal graveyard was cleared to make room for new burial sites.³⁸ The clearing of the graves was announced at graveyard posts, giving the bereaved at least a year to react. The municipality decided that if relatives or interested parties did not protest a

³⁷ An Internet search in 2009 resulted in the documentation of at least twenty initiatives for monuments to mark collective graves in Dutch graveyards. The first monument I am aware of was erected in 1995 at the Eikenhof graveyard in Heemskerk.

³⁸ Several articles were published on this topic in the *Provinciale Zeeuwse Courant* on 31 August 2007, 9 June 2007 and 1 September 2007.

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grave could be removed. During this year, the municipality received little reaction, but when the actual removal began, many protests arose.

Citizens claimed that they were not aware of the proposed removal of the graves. Appalled by the sight of the emptied graves, some of the bereaved organized a silent march.³⁹ The protests resulted in the resignation of the alderman held responsible for the reorganization of the graveyard. The municipality officially apologized and eventually a monument was raised commemorating the reburied dead. A ceremony of remembrance was organized at the graveyard. A crowd of hundred and fifty bereaved people and other locals gathered to attend the unveiling of the memorial bearing the names of the 750 persons who had been exhumed. Several of the visitors left flowers, and a poem was read in honour of the deceased. Afterwards, coffee and tea were served in a local café.

Because of such citizens' initiatives and the media attention they attract, government officials and graveyard administrators are becoming aware of the enduring importance of human remains for Dutch mourners. Increasingly, the location of collective reburial sites is being indicated on graveyards. These monuments, not unlike the ossuaries of the past, provide the bereaved with a spot to visit and leave flowers or other offerings. In the current monuments, however, the bereaved do not commemorate the dead in general, but their own specific dead.

In line with an emphasis on the individual deceased rather than a collective group of ancestors, a wider trend of commemoration can be detected. Monuments have been erected of late for other deceased persons, such as stillborn children (Peelen 2009; 2011), body donors (Bolt 2008), road traffic victims (Klaassens, et al. 2009) and victims of so-called 'senseless violence' (Stengs 2003). Moreover, while up until the 1980s ashes were disposed of anonymously, nowadays ash disposal is promoted as a ceremonious moment. Next to the ritualizing of collective graves, an increasing number of mourners opts for individual reburial of a deceased relative.

Individual reburial

In the Netherlands, exhumations and reburials are conducted by professional gravediggers. Citizens are not allowed to relocate the graves of relatives on their own initiative. The municipality has to grant permission for exhumations. Once permission has been given – usually after the remains have been in the grave for a decade at least – gravediggers can reorganize the grave. On the day of exhumation, the gravestone will be lifted and the grave opened. First the grave is opened up with a mechanical shovel but once the coffin has been found, finer machinery is introduced filtering the soil to find all the remains. The remains are then placed in a small coffin or box. Finally, this coffin is transported to the new location. Survivors who order an exhumation usually opt for reburial of the remains, but it is also

³⁹ Since the nineties, a ritual has evolved in the Netherlands called *de stille tocht* (the silent march). In most cases, such a march is organized in protest against 'senseless' violence. For further information on silent marches in the Netherlands, see Margry (2006).

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possible to have them cremated. In most cases, the exhumation and reburial or cremation are carried out within a single day.

In line with the ideal image of professionals as facilitators, reburial companies have adjusted their strategies. Clients are informed of the exhumation and reburial procedures by means of leaflets and websites. While exhumations used to be screened off from the sight of bystanders, and were thus viewed only by gravediggers, reburial companies increasingly invite mourners to witness a reburial and to participate in the event.

Mourners can participate in a number of ways. Some mourners construct a homemade coffin for the remains of a dead relative. Others transport the coffin to the new cemetery or crematorium in their own car. Though less common, some families even insist on taking part in the actual digging. Joost and his brothers participated as much as they could (see pictures 79 to 82).

You could say that we only hired the gravediggers in order to borrow their tools. We dug. We sifted. We did everything we could ourselves. I don't understand it when people do not carry the coffin into the church or auditorium – can't you assist the deceased with these last steps after all he or she has done for you? This felt the same. All three of us agreed to handle the remains ourselves, because it is your own blood.

Joost explains that is very happy with the way he and his brothers were able to participate in the exhumation and reburial process. To him it felt like it was their way of caring for their brothers. Joost emphasized the fact they wanted to do this for their little brothers. To them, they are not just any remains, they are of 'their own blood'.

Most of the bereaved stated that they had carried out an exhumation and reburial, 'because they felt they had to'. They spoke about a basic feeling of taking care of the dead. Throughout the interviews, the bereaved often referred to the bones with the name of the deceased. Just as ashes remain connected to the deceased in the eyes of the bereaved, so do bones, even after years of burial. Lisette, a woman in her fifties, organized the reburial of her mother together with her father. She said: 'We awaited my mother at the graveyard to welcome her together.'

A fundamental feeling of connection to and care for the dead made the bereaved willing to take risks and to improvise in a situation that was new to them. Lisette said:

Giving meaning to an event like this is a question of feeling. We could only attempt to do what felt right, as my father and I did not know what to do and neither was there a protocol. We discussed it and decided to await mother at the graveyard in order to welcome her together. It felt soothing to have a plan. It is the format that gives support in unknown situations like that.



79. Collecting the exhumed bones in a new coffin (by Joost and Erik Klaren 2009).



80. Carrying the coffin to the new burial place (by Joost and Erik Klaren 2009).



81. Digging a grave behind their father's tombstone (by Joost and Erik Klaren 2009).



82. Placing the reburied remains of their brothers (by Joost and Erik Klaren 2009).

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The mourners explained that they did not know of any ritual that would give meaning to this ceremony in the Netherlands. Exhumation and reburial rituals are not part of traditional burial culture as is the case in rural Greece for example. Because there is no shared tradition of reburial in the Netherlands, the second burial is not precipitated at the time of burial. In the absence of an established ritual, the Dutch bereaved have to improvise a ritual for the reburial. Moreover, unlike ash disposal, the bereaved are not stimulated by professionals to conduct a ritual or to make a reburial into a meaningful event. Instead, the initiative has to come from the bereaved themselves.

Throughout the interviews I noticed that people knew little about each other's practices. Almost every interviewee asked me whether I knew of anyone else in the Netherlands who had organized a reburial. Often they were surprised to learn that indeed more people carried out exhumations and reburials. Lacking any knowledge of such a ritual, they often felt that they had invented it themselves, drawing on first burial traditions, such as throwing flowers on the coffin before burial or a coffee table afterwards, but also their own imaginations.

Although every group of mourners creates its own rituals, certain elements appear frequently. In contrast to first burials and cremation services, but similar to ash disposals, reburials are usually executed by a small group of relatives. In all the cases I documented, the bereaved brought flowers, and often a family reunion was organized before and/or after the reburial. Furthermore, some mourners chose a special day for the exhumation such as a birthday or the date of the deceased person's death. When reburial occurred in a formerly Christian family or context, the bereaved sometimes asked a priest to consecrate the second burial site. For the priests involved it was often their first reburial. Thus, the priests also had to improvise, using elements from first burial rites such as blessing the place of burial and following the coffin in a procession to the grave.

Because of their nature as rites of passage, first burials are generally given greater public importance than secondary burials according to Van Gennep (1960). He refers to the 'popular saying that only the *first time* counts' and makes it clear that the transition has already been made in so-called 'rites of the first time'. Hence 'the repetition of the first act has a decreasing importance' (ibid.). Likewise, the reburial of a person's remains implies that the transition from the status of 'living' to that of 'dead' already took place at the time of the first burial. Yet, to the bereaved the bones of their relatives have not lost their meaning. The second burial does not necessarily have a decreased meaning. In some cases, the second time one goes through a rite of passage might even have a greater impact on mourners than the first (Grimes 2010: 91-111). As the remains are relocated, mourners must, or are finally enabled to, reorient themselves, and their relationship to the deceased. Therefore, a transfer of the remains is often accompanied by a ritual.

Restructuring relations between the dead and the living

In case of a reburial, not only the grave is adjusted. Relations among the mourners, and between the mourners and the deceased, are also transformed. Secondary dealings with the corpse affect the bereaved and the deceased alike. An alteration in the situation of the dead, automatically affects relations with and among the living. Spatially reorganizing relations with the dead can be a way of reordering living human communities (Verdery 1999: 108). Reburial can re-establish harmony between the living and the dead (Halealoha Ayau and Kawika Tengan 2002), but it can also cause turmoil among the living (Robben 2004). Reburial can also stem from a change in the lives of the next of kin that generates requests for alterations in (spatial) relations with and among the dead.

Reburial is often provoked by expiring grave rights or a recent demise. The expiration of grave rights can initiate a discussion among relatives about the grave. The bereaved can decide to extend the rights, to relinquish them or to replace the grave, using the opportunity to organize a secondary burial. A recent demise can also prompt a discussion about the existing graves as Roelwinne explains. Roelwinne, a woman from the northeastern Netherlands lost her mother in 1999. Her mother had expressed the wish to be cremated, whereas her father had already been buried. This difference presented a problem to the bereaved family members who felt that their mother and father would be separated in death. As the remains were still connected to their deceased mother and father, who had always been inseparable during life, it was of vital importance to them that their remains would be reunited.

A few days after her mother's death, Roelwinne woke up knowing what to do. She wanted to exhume and cremate her father's remains so that he and her mother could be dispersed together above the North Sea, the waters where he had worked as a sailor during life. Roelwinne said: 'I had a vision: the water that had separated my mother and father during life would now bring them together.'

When analyzing the motivations for secondary burial, reuniting the dead together was mentioned in almost half of the cases. The second most mentioned motive was to keep deceased relatives in close proximity of the living, reuniting the dead and the living. Third, a reburial was motivated along changed relations among the living. There are also three minor motives. Sometimes exhumation and reburial are conducted in order to give the deceased another place, because the first place of burial is considered uncomfortable, unsuitable, ugly or 'not right'. In some cases the high cost of grave rights can be a motive for combining two graves. Finally, the bereaved may opt for exhumation in order to alter an initial decision to bury their dead, preferring to cremate them instead. Often, a combination of several motives drove people's decisions.

The three major motives for reburial relate to reunion of the dead, reunion of the living and the dead and altered social relations among the living as well as the dead, which ask for an adaptation of the grave. Exhumation can be performed to reunite

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deceased relatives such as Roelwinne's parents, who were reunited in a joint scattering of the ashes. But reburial can also be conducted to prepare for the future reunion of a deceased person with his or her living relatives as Joost and his brothers described. Joost and his brothers reburied their two deceased brothers who died soon after birth. When the grave rights expired, they did not want to abandon the grave, but they were not sure about keeping it either, because of the costs. They chose to re-inter the remains of their brothers in the grave of their father, enabling them to preserve their brothers' remains without having to maintain their graves. Along the way another motivation surfaced. Their mother felt reassured by the fact that her husband would be reunited with their two deceased sons, who had been buried at another part of the graveyard assigned to deceased children. Besides, she knew that when she died, she would be able to join them in the grave. The different motives for reunion collided in these reburials, reuniting the three deceased as well as anticipating a reunion with their living partner and mother.

The second motive that came to light was proximity. Often the bereaved, when they migrate or move house, wish to take their dead with them. In past times people were generally buried in the village where they were born, but the increasing mobility of people makes this a less self-evident proceeding. Lisette's father, who reburied his wife, moved from the town of Apeldoorn to Amersfoort. After two years he decided to rebury his wife close to his new home.

The first two years after I moved, I was still able to visit her grave in Apeldoorn, so I could live with her, at least mentally I mean. It is about maintaining the bond we had during life. I am a widower living alone in a small apartment and through visiting her at least we had contact. That gives meaning to my life. After a while I became less mobile and I could not visit her anymore. Since we replaced the grave I can visit her every week again.

Some mourners rebury the dead near their new homes while others prefer to cremate the remains after exhumation, enabling them to take the urn with them. In these ways the dead are re-incorporated in the lives of the living. A spatial separation, because of a move, can trigger mourners to exhume and rebury a deceased.

In the third case, a change in relations among the living requires or enables a change in relations among the dead. Gerard, a retired man from the southern Netherlands, reburied his son Johnny. He had wanted to do this for a long time, but his ex-wife refused to cooperate. When Gerard learned that his ex-wife had died, he finally felt free to exhume and rebury his son at a green burial ground near his home:

I had always thought. If the moment comes, I want to have it (the grave MH) closer. It is the only thing that I have left of my son. The new grave is a very

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beautiful place. It is soothing that he no longer lies in a row but in the midst of nature.

The new burial place was not only physically closer to his home, enabling Gerard to go the grave more often. It also enabled him to meet his son Johnny in what he experienced as a more intimate way, in the natural atmosphere of the woodlands. Moreover, at the new burial site Gerard would no longer have to worry about encountering relatives of his ex-wife, who still lived in the village where his son was formerly buried. Thus, secondary disposal can be as much about the living as about the dead.

In conclusion, instead of a place of eternal rest, in the Netherlands the cemetery is really a place of transition. Unlike burial sites in the United Kingdom for example, Dutch graves do not belong to survivors in perpetuity. With grave rights that generally expire after ten years, graveyards can be considered temporary decomposition sites. Today, after initial burial, the remains can be collectively or individually relocated commemorating the individual deceased rather than relegating them to anonymity.

In case the mourners opt for individual reburial, they are actively involved. In the absence of ritual scripts to provide structure and a director for these secondary burials, mourners invent their own rituals. The reburials do not embody a standardized practice. The more private and secluded character of secondary burials, which provides a certain freedom to experiment and improvise, reflects contemporary disposal strategies relating to ashes.

Moreover, an up-close analysis of mourners and professionals ritualizing secondary burials reveals that the bones are still considered related to the deceased. The dead remain part of a network of relations. Years after an initial burial, the deceased can be reburied for the sake of reunion. Family members who lived together in life can be kept together after death by burying or reburying them together. Thus it seems that the dead are perceived as having a continued existence after death, not just in relation to survivors but also in relation to each other. In the case of reburial for the sake of proximity, loved ones who were close in life are kept close by after death, as demonstrated by the mobility of the dead who migrate along with the living.

7

Conclusion: an afterlife on earth

Death rituals of non-religiously affiliated people in the Netherlands focus primarily on the past life of the deceased. However, the focus on these this-worldly biographies does not rule out religious questions. Being non-religiously affiliated is not equal to being non-religious in the sense that people reject spiritual, transcendent or otherworldly concerns. People create rituals outside of religious institutions, while drawing on their relationship with the deceased, on bits and pieces of religious traditions and on diverse beliefs in an afterlife, be that in nature, with a God, with other dead, in a good place somewhere 'above' or on earth within the family.

Throughout this research I have learned that performing religion is a dynamic and capricious process. Worldviews not only differed among groups of mourners, sometimes informants' worldviews even conflicted within one interview. The diversity as well as the changing character of beliefs that I came across convinced me of the fact that in order to understand processes of meaning making, scholars should start from the experiences of people themselves. In line with McGuire (2007), I have argued that to understand beliefs among non-religiously affiliated people, the complexities and inconsistencies of daily religious life should be involved, instead of limited to general notions such as *ietsism* (something-ism) (Verkuijlen 1996) or search-religiosity (Bernts, et al. 2007). Moreover, it is essential that researchers are sensitive to different ways of expressing transcendent values. In order to obtain such a line of approach, addressing verbal as well as bodily and material expressions, I was inspired by Hertz's (1960) claim that practices with the dead body have a metaphoric relationship to beliefs about the non-material aspects of the person. Through combining fieldwork in crematoriums with interviews at people's homes, I was able to infer beliefs about the dead and afterlife concepts from practices with human remains by asking: *In the Netherlands, what do the practices of bereaved people with human ashes imply about beliefs concerning the dead and their continuing existence?*

Between matter and person

Before 1980s the ash disposal was generally left to the care of professionals, who anonymously dispersed the ashes. But in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, protests arose against these anonymous practices. Individual mourners as well as small funerary organizations demanded access to and control over human remains. Their protests were successful. Since 1991 ashes can be taken home. Since 1998 ashes can be scattered by mourners on a self-chosen place and it is permitted to divide ashes

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and to incorporate ashes into small objects such as jewels. In the past decades the Netherlands has witnessed a rise in new practices with human remains demonstrating a change in the attitude of the Dutch towards ash disposal. Ash disposal is promoted as an important symbolic event in which the bereaved should play an active role. While anonymous dispersal used to be the rule, nowadays many mourners and professionals consider it careless to leave ashes to the mercy of professionals without any further wishes considering disposal or storage.

A similar change occurred with regard to secondary burial practices. Until the 1990s, exhumed remains from expired graves were anonymously buried in collective graves that were inaccessible to visitors. From 2002, this practice led to citizen's protests about what they perceived as 'unethical grave clearing'. This was picked up by Dutch politicians, resulting in parliamentary questions and eventually in the specification of regulations with regard to exhumation and reburial in 2009. Next to that, collective monuments of reburial have been raised throughout the country to commemorate the reburied dead.

These developments regarding ash disposal, exhumation and reburial indicate that the Dutch attribute ever more importance to human remains and the ways these are treated. The disposal of human remains has been increasingly ritualized. After a cremation, and on a smaller scale also after a burial, human remains are given a new place by bereaved people themselves, scattering ashes, wearing jewellery with ashes or witnessing the exhumation of a relative's bones. Following Hertz's (1960) argument that there is a parallelism between people's ideas about the condition of the body and their ideas about the condition of the soul, I argue that the meaning of these new rituals with human remains bears witness to changing beliefs about the dead and their afterlife.

Following this line, I argue that not only mourners' statements about ash disposal rituals, but also mourners' material and bodily expressions provide crucial insights in their beliefs. Gaining information from material culture is not a self-evident process. Cultural meanings do not precede material culture, but come into being as people handle objects (Boivin 2009; 2010). Objects are not blank canvases to which people ascribe meanings and from which ideas can be easily abstracted. Instead, meanings evolve in interaction with objects. As such, the ashes do something, they co-create meaning when people handle them.

In doing anthropological fieldwork engaging with the daily lives of mourners and witnessing over fifty disposals, I found that in many ways people relate to human remains the way they did to that particular person during life. Though mourners are aware of the obvious difference between living people and their remains, there are many correspondences to be recognized in their contact with and reactions to ashes and living persons. People not only refer to ashes or objects with ashes using the name of the deceased. Mourners also react physically to the ashes, by hugging, stroking or kissing, like they would have to the deceased. At such moments, there is no strict line between the living and the dead. Ashes blur the lines

between object and subject. As such, objects with ashes cross the borders of both categories, a process I called subjectification. Bereaved people consider ash objects both matter and person. Practices with human remains that encompass ash disposal as well as reburial practices show that bereaved people treat lifeless human remains as animated, personal matter. Even a small quantity of someone's ashes or exhumed bones represent the whole person, making it of vital importance to mourners how the remains are disposed.

When I aimed to relate these practices to people's beliefs and asked, 'Do you consider yourself religious?', in most cases people reacted with rejection. At first I was unsure how to reconcile mourners' reactions with their practices. Why would informants carry out all these actions with human remains, if when asked about the meaning they state that there is nothing supernatural about it? Throughout this research, I learned that many Dutch have rejected the Christian church in such a strong way during the period called depillarization, that for them the definition of religion is still strongly tied to churchgoing. But, in line with Dutch national surveys (Bernts et al. 2007), I found that after distancing themselves from the church, many mourners declared to believe in some way, independent of religious institutions.

However, these beliefs are not so much verbalized, they are mainly experienced in practices. My questions caused hesitation, not because people couldn't put their ideas to words, but because the abstraction of ideas from these practices was irrelevant to them. In a similar process that Maurice Bloch (1995) described, I came to realize that ashes do not merely represent something, implying that beliefs can be abstracted. Rather, the ashes *are* something or actually someone. Caring for someone's ashes is experienced as caring for that person. Practices with ash objects connect the body of the deceased with the body of the bereaved. By handling ash jewels, digging up bones or stroking an ash tattoo the bond between the bereaved and the deceased is continued and performed in the here and now. Mourners literally keep in touch with this person. The deceased person still has a meaning to them after death and for some mourners a deceased relative can even have an active, comforting role.

In that sense, ash objects remind of historical traditions of containers of human remains varying from fetishes to objects with human hair and relics of saints. All these objects are considered powerful, because they radiate the power of the person to whom the remains once belonged. In this aspect, ash objects resemble relics of saints that were touched by believers in the hopes of participating in the saints' powers. However, a crucial difference between ash objects and relics is the fact that ash objects are considered private. Unlike relics of saints, public recognition is not sought after in the case of ash objects. Most ash objects are explicitly designed to make their contents invisible. Exposure can even lead to withdrawing the objects from the public sphere.

Practices with ash objects encompass more than remembering alone. Mourners' practices form a whole of objects, gestures and beliefs. As the ash objects are treated

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and perceived as (part of) the deceased, these practices are in fact a continuation of a bond with a deceased. In some cases, these acts bear witness to a belief that the deceased might still be present on earth and support the bereaved.

Rituals and improvisation

Since the 1950s, as a result of the declining role of clergy, professionals gained a self-evident part in death rituals in the Netherlands. The growing importance of professionals in the organization of death rituals is not self-evident in secular, Western countries. In various countries the role of professionals in the organization of death rituals has developed differently. In Sweden, the state church secularized and continued to arrange all funerals whether religious or secular (Walter 2005). Whereas in Japan professionals strongly claimed a directive role in the vacuum of declining traditions (Suzuki 2000).

Until the 1980s professionals were openly directive, proclaiming their role as 'relieving the bereaved from all sorrows'. After the 1980s, the role of professionals changed radically again. The directive role of professionals has become much more implicit, and even taboo. Instead, the current credo of funeral businesses emphasizes an active and participative role for mourners. Correspondingly, professionals define themselves as enablers of the wishes of the bereaved, and if they are known also the wishes of the deceased.

Cremation rituals, and especially ash disposal rituals, are emergent rituals. When cremation was declared legal in the Netherlands in 1955, 2% of the people were cremated. In 1970 this percentage rose to 14%, in 1990 to 44%, and in 2010 to 57%. This growth increasingly confronted Dutch mourners with cremation rituals. Especially ash disposal rituals, which are now stimulated as a meaningful event in which the bereaved can participate, are a first time experience. The new character of ash disposal has had consequences for the nature of these rituals.

Ash disposal is an act of ritualizing, a term borrowed from Grimes (1982: 61). This means that people are in the process of creating rituals. Despite numerous websites on cremation, the information provided about ash disposal is very general and concise. The rules of ash disposal rituals are not prescribed, instead, they are mainly discovered by breaking them. Cremation rituals are negotiated between a small group of bereaved and an employee in an ash disposal room, at a scattering field or at a grave in a trial-and-error manner. Nevertheless, this improvisation is not haphazard. I found that from the point of view of professionals, ideal images of a good cremation ritual held by the funeral company function as guidelines. The two main ideal images are: the cremation or ash disposal as a singular event and the ideal image of professionals as facilitators.

Despite the ideal of facilitating personal wishes, my fieldwork revealed that funeral professionals do not objectively assist mourners. Professionals interpret their company's ideals in their own ways and add their own ideas and experiences to the

process. Besides, mourners also have their own ideals and propositions. Both professional and bereaved parties thus have an active role in the negotiation and organization of ash disposal rituals.

During these negotiations, conflicts can arise. Through concentrating on irregularities in ash disposal rituals, using a choice of method proposed by Hüsken (2007), I explored the barriers of secondary death rituals. By analysing which deviations were welcomed and which were rejected by mourners or by professionals, I learned what was considered appropriate by the different participants. These moments made the personal values of employees versus the company's ideals as well as the wishes of mourners insightful. From the perspective of the professionals, the improvised rituals often occurred in line with the company's ideals, but sometimes company ideals were bended or even put aside. Company ideals were bended or neglected for different reasons. In some instances different company ideals clashed, forcing professionals to prioritize one ideal over the other. In other cases, professionals acted out because they the ritual proposed by the mourners did not match their personal values of a good cremation ritual. My findings show that with the best of intentions professionals actively guide and structure many improvised rituals, shifting between different company ideals, the wishes of mourners and their own personal values.

The living and the dead

Since human remains are inextricably connected to a deceased, reburial and ash disposal not only change the place of bones and ashes, but also touch upon the relations between the dead and the living. Current death rituals emphasize continuing relations between the living and the dead through focussing on the past life of the deceased and shared memories (Davies, 1997: 141; Gibson 2008: 162; Howarth 2007; Prendergast et al. 2006: 889). Elaborating on this finding, I asked which worldviews go hand in hand with the performance of enduring relations. If people can continue a relation with the dead, then where do the dead reside in their eyes?

To investigate where the Dutch believe that the dead reside, I have analyzed the transitions performed in modern cremation rituals. According to van Gennep (1960) the emphasis in funeral rituals lays on the transition from the deceased to the world of the dead, emphasizing a separation from the world of the living. Dutch cremation practices in the Netherlands indeed show that separation from this world is the main focus during cremation services. However, after a waiting period of thirty days when the ashes are returned to the bereaved, the opposite movement occurs. The group of mourners are re-united with the (remains of) the deceased.

With regard to Van Gennep's trifold scheme, the ash disposal suggests an adaptation. It suggests the addition of a fourth phase to the cycle of cremation rituals. Otherwise, the ash disposal could be viewed as a separate tripartite ritual itself. But, I join Metcalf and Huntington (1991) in their statement that research on

death rituals is not so much about recognizing Van Gennep's tripartite scheme, but about recognizing the creative ways in which this scheme is applied in different cultures. Besides, even Van Gennep did not use his scheme so strictly. Van Gennep argued (1960: 175) that it is quite common 'that the rites of passage do not appear in their complete form, are not greatly emphasized, or do not even exist except at the time of the first transition.' What I consider central here, is the meaning of this 'extra' transition performed after the cremation service.

While the funeral indeed emphasizes separation, the ash disposal focuses on incorporation. The purpose of ash disposal is not about putting the dead away in another realm, but about taking them back into the lives of the bereaved. Throughout ash disposal rituals, the relations between the living and the dead, between the different deceased and between the living are performed. Mourners carry the urn together or one after another emphasizing the bonds between the living and the dead. The ashes are scattered on the same spot as an earlier deceased to express the relations between different deceased and a shared ash disposal rituals, such as the placement of an ash tattoo, simultaneously emphasizes the bond between the living.

Through emphasizing relations between the dead and the living, the deceased is re-incorporated among the living in his or her new shape as human ashes. With regard to this focus on physical re-union between the living and the dead, ash disposal rituals resemble what Van Gennep (1960) called welcoming rituals. The dead are welcomed back in this world through gestures, objects and words focussing on a good place for the dead, in which the dead are together with their relatives and friends.

My findings elaborate on Gibson's argument (2008) that what dominates stories and practices of non-religiously affiliated concerning an afterlife is the desire to be reunited with loved ones. This hope for reunion proves to be an age-old motive for non-religiously as well as religiously affiliated people. Christians also increasingly view heaven as a place of reunion, a reunion with God, but even more so with the community of familiar dead (Mc Dannell and Lang 2001). But what is new in Dutch cremation practices is the aspect of secularization. Not religious teachings, formats and rules, but people themselves determine and create rituals with human ashes and bones and imagine the deceased's afterlife.

When describing this afterlife concept or 'place of the dead', mourners often related to a notion of home. Sometimes the deceased is literally brought home among the living when mourners take an urn home or wear memorial jewels with ashes. In other cases, the bereaved opt for a place that felt like home to the deceased, such as a favourite holiday location. Or they chose a place that represents home, because it is the place of disposal of other dead that were close to the deceased during life. The dead are given a place that is defined as home or 'like home', referring both to a physical place as well as a community of relative's and friends.

Appendix I. Crematorium correspondence about ash disposal

To sir/madam...
Adress...
Postal code...

Enschede, date/month/year
Code: (for example scattering with family MH)
Cremation number: ESD C00000

Re: scattering appointment

Dear sir/madam...,

Herewith we confirm the appointment for the scattering of the ashes of sir/madam (name deceased). The scattering will take place at (date).

We will await you at (time) in the white building at the right side of the driveway at the crematorium grounds of Enschede.

For more information you can contact the department of ash disposal every day between 09.00 and 13.00, (phone number).

Yours sincerely,

Name employee
Crematoria Twente
Department of ash disposal

Appendix: explanation ash scattering procedures

You will be received by an employee from the department of ash disposal. Then, a short explanation about the upcoming scattering will be given.

In case you wish so, the cap of the urn with the name and initials of the deceased as well as the cremation number imprinted on it and the identification stone will be handed over to you.

As a mourner you are free to choose:

- one of the scattering lanes for the scattering of the ashes of the deceased (for example with respect to an earlier scattering of a family member);

Appendix I

- the place at the scattering lane for the scattering of the ashes of the deceased (within the possibilities at that moment);
- whether you would like to carry the ashes of your loved one to the scattering lane yourself;
- whether you want to scatter the ashes yourself;
- whether you want to lay down a flower greeting at the place of scattering;
- whether you want to do a farewell word;
- whether you would prefer accompaniment of a clergyman;
- whether you would like to place a memorial stone combined with the scattering;
- there is no possibility to place your own monument.

The employee of the department of ash disposal will accompany you during these ceremonious moments and if you wish so, the employee will take over the acts that you are not capable of at that moment.

In case you have more questions after this explanation, you can turn to us. You can reach us every workday between 09.00 and 13:00, (phone number).

Name employee
Name employee
Crematoria Twente
Department of ash disposal

Appendix II. Map of documented crematoriums and cemeteries



National

Crematorium Usselo (Crematoria Twente)
 Crematorium Almelo (Crematoria Twente)
 Crematorium Jonkerbos, Nijmegen (de Facultatieve Groep)
 Cemetery Jonkerbos, Nijmegen
 Cemetery and crematorium Westerveld, Driehuis (de Facultatieve Groep)
 Yarden funeral centre and crematorium Rotterdam (Yarden)
 Yarden crematorium Groningen (Yarden)
 Yarden crematorium Schagerkogge (Yarden)
 Crematorium Rijtackers, Eindhoven (Dela)
 Crematorium Maaslanden, Vlijmen (Dela)
 Cemetery, crematorium and memorial park De nieuwe Ooster, Amsterdam
 Public cemetery, Den Burg
 Natural burial site Bergerbos, St. Odiliënberg

Appendix II

Cemetery and Memorial Park Heilig Land Stichting, Heilig Land Stichting
Cemetery Sint Barbara, Nijmegen
Cemetery Rustoord, Nijmegen (Monuta)
Cemetery Gemonde
Public cemetery, Sint Michielsgestel
Public cemetery, Best
Roman-Catholic cemetery, Best
Sea scatterings, Scheveningen

International

Assistens Cemetery, Copenhagen, Denmark
Crematorium, Durham, United Kingdom
Church cemeteries, Durham, United Kingdom
Brompton Cemetery, London, United Kingdom
Kensal Green Cemetery, London, United Kingdom
Cemetery Negrana, Italy
Cemetery Gravedona, Italy
Cemetery Bonifacio, Corsica, France
Cemetery, Xoxocotlan, Oaxaca, Mexico
San Miguel Cemetery, Oaxaca, Mexico
Cemetery Coyoacan, Mexico City, Mexico
Mixquic Cemetery, Mexico City, Mexico
Hollywood Forever cemetery, Los Angeles, United States
Burning ghats, Varanasi, India
Burning ghats, Kathmandu, Nepal

Dutch summary

Het thuisbrengen van de doden in Nederland

In dodenrituelen van mensen die niet of niet langer lid zijn van een religieuze institutie speelt de notie van 'een persoonlijke uitvaart' gefocust op het leven van de overledene een grote rol. Maar, in dit boek laat ik zien dat deze focus op wereldlijke, biografische elementen niet voor een volledig gebrek aan geloof in 'het bovennatuurlijke' moet worden aangezien.

In de twintigste eeuw is het religieuze landschap van Nederland drastisch veranderd, van een van de meest christelijke landen naar een van de meest seculiere. In 1909 was 57% van de Nederlandse populatie Protestant, 35% Katholiek en slechts 5% was niet aan een religieuze institutie verbonden (Knippenberg 1992). Dit staat in schril contrast met de cijfers van een eeuw later. In 2006, beschouwde 16% van de Nederlanders zichzelf als Katholiek, 14% als Protestants en 9% beschouwde zichzelf als lid van een andere religieuze groepering (Bernts, et al. 2007). Veruit de grootste groep bestaande uit 61% van de Nederlandse bevolking beschreef zichzelf als lid van geen enkele religieuze institutie (ibid.).

Maar, niet aan een religieuze groep verbonden zijn, is niet hetzelfde als niet-religieus zijn. Sterker nog, ondanks het feit dat lidmaatschap van religieuze instituties afgenomen is, is geloof in een leven na de dood niet even sterk verminderd. In 2006, gaf 29% van de Nederlanders, die geen lid zijn van een religieuze organisatie, aan te geloven in een leven na de dood (Bernts, et al. 2007). Nog eens 33% van deze mensen zei dit niet zeker te weten (ibid.). Deze statistieken betekenen dat twee derde van de niet religieus geaffilieerde mensen geloof in een bepaalde vorm van leven na de dood niet afwijst. Ik heb me gefocust op de betekenis van deze veelvormige beelden van een leven na de dood, waar nog heel weinig kwalitatief onderzoek naar is gedaan (Venbrux 2007a: 9,11).

De informanten in deze studie hielden er vele verschillende overtuigingen op na. Deze overtuigingen verschilden binnen een groep nabestaanden, maar zelfs een enkele nabestaande had soms conflicterende overtuigingen. Het diverse en complexe karakter van beelden van een leven na de dood onder niet-religieus geaffilieerden heeft mij er van overtuigd dat om religie te kunnen onderzoeken, wetenschappers moeten beginnen bij de ervaringen van mensen zelf. Hierbij zijn de complexiteiten en de tegenstellingen die je tegenkomt in dagelijkse religieuze praktijken startpunt van onderzoek, in plaats van iets dat uitgevlakt zou moeten worden door brede begrippen te gebruiken zoals 'ietsisme' (Verkuijlen, 1996) of zoekreligiositeit (Bernts, et al. 2007).

Daarbij is het van belang om als onderzoeker open te staan voor verschillende manieren waarop mensen transcendente waarden, geloofsovertuigingen of wereldbeelden uitdrukken. Om zo'n benadering te bereiken heb ik me laten

Het thuisbrengen van de doden in Nederland

inspireren door de socioloog Robert Hertz (1960) die claimde dat praktijken met het dode lichaam een metafoor zijn voor ideeën over de non-materiële aspecten van een persoon, zoals bijvoorbeeld een geloof in de ziel. Het werk van de antropoloog Maurice Bloch (1995) en dat van de archeologe Nicole Boivin (2008; 2009) heb ik centraal gesteld in de uitvoering van deze benadering die erop beducht is dat juiste moeilijk te vatten zaken zoals geloof of de betekenis van een ritueel, door mensen uitgedrukt (kunnen) worden op andere wijzen dan met woorden alleen. Ik heb dan ook geprobeerd om de verschillende manieren waarop mensen zich uitdrukken in dit onderzoek op te nemen, namelijk door woorden, door middel van het gebruiken en maken van objecten en door lichaamstaal.

Ik heb me gefocust op geloof in een leven na de dood, zoals uitgedrukt in wat mensen doen met menselijke resten, dat wil zeggen crematie-as en botten, door te vragen: Welke inzichten kunnen praktijken van niet religieus-geaffilieerde nabestaanden met menselijke resten verschaffen betreffende geloof in een leven na de dood? Hiertoe heb ik allereerst 47 nabestaanden thuis geïnterviewd over hun praktijken met de as of botten van een overledene, waarbij in de meeste gevallen de plek van asbestemming of herbegraven bezocht werd. Daarnaast heb ik 49 professionals geïnterviewd, variërend van crematoriummedewerkers, tot uitvaartverzorgers, funerair kunstenaars en begraafplaatsbeheerders. Ik heb bovendien in 4 verschillende Nederlandse crematoria gewerkt gedurende een periode van zes maanden, waarbij ik meer dan 50 asbestemmingen heb bijgewoond.

In dit boek staan drie argumenten centraal, die ik in deze samenvatting achtereenvolgens zal behandelen: (1) de permeabele grenzen tussen levenloze materie en persoon, wanneer het gaat om menselijke resten, (2) het improviserende karakter van rituelen met menselijke resten en (3) de relaties tussen de levenden en de doden en het concept van een leven na de dood dat hieruit voortvloeit.

Tussen levenloze materie en persoon

In de afgelopen decennia zijn er in Nederland verschillende ‘nieuwe’ tradities met menselijke resten opgekomen. Hoewel tot ongeveer de jaren tachtig asbestemming werd overgelaten aan professionals, die de as anoniem verstrooiden, wordt de asbestemming tegenwoordig als een belangrijk symbolisch moment gezien door professionals in de uitvaartbranche, waarin nabestaanden een actieve rol zouden kunnen of zelfs moeten spelen. Veel professionals, maar ook nabestaanden, zijn zo overtuigd van de waarde van de asbestemming dat niets doen met de as, dat wil zeggen de as anoniem te laten verstrooien, als onverschillig wordt gezien.

Ik heb eenzelfde verandering geconstateerd betreffende herbegraven in Nederland. Tot de jaren negentig werden geruimde resten anoniem herbegraven in collectieve graven. Deze graven waren in de regel niet toegankelijk voor bezoekers en bevonden zich op het besloten terrein van de begraafplaats, wat aan de professionals toebehoort. Tegenwoordig echter, worden de plaatsen van dergelijke

collectieve graven voor geruimde resten steeds vaker gemarkeerd met een monument.

Deze omslag in ritueel markeren van asbestemming en herbegraven is ingezet door burgers zelf. In de jaren tachtig en negentig protesteerden individuele burgers, kleine uitvaartorganisaties en columnisten tegen de dominante rol van professionals. Pioniers in dit veld waren bijvoorbeeld Marjan Sax, Knaar Visser en Marjo Boer, die het boek *Zand erover? Afscheid en uitvaart naar eigen inzicht* (Sax, et al. 1989) schreven. In dit boek wijzen ze mensen op de mogelijkheden om hun eigen dodenrituelen te organiseren, door bijvoorbeeld de overledene thuis op te baren of bewust te kiezen voor cremen of begraven. Vanaf de jaren '90 komen er steeds meer kleine uitvaartorganisaties op die ingaan tegen het ideaal om de nabestaanden te 'sparen' door alle zorg uit handen te nemen. Integendeel, deze organisaties maken zich hard voor een persoonlijke uitvaart geregeld in samenspraak met de nabestaanden en met de overledene, als zijn of haar wensen bekend zijn (Bot 1998).

Deze beweging heeft veel consequenties gehad voor de vormgeving van uitvaartrituelen in Nederland. Sinds 1991 mag de as in de urn mee naar huis genomen worden, wel moest de urn gesloten blijven. Ook hierop reageerden mensen initiatiefrijk en op creatieve wijze. Zo zullen veel Nederlanders zich de aflevering van *de Schreeuw van de Leeuw* herinneren, waarin Paul de Leeuw samen met de partner van overleden zanger René Klijn diens as verstrooide. Op een bootje op de Hudson rivier in New York opent René's partner met een schroevendraaier de urn en samen verstrooien ze illegaal René's as. Daarnaast vroegen nabestaanden crematoriummedewerkers om een beetje as apart aan hen mee te geven in een luciferdoosje, om mee naar huis te nemen of te verwerken in een sieraad (Enklaar 1995: 98-90). Vanaf 1994 verkopen verschillende crematoria juwelen waarin wat as bewaard kan worden (Cappers 1999: 315). Uiteindelijk werd in navolging van deze en vergelijkbare initiatieven de Wet op de Lijkbezorging opnieuw aangepast. Sinds 1998 mag de as door nabestaanden op een zelfgekozen plek verstrooid worden en mag de as verdeeld worden, wat betekent dat ook de asjuwelen die tot dan toe gedoogd werden, gelegaliseerd worden. In 2009 worden bovendien regulaties aangaande het ruimen van graven verder gespecificeerd in de Wet op de Lijkbezorging.

Al deze veranderingen duiden op het feit dat er in Nederland steeds meer waarde wordt gehecht aan menselijke resten en de manier waarop daar mee wordt omgesprongen. Na een crematie en op kleine schaal ook na begraven, geven nabestaanden menselijke resten een nieuwe plek door de as te verstrooien, juwelen met as te dragen, aanwezig te zijn bij een herbegravenis of een as tatoeage te laten zetten.

Uitgaande van deze praktijken heb ik onderzocht wat ideeën over de omgang met het dode lichaam zeggen over ideeën over een leven na de dood. Dit is echter geen voor de hand liggend proces. Je kunt ideeën over objecten niet zonder meer uit objecten aflezen (Bloch 1995). Het ontstaan van deze ideeën is een actief proces.

Het thuisbrengen van de doden in Nederland

Culturele betekenissen gaan niet vooraf aan materiële cultuur, maar komen tot stand in de interactie tussen mensen en objecten (Boivin 2008; 2009). Door veldwerk te doen dichtbij het dagelijkse leven van nabestaanden, heb ik gezien dat mensen omgaan met de as of de urn van een overledene op een manier die doet denken aan de manier waarop ze tijdens het leven ook met de overledene omgingen. Mensen verwijzen niet alleen naar de as of naar een object met as, zoals een urn of assieraad, met de naam van de overledene. Veel nabestaanden reageren bovendien op de as door een urn vast te pakken, te aaien, een kus te geven, zoals ze bij het weerzien met de overledene ook hadden gedaan. Op zulke momenten is er geen strikte grens tussen de levenden en de doden. Doordat de as in de ogen van nabestaanden dode materie en persoon tegelijk is, vertroebelen de grenzen tussen subject en object. Dit proces noem ik subjectificatie ofwel verpersoonlijking van objecten. Praktijken met menselijke resten, betreffende zowel asbestemming als herbegraven, tonen dat mensen omgaan met de resten alsof die 'bezielde' zijn. Er wordt op een andere manier met deze objecten omgesprongen dan met objecten die volledig als levenloze materie beschouwd worden. Zelfs een klein beetje van de as of geruimde botten representeren de gehele persoon. Dit proces van subjectificatie maakt voor nabestaanden de manier waarop er met menselijke resten wordt omgegaan en de bestemming die hier aan gegeven wordt van essentieel belang.

Wanneer ik tijdens interviews probeerde deze dagelijkse gewoontes te relateren aan bepaalde geloofsovertuigingen, reageerden de meeste mensen in de eerste instantie afwijzend. De meeste informanten distantieerden zich in de eerste instantie van religie, door te zeggen dat ze niet of niet meer religieus waren. Ik vroeg me af hoe die twee dingen te verenigen waren. De as wordt behandeld als een belangrijke en zelfs bezielde materie, maar mensen zeggen niet te geloven. Waarom is die as dan zo belangrijk?

Tijdens het onderzoek kwam ik er achter dat doordat veel van mijn informanten of hun ouders zo radicaal afscheid genomen hadden van de kerk tijdens de periode van ontkerkelijkheid dat de definitie van religie voor hen nauw verbonden is met kerkgang. Nadat informanten genoemd hadden dat ze niet of nauwelijks naar de kerk gingen, bleek dat ze wel ergens in geloofden, maar dan los van religieuze instituties.

Deze overtuigingen drukten zij echter niet zozeer uit in woorden. Deze overtuigingen werden veeleer ervaren in handelingen met de as. De vertwijfeling die mijn vragen over hun ideeën achter de handelingen met de as veroorzaakten, kwam dan ook niet voort uit het feit dat mensen dit niet onder woorden konden brengen. Dit gebeurde, omdat ik feitelijk een zinloze vraag stelde. Voor nabestaanden was een abstractie van hun overtuigingen uit hun handelingen met de urn of met een object met as simpelweg irrelevant. Het realisatieproces dat ik als onderzoeker doormaakte doet denken aan wat de antropoloog Maurice Bloch (1995) meemaakte, toen hij zijn informanten maar bleef doorvragen over de betekenis van houtsnijwerk aan deurposten. Zijn informanten bleven hetzelfde antwoord geven,

namelijk dat ze dit deden 'om het hout mooier te maken'. Pas toen Bloch zich realiseerde dat het mooi maken van de deurposten van een huis, als handeling deel is van het starten van een gezin, snapte hij dat je sommige dingen niet moet bevragen, maar als geheel van handelingen moet beschouwen. Zo kwam ik er achter dat de as niet alleen iets representeert, wat veronderstelt dat de gerepresenteerde betekenis uit een object zou kunnen worden geabstraheerd. Nee, de as staat niet alleen *symbol* voor iemand, de as was *deel* van iemand en wordt nu nog zo gezien. Daarom wordt het zorgen voor de as ervaren als zorgen voor die persoon. In het dagelijkse leven vormen handelingen, de omgang met objecten en overtuigingen een geheel. Deze compilatie van ervaringen geven mensen het gevoel van voortbestaan van de doden.

Handelingen met asobjecten verbinden het lichaam van de overledene met het lichaam van de nabestaanden. Door assieraden te dragen, door aanwezig te zijn bij een herbegravenis, door een astatoeage te laten zetten, wordt de band tussen de doden en de levenden uitgedrukt in het hier en nu. Nabestaanden blijven op deze manier letterlijk in contact met de overledene.

De overledene heeft nog steeds een betekenis voor nabestaanden na de dood en voor sommigen kan een overledene zelfs een actieve adviserende of kalmerende rol hebben, informanten vertelden bijvoorbeeld dat ze zich rustig voelden door in stressvolle situaties een assieraad vast te houden. Deze handelingen met as en objecten gevuld met as zijn deel van een proces dat meer behelst dan herinneren alleen. Deze handelingen drukken op fysieke wijze een doorgaande band uit. Daarnaast speelt voor sommige informanten het geloof dat iemand er nog is en hen steunt. In die zin doen asobjecten denken aan een historische traditie van objecten met menselijk weefsel, namelijk haarwerken en relieken. Ook deze objecten werden gezien als krachtig, omdat ze de kracht van de persoon aan wie de haren, botten of ooit toebehoorden uitstralen. Net als heiligenreliken die door gelovigen werden aangeraakt in de hoop mee te delen in de krachten van deze heilige figuur, pakken sommige nabestaanden objecten met as vast en ervaren zo de kracht of de aanwezigheid van de overledene. Een cruciaal verschil tussen asobjecten en heiligenreliken is echter het feit dat asobjecten als privé worden beschouwd. In tegenstelling tot relieken zoeken nabestaanden geen publieke (h)erkenning voor hun asobjecten. Integendeel, de meeste asobjecten zijn ontworpen om hun inhoud onzichtbaar te maken. Herkenning kan zelfs leiden tot het weghalen of verplaatsen van deze objecten. Het aanraken van asobjecten gaat om het uitdrukken van doorgaande relatie tussen de levenden en de doden, waar inderdaad kracht uit kan worden geput, die alleen voor de eigenaar van een asobject zelf bestemd is.

Rituelen en improvisatie

Vanaf de jaren vijftig hebben professionals in Nederland een vanzelfsprekende rol gekregen in dodenrituelen, als gevolg van de afnemende rol van kerkelijke leiders. In verschillende westerse landen zijn deze ontwikkelingen anders verlopen. In

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Zweden bijvoorbeeld organiseert de staatskerk alle uitvaarten zowel mensen die lid zijn van de kerk als voor mensen die niet of niet actief lid zijn (Walter 2005). Terwijl uitvaartprofessionals in Japan juist een veel grotere rol kregen in het vacuüm van afnemende tradities (Suzuki 2000).

In de jaren '80 is de rol van professionals in dodenrituelen in Nederland opnieuw enorm veranderd. Terwijl tot de jaren '80 professionals openlijk de regie hadden en hun rol verkondigden als het wegnemen van alle zorgen, is hun regisserende rol nu veel meer impliciet. Het huidige credo van uitvaartbedrijven benadrukt een actieve en participerende rol voor nabestaanden. In overeenkomst hiermee, definiëren professionals hun rol als het mogelijk maken van de wensen van de nabestaanden en van de overledene, als die wensen kenbaar zijn gemaakt.

Naast de veranderde rol van professionals, is de jonge geschiedenis van crematie in Nederland van invloed geweest op de vormgeving van crematierituelen. Crematie werd pas in 1955 legaal verklaard in Nederland. In die tijd koos 2% van de mensen voor crematie. In 1970 steeg dat percentage tot 14%. In 1990 was dit 44% en in 2010 stond de teller op meer dan de helft, namelijk 57% van de mensen. Deze snelle groei confronteerde steeds meer mensen met crematierituelen, zoals ook het geval is in de Verenigde Staten (Roberts 2010). In geval van asbestemming is de deelname aan deze rituelen vaak de eerste keer voor nabestaanden. As mag pas sinds 1991 mee naar huis genomen worden en vanaf dat moment werd ook pas langzaam gestimuleerd om aanwezig te zijn bij verstrooiing op crematorium terrein. Dit staat in groot contrast tot Verenigd Koninkrijk (Kellaher et al. 2005) waar crematie al in 1885 gelegaliseerd werd en waar al sinds de jaren zeventig 12% van de as van crematoria meegenomen werd.

Beide ontwikkelingen hebben consequenties voor het karakter van dodenrituelen in Nederland. Doordat de asbestemming en herbegrafenis niet langer anoniem door professionals worden uitgevoerd, maar nabestaanden worden gevraagd mee te doen, ontstaan er nieuwe vormen van rituelen. Asbestemming en herbegrafenis zijn wat Grimes (1982: 61) opkomende rituelen noemt. Deze rituelen zijn in het proces van gemaakt worden. Grimes noemt dit proces ritualiseren (2006: 163). Ondanks de vele websites en voorlichting over crematie is de daadwerkelijke informatie over hoe een asbestemming aan te pakken vrij summier. Als gevolg daarvan zijn nabestaanden samen met professionals gedwongen deze rituelen zelf te creëren en te improviseren. De regels van deze rituelen zijn niet voorgeschreven, er is namelijk nog geen traditie. In plaats daarvan worden de regels ontdekt tijdens de rituelen zelf, voornamelijk door ze te verbreken.

Door me te concentreren op ongeregelheden in rituelen, zoals Hüsken (2007) dit noemt, en door te analyseren welke aanpassingen met open armen verwelkomd werden en welke afgewezen werden, door nabestaanden of door professionals kon ik de grenzen van deze nieuwe rituelen opzoeken en documenteren. Op het moment dat grenzen overschreden werden, in de ogen van een van de partijen, wist ik wat als ideaal werd gezien en wat niet.

Ik heb me op de conflicten tussen de idealen van uitvaartbedrijven versus de idealen van de professionals en die van nabestaanden gefocust, omdat juist deze momenten de persoonlijke waarden van werknemers en de wensen van de nabestaanden inzichtelijk maken. Bij het maken van asbestemmingsrituelen zijn gezien vanuit de professionals de idealen van het uitvaartbedrijf een van de richtlijnen. Deze idealen heb ik samengevat als: 1) het ideaal van een uniek ritueel en 2) de rol van professionals als faciliterend en van nabestaanden als regisserend. Volgens het boekje zijn de professionals dus gericht op het uitvoeren van de wensen van de nabestaanden, maar mijn veldwerk heeft laten zien dat professionals nabestaanden niet klakkeloos assisteren. Integendeel, professionals beïnvloeden rituelen op basis van hun eigen overtuigingen.

Asbestemmingsrituelen worden onderhandeld in een kleine groep van nabestaanden samen met een werknemer, in een van de kamers op de afdeling asbestemming van een crematorium of op het terrein van het crematorium. Zowel de nabestaanden als de professionals hebben dus een actieve en persoonlijke rol in de uitvoering van asbestemmingsrituelen. Meestal verloopt deze onderhandeling volgens de idealen van het uitvaartbedrijf, maar soms vragen nabestaanden of dit anders kan en zien professionals zich gedwongen de bedrijfsidealen anders toe te passen of naast zich neer te leggen. In andere gevallen botsen de idealen van professionals met die van nabestaanden. Soms willen nabestaanden bijvoorbeeld rituelen die door de professionals als te simpel worden gezien, waardoor professionals op eigen houtje een toevoeging aan het ritueel organiseren. Met de beste intenties sturen professionals deze rituelen actief terwijl ze balanceren tussen de verschillende idealen van het bedrijf, de wensen van de nabestaanden en hun eigen waarden betreffende crematierituelen.

De levenden en de doden

Doordat menselijke resten in de ogen van nabestaanden verbonden blijven met de overledene, veranderen herbegraven en asbestemming niet alleen de plek van botten en as, maar treffen deze ook de relaties tussen de levenden en de doden. Huidige dodenrituelen benadrukken de doorgaande relaties tussen de levenden en de doden door een focus op het geleefde leven en op gedeelde herinneringen (Davies 1997: 141; Gibson 2008: 162; Howarth 2007; Prendergast et al. 2006: 889). Hierop voortbordurend, vroeg ik me welke consequenties deze nadruk op voortgaande relaties heeft voor mensen die niet of niet langer lid zijn van een religieuze groep. Als mensen hun relaties met de overledene kunnen blijven onderhouden, waar bevinden de doden zich dan in hun ogen?

Om dit te onderzoeken heb ik gebruik gemaakt van de theorie over overgangsrituelen van Arnold van Gennep (1960). In zijn boek *Rites de passage* stelt Van Gennep dat alle belangrijke overgangen in het leven van een mens, zoals geboorte, initiatie en dood, worden gemarkeerd door rituelen. Volgens hem bestaan deze rituelen uit drie fases, namelijk separatie, transformatie en incorporatie. Door

Het thuisbrengen van de doden in Nederland

deze theorie als beginpunt te nemen heb ik geanalyseerd welke overgangen gemarkeerd worden in moderne crematierituelen in Nederland. Volgens van Gennep (1960) ligt de nadruk in uitvaartrituelen op de overgang van de dode naar de wereld van de doden, wat in feite een separatie van de levenden inhoudt. Mijn onderzoek laat zien dat tijdens de uitvaart inderdaad de nadruk ligt op separatie. Maar, na een wachtperiode van dertig dagen, waarin de as wettelijk op het crematorium bewaard moet blijven, treedt er een tegengestelde beweging op. De verantwoordelijkheid over de as wordt teruggegeven aan de nabestaanden, die over de bestemming dienen te beslissen. Hoewel er geen officiële landelijke percentages beschikbaar zijn, schat ik op basis van de data die ik van de crematoria waar ik werkte heb verkregen dat tegenwoordig de meeste nabestaanden er voor kiezen om aanwezig te zijn bij een asbestemming in Nederland. Wanneer nabestaanden tot een asbestemming in hun aanwezigheid overgaan, worden ze opnieuw fysiek her-enigd met de (overblijfselen van) de overledene.

Gelet op het driedelige schema van Van Gennep (1960), suggereert deze fase van asbestemming minstens dertig dagen na de uitvaart een toevoeging van een vierde fase. Aan de andere kant, zou je asbestemming ook op zichzelf als een nieuw driedelig dodenritueel kunnen analyseren. Ik ben echter net als Metcalf en Huntington (1991), van mening dat onderzoek naar dodenrituelen niet zozeer draait om een herkenning of afwijzing van Van Gennep's (1960) driedelige schema, maar om de manier waarop dit schema op creatieve wijze wordt toegepast in verschillende culturen. Van Gennep zelf was bovendien de eerste om toe te geven dat de lezer zijn schema's niet als strikte wetten moest beschouwen (1960: 175). Wat ik dan ook centraal heb gesteld, is de vraag naar betekenis van deze schijnbaar afwijkende, laatste fase in Nederlandse crematierituelen.

De nadruk ligt tijdens de asbestemming namelijk niet op separatie, maar op incorporatie. Het 'hogere doel' is niet het wegbrengen van de dode naar een andere wereld, het lijkt veeleer te draaien om het terugbrengen van de dode tussen de levenden. Nabestaanden dragen samen een urn of geven die één voor één aan elkaar door, zodat eenieder deelneemt aan het ritueel en uitdrukking kan geven aan zijn of haar relatie met de overledene. De as wordt op eenzelfde plek verstrooid als die van een eerder overleden familielid of vriend, om uitdrukking te geven aan de hechte band tussen de overledenen. Daarnaast blijven mensen terugkomen op de plek van asbestemming, waardoor ook voor nabestaanden hun onderlinge relatie bevestigd wordt. Door op deze manier uitdrukking te geven aan de relaties tussen de levenden en de doden, tussen de verschillende doden en tussen de levenden wordt de dode, ge-her-incorporeerd tussen de levenden in zijn of haar nieuwe verschijning als as.

Wat betreft deze nadruk op fysieke her-eniging tussen de levenden en de doden, doet asbestemming denken aan wat Van Gennep (1960) welkomstrituelen noemt. De doden worden eigenlijk opnieuw verwelkomd in deze wereld door handelingen, objecten en woorden die een goede plek voor de dode benadrukken, waarin de doden her-enigd zijn met hun dode en levende familieleden en vrienden.

Mijn bevindingen sluiten aan bij Gibson (2008), die stelde dat het idee van een hereniging met geliefden domineerde in de verhalen van nabestaanden die niet of niet meer lid waren van een religieuze institutie in Australië. Deze wens geldt overigens niet alleen voor niet of niet meer gelovigen. Ook de hemel wordt door Christenen steeds meer gedefinieerd als een plek van hereniging met God, maar vooral ook met de gemeenschap van overledenen (Mc Dannell en Lang 2001). Wat nieuw is aan de Nederlandse crematiepraktijken, is het aspect van secularisering. Niet religieuze voorschriften of praktijken, maar mensen zelf bepalen en creëren deze rituelen met as en botten en maken zich een voorstelling van het blijvende bestaan van de doden in Nederland.

Wanneer informanten deze 'plekken voor de doden' ofwel ideeën over een leven na de dood beschrijven, is daar geen eenduidig institutioneel kader voor, zoals bijvoorbeeld een Christelijke hemel. Een bepaalde notie keerde echter in alle verhalen van nabestaanden terug, het idee van thuis. Soms brachten nabestaanden de (overblijfselen van de) overledene letterlijk thuis, door de as mee naar huis te nemen of door asjuwelen te dragen. In andere gevallen kozen nabestaanden voor een plek van asbestemming die voor de overledene als thuis zou voelen, bijvoorbeeld een favoriete kampeerplek of een vast verstopplekje van een kind. In andere gevallen werd gekozen voor een plek die als thuiskomen geldt, doordat de overledene bij andere eerder overledenen wordt verstrooid of begraven. Ook in het geval van strooivelden van crematoria werd vaak gekozen voor een bepaald veld of een bepaalde boom, omdat daar al eerder as van een of meerdere familieleden of vrienden verstrooid was. De doden krijgen dus een plek toebedeeld die wordt gezien als thuis of 'zoals thuis', wat kan refereren naar de fysieke plek of naar een gemeenschap van doden waarmee de overledene een hechte band had.

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About the author

Meike Heessels (1982) received her MA degree in anthropology in 2006. Part of her master thesis, for which she studied Marian pilgrimage in Mexico City, was published in a joint article with Sanne Derks in *Culture and Religion*. In 2007, Heessels started this PhD research at the department of Anthropology of Religion at the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies at the Radboud University Nijmegen. This research was conducted as part of the NWO programme 'Refiguring Death Rites. Post-secular material religion in the Netherlands'. While working on her doctoral thesis, Heessels published several (joint) articles for example on reburial in *Mortality* and on Hindu cremation in the Netherlands in *Quotidian. The Journal of everyday life*. She also co-edited a Dutch book for a wider audience called *Rituele Creativiteit. Actuele veranderingen in de uitvaart- en rouwcultuur in Nederland*. The book was coupled with a photo exhibition on the topic. Currently, Heessels teaches qualitative research methods at the Nijmegen School of Management, Radboud University Nijmegen. She also works as a researcher at the HAN University of Applied Sciences on the topic of customer-oriented care for elderly migrants in the Netherlands.

meikeheessels@gmail.com

