

Death in the family revisited: Ritual expression and controversy in a Creole transnational mortuary sphere

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Abstract

On the basis of an ethnographic analysis of the ritual process following the sudden death of a Surinamese migrant, this article shows that while the conceptual polarity of death (good versus bad death) might be clear-cut, the morality of death is both bound and unbound in space and time, and relative to the multiple conditions of bereaved relatives involved. Against the background of transnational migration, multi-territorial belonging, and individual self-making, the article explains the crisscrossing morality of death, and how ambiguity is manifested in ritual organization, arguing that mortuary rites express as much controversy and failure as cohesion and closure.

Keywords

Suriname, death, mortuary rites, mourning, transnational migrants

There was still light on in the large wooden house, when I entered the gloomy premises after midnight. As most people in Paramaribo go to bed early, it appeared to be an alarming sign. Suddenly Nelly loomed up at the back door of the kitchen.¹ She leaned out of the door left ajar. ‘I have some very bad news,’ she called and paused for a while: ‘Lando has died.’ She came into the patio with tears in her eyes. He had only just arrived that afternoon. ‘To come and say goodbye,’ Nelly sobbed.

Orlando Theodoor Bakgast (a.k.a. Lando) was Nelly’s older brother. Like many Surinamese people he lived abroad. In the 1970s the young Lando had migrated to Canada to find work and a new home. Visits to his motherland were infrequent and short. This time, however, he had planned for a long stay. He would come to

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celebrate Independence Day, a major event. It was exactly 25 years ago that Suriname gained autonomy and its festive commemoration pulled Orlando, like other migrants, to *switi Sranan* (sweet Suriname) for an extended holiday. Moreover, he would bring his new wife Lynn to introduce her to his family and native country. Within a few years both Lynn and Orlando were to retire. Their stay was intended to feel out some places where they possibly could settle after retirement. But their visit took a tragic turn when Orlando dropped dead a few hours after his arrival.

At first glance Orlando's sudden death gives the impression of a sad and awful incident that is frequently associated with tragic or bad death. Initially, I also used these terms to describe the event of death. But as soon as the ritual organization set in motion, neither Lando's death nor the bereaved family's reactions could be understood in such a clear-cut manner. How tragic or bad was his death actually, and for whom? Relatives responded in different ways to the unexpected death, searching for explanations to make sense of the sudden loss and locate the death in an ongoing biography, that is, their *own* biographies (cf. Hallam et al., 1999: 14–15, 88–9, 95–6). The diversity of responses was reflected in the ways the bereaved relatives intended to organize the various ritual stages to pay their last respects, to separate Orlando from this world and guide him to another. Polyphony was found in their narratives and the cultural scripts by which they wanted to make his death good and express their grief. And, of course, there was the ethnographic Self, both witnessing and being part of this polyphonic process.

Let me consider briefly my position in the family and my role in the ritual bricolage that is analyzed in this article. I am very close to the Bakgast kin that occupies centre stage in the ethnographic narrative that is depicted below. When Orlando died, I had been living on the family's premises already for two years. And since then, I usually stay there during research periods in Paramaribo. The death in the family shocked me as much as it shocked Lando's relatives. But it also made me feel uncomfortable, as I chanced upon a perfect case at the survivors' expense. To cap it all, my inconvenience was enforced by tongue-in-cheek comments such as: 'You'll get done with your study in a great way!' Obviously, this is part and parcel of all participatory research: being moved through the 'dialectal spiral' (Rabinow, 1977: 79–80), adapting roles from 'complete observer' to 'complete participant' and vice versa (see Davies, 1999: 72–6) – and feeling awkward about it. Yet, because of my insider/outsider position, I got a very intimate view of the ways the bereaved family dealt with the sudden death and tried to reconcile diverging, and at times conflicting, demands, desires, expectations and aspirations.²

On the basis of an ethnographic analysis of the various interpretative frameworks and transitional rituals following Orlando's death, this article shows, then, how the at first sight tragic death of a Surinamese 'returnee' transformed into a multifaceted celebration as well as contestation – about the nature of the death, and what to represent and what to do. The article aims to discuss the spatial aspects of death, criticizing a place-centered understanding of the morality of death. The argument is made that mortuary rituals might be considered as important

homecoming and community-building events (e.g. Mazzucato et al., 2006; Olwig, 2009), but also as occasions that express controversy and failure, especially in a transnational context. It therefore seeks to critically assess death rituals as a 'sensuous arena' (Chesson in Olwig, 2009: 521), a 'complex mass of beliefs, emotions, and activities' (Cátedra, 1992: 348), and a space 'of social contestation [...] where heterogeneous and antagonistic cultural codes and social interests meet and tangle' (Serematakis, 1991: 115), pointing to the need to approach rites of passage as dynamic, sometimes disintegrating practices instead of mere manifestations and reinforcers of social ties and cultural values (cf. Gardner and Grillo, 2002; Suzuki, 2000).

Rituals talk

Anthropology has a long tradition in interpreting the ritual process that gradually separates the living from the dead and incorporates both into a new position, phase or place. It has developed a sophisticated grammar to conceptualize death, to examine how different people culturally respond to loss, and to comprehend the ambivalent attachment between the living and the dead. In understanding death as a ritual process of phased transitions, numerous anthropologists still follow the structural paths once cleared by Van Gennep (1960) and Hertz (1960) (see Robben, 2004: 9–10). Funerals especially as important constitutive ritual acts are a much-discussed topic of inquiry. They serve in current ethnographic studies evermore as guiding analytical frames for various cultural themes and are considered as valuable sites of ethnographic research.

Olwig (2009), for example, examines an African-Caribbean migrant community through the lens of a funeral ritual, arguing that African-Caribbean immigrants in Britain maintain the significance of their burial custom, which provides for a ritual context of community-building. But she also critiques the idea of continuity and cohesion: 'as Caribbean people settle abroad, the question arises whether these funerals will continue to be an important site of African-Caribbean community construction' (Olwig, 2009: 532). Other studies equally consider contemporary (transnational) funerals as significant occasions for reaffirming ties and even ultimate tests of belonging (e.g. Gardner, 2002; Geschiere, 2005; Jindra and Noret, 2011; Mazzucato et al., 2006). Yet these burials are not marked by maintenance or renewal of social cohesion only. Animosity, conflict and unrealistic expectations for conspicuous consumption may also be part of burial ceremonies and other mortuary rites (e.g. Geschiere, 2005).

In his classic essay 'Ritual and Social Change', Clifford Geertz (1957) already tried to show how rituals could be events that express both cohesion and conflict. Extending such argument, I suggest that particularly present-day transnational death rituals often express tension rather than contributing to solidarity and the restoration of the social fabric. Moreover, as the ethnographic narrative below will show, they are contentiously used in individual self-making and personal grief. As such, death rites talk about well-established concepts like community and

belonging as much as ‘they are stories people tell themselves about themselves,’ as again Geertz (in Danforth, 1982: 29) maintained. The death in the family presented here therefore demonstrates that mortuary rituals are a reflection of and upon social life, representing both continuity and temporality as well as personal, sometimes antagonistic, accounts of death itself – of its nature and cause, and the notion of what the ‘right’ thing to do might be.

As death is increasingly a site where investigations of transnationality, diasporas, belonging, individuality, ritual performance and commemoration come together, the analysis proposes a dynamic, reflexive look moving beyond rituals as static cultural events and self-contained practices for the sake of social solidarity. It shows that mortuary rituals cannot be reduced (anymore) to sheer ‘ritual therapy,’ communally recognized and experienced by ‘the entire group,’ as Rosemary and Gary Brana-Shute (1979: 79) once described the Creole complex of transitional rituals in their article ‘Death in the Family: Ritual Therapy in a Creole Community.’ Accordingly, the examination of this death in the family raises questions concerning the location of death as a major preoccupation, and what makes a death ‘good,’ ‘bad’ or ‘tragic,’ and for whom.

The good, the bad and sudden death

Despite anthropology’s obsessive concern for cultural variation in the conceptualization of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death, it is argued that the contemporary concept of good death unifies around a cross-cultural, nearly universal idea(l) of peacefulness, preparedness, awareness and acceptance (Counts and Counts, 2004; Howarth, 2007; Kwon, 2006; Long, 2004; Seale, 1998; Seale and Van der Geest, 2004; Serematakis, 1991; Van der Geest, 2004; Walter, 1994). Dying at home (preferably after a long and successful life, without pain or violence), surrounded by significant others, the ability to say one’s farewells to them, and being buried in one’s own land are generally considered important elements. Bad death is usually defined as the opposite of this ideal: a death that failed the final test of preparedness, that lacked warning and awareness of the impending death; a death that is characterized by images of dying alone, dying before one is old or dying away from home, relatives and friends.

Yet these conceptualizations do not imply fixed categories. Neither do they provide unambiguous explanations for why death must occur or clear notions of how bereaved individuals are expected to respond (Seale and Van der Geest, 2004; Van der Geest, 2004). As Orlando’s death illustrates, there is no clear-cut distinction between good and bad death. Rather, some people may regard as bad what others praise as good. Besides, ‘a bad death can produce a “good” (= well attended, dramatic) funeral and may thus be somewhat restored in retrospect’ (Van der Geest, 2004: 906). Particularly the tension between the idea(l) of prepared versus sudden death is problematic. Sudden death might be called a good death (i.e. death without pain and suffering; see e.g. Cátedra, 1992: 119ff.), but lacks awareness and preparation and may therefore not be good for those who stay behind

(Howarth, 2007: 155; Van der Geest, 2004: 909). Ideally it should take place when a person has completed the lifecycle. Thus even if sudden death shares some features of good death, it is also perceived as bad or tragic: a death out of time and place that creates disorder and chaos, disrupting both the individual and social biography. It may even result in disputes between relatives as to its nature and cause (Halam et al., 1999: 89, 98; Howarth, 2007: 160).

Generally it is argued that how one dies not only has a bearing on how one culminates one's biography, but also shapes the quality of grief of significant others. Death therefore only becomes good when it serves not only the needs of the dying but of survivors too. The morality of death, in other words, is somehow relative to the condition of the living, as Kwon (2006) puts it. Subsequently, to locate death satisfactorily in their own biographies survivors usually draw from multiple scripts, depending on the context or person(s) with whom they are dealing. Considering the issue of dying well, Long (2004: 914) argues that 'ordinary people rarely perceive that there is a single correct script to be followed.' Instead, they recognize 'multiple answers' and use 'cultural metaphors from a number of scripts simultaneously or consecutively.' Orlando's death raised numerous questions and gave rise to just as many answers: how sudden, bad or good was his death and for whom? According to some relatives 'he came to die at home.' So how tragic was his death in their interpretation and was it completely unexpected? On the other hand, did he really die 'at home' and what is the significance of dying 'at home' and being buried in one's 'own land' when a person has different homes and mourners are dispersed over the world?

As Kwon (2006) argues in his fascinating study of the massacres in southern central Vietnam, this death in the family – notwithstanding its totally different context – has to be understood against the background of both local understandings and global experiences, and thence situated within its *relative* spatiality. So although the conceptual polarity of death (good versus bad death) is, as many scholars suggest, related to the space of death and a proper place of burial, the morality of death is as much bound as unbound in space and time. The following sections show how this ambiguity is manifested in the ritual organization and negotiation, and how surviving relatives draw upon multiple, sometimes conflicting, ideas and explanations to construct a meaningful death and put an end to their sorrow.

The event of death

Lando's visit to Paramaribo was exceptional and festive. His entire Surinamese family had looked forward to his coming. Especially Orlando's mother, *frow* (Mrs.) Bak, was very excited. The 80-year-old lady had been busy making preparations for weeks. She cleared out the *dyari* (premises), polished the family's copper work carefully, and cleaned the entire house that she shared with her daughter Nelly, son-in-law Ruben and granddaughter Marisha. After arriving at the airport, Lando and his wife Lynn immediately headed for the parental home. It was a sweet

reunion: *frow* Bak holding her son in her arms. A few hours later she had to be informed that he was dead.

The tragedy took place on the premises of Orlando's aunt Es (mother's sister). On their way to the city centre, Orlando wanted to show Lynn the place where he was born and bred. They came round and Lando was given a warm welcome by his relatives, after which they gathered for a chat and a couple of drinks. All of a sudden Lando started to tremble and shake. A moment later, in the midst of kith and kin, he dropped dead. The lifeless body was brought to the hospital only to establish the cause of death: a heart attack. 'He could be stored in the morgue straight away,' one of his cousins muttered bitterly afterwards. Within a few hours the cheerful arrival had turned into a last farewell facing the Bakgast family with the delicate task to prepare a series of rituals that would serve the various participants involved.

In Suriname, death as a 'life-crisis event' carries a great deal of practical and symbolic weight, for it is at this moment that cultural values, religious orientations, social relations and interpersonal as well as internal conflicts may be expressed (cf. Gardner and Grillo, 2002). Generally, Creole mortuary rites are intended to aid the passage of both the dead and the living. The most significant symbolic purpose is to separate the living from the dead: to usher the deceased into *dedekondre* (land of the dead) and, in the opposite direction, direct the bereaved away from the deceased, incorporating them gradually into daily routine again. The rituals are further considered as an attempt to gather and comfort the mourners, and as an expression of respect (see also Van der Pijl, 2013). Although most people agree with this, the exact meaning depends on often highly personal principles and desires. Difficulties may arise when cultural and religious beliefs rub up against each other, especially when conflicting folk-religious *Winti* (*kulturu*) notions and Christian convictions come into play.³ Though Creole death culture is obviously syncretic, *kulturu*, Christian and secular orientations do not only mingle or coexist, they also clash. The Bakgast family surely is a case in point when it comes to these issues: immediately after Lando's body was transported to the morgue and relatives were summoned to the parental home, various beliefs, explanations and stories began to circulate, trying to convert Orlando's sudden death into a meaningful or at least understandable event.

At the house of mourning (storytelling): Making death good

The ritual preparations were set in motion with the gathering of Orlando's closest blood-kin present in Paramaribo. Orlando's sister Carla had to be called from Kwakoegron, an isolated village in the interior of Suriname. His brother Lionel, who stayed with his family in the rural district of Nickerie, had been contacted and was to arrive the following morning. Lando's sister Hetty was also informed that night. She lived in the Netherlands and had to arrange an airline ticket as soon as possible. The following day was spent contacting more persons and making international calls. Orlando's ex-wife in Canada had to be notified.

After divorcing Orlando, she raised their two children. The oldest daughter would attend the funeral. Lynn rang up friends and family members in Canada and Trinidad, her native country. In Trinidad her sister Dalia decided to support Lynn in the coming ritual duties and arrived two days later in Suriname. Within a few days, Orlando's death generated a considerable flow of people across borders (carrying money, goods and ideas), affecting both course and content of the rituals to be performed.

The returning son

At the house of mourning, arriving relatives, neighbors and friends attended *frow* Bak, who was telling of her son's death again and again. She gave full and often animated account of the events starting from the moment of Orlando's arrival the previous day. Central to her narrative was the part of the returning son. *Frow* Bak was convinced that Orlando had come, after all those years abroad, to die in his *switi Sranan*. The fact that he had gone to his mother immediately after his arrival at the airport reinforced the belief that her son not only 'had come to die,' but also to reunite with her before he passed away: '*e a gi mi wan laatste odi* [he gave me a last goodbye],' she repeatedly impressed on her listeners' minds. Although *frow* Bak sometimes sadly emphasized that a mother should not survive her child, the story of Orlando's final return and last farewell reconciled her with his death. Hence the place of his death in her biography was less tragic (mother survives son) than expected: after all, he was back in Suriname, 'back home.' *Frow* Bak's belief that it was predestined to happen this way made her story even stronger: it was '*met Gods wil* [by God's will].'

Other mourners shared her explanation. Most conversations turned to the nature and cause of Orlando's death. The fatality of the heart attack was interwoven with an omen that family members had seen (in retrospect, but also in dreams): their beloved Lando had been ready to come home and die, he had arranged all his affairs in Canada, brought his new wife to Suriname, said his good-byes to his mother, went to his place of birth and passed away. Orlando's sister Carla stated that he had 'completed his life cycle perfectly; he died where he was born.' Most relatives made his death good by emphasizing the 'lucky circumstances' among which his death had taken place, namely 'at home' so that he could be buried in his 'own land.' Although the death lacked warning, it was soon framed as peaceful and not totally out of time or place. 'At least he did not suffer,' one of Lando's cousins further mentioned. The cause of death was accepted quite readily, because of an absence of pain, and also an absence of awareness of dying (cf. Cátedra, 1992: 119) that was considered, contrary to the general picture in the literature, good. Moreover, Lando's death was regarded as peaceful, as violence, misfortune or supernatural forces did not cause it. He died a natural death and seemed in a way prepared as he had put his 'things in order,' supposing that he was at peace with his death (cf. Van der Geest, 2004: 906, 908).

But peacefulness of death ‘lies in the eyes – and interests – of the beholders’ (Van der Geest, 2004: 909). By constructing the last hours of Orlando’s life and searching for explanations to make his death understandable, relatives were not so much completing Lando’s biography, locating the death event in his life story, but rather creating a biographical continuity central to their own identity and knowledge of why Orlando died (cf. Howarth, 2007: 169–70). Herewith there was a remarkable emphasis on the ‘spatial aspect of death’ (Van der Geest, 2004: 909): even if Orlando had not died after a long life, still he had completed his life cycle as he died ‘at home,’ surrounded by relatives. But what about the ones who could not fall back on these scripts or did not share the same feelings and ideas about home and homeland? What about Lynn, for instance?

The loss of a husband

While Lynn was trying to face the events, reconstructing her last moments with Orlando, his death was already steeped in a social convention through the narrative construction of the returning son. The significance of home(coming) drove a wedge between Bakgast members and Lynn: ‘they reunite, they say, with their brother and son, but I lost him too! I lost my husband away from home,’ Lynn entrusted me in a moment of despair. According to her perception Orlando had died abroad, too young, without the company or notice of other significant persons, namely dear ones *not* from Surinamese soil. He would furthermore be buried in a country which she doubted was still his homeland, let alone hers.

Soon after Orlando’s death, it became clear that home is, despite its familiar connotation, not a self-evident category. It is therefore necessary to cautiously examine the spatial dimension of death and question the way in which notions of home and belonging are employed. From the perspective of transnational theory it is argued that home is a complicated, affectively rather than cognitively defined concept (Hedetoft and Hjort, 2002: vii) involving very distinctive meanings, often implying bi- or even multi-territorial dimensions (Hannerz in Hedetoft and Hjort, 2002: 218ff.) instead of ‘some [one] essentialized point on the map’ (Malkki, 1995: 509). Concerning the latter, we should realize that not only life but also death often includes more than one locality. This death in the family undeniably involved various locations, several homes and overlapping contexts of belonging, which makes a plain correlation between home, suggesting ‘the highest degree of peace’ (Van der Geest, 2004: 909), and the goodness of one’s death problematic.

At the house of mourning, nonetheless, the dominant story of ‘the returning son’ completely overshadowed ‘the loss of a husband’ that was central to Lynn’s narrative, biography and self-identity, which resulted in feelings of personal meaninglessness (cf. Howarth, 2007: 155, 169). The arrival of her sister from Trinidad did comfort her a bit. Dalia arrived in time to support Lynn in most of the rituals the family had planned, starting with the *dede oso* (wake) on the eve of Lando’s funeral.

Wake (performing): Negotiating between scripts

Dede oso means house of death and refers both to the house of mourning and the wakes that take place at this location. The *dede oso* formally starts at the night of death when close relatives gather at the (family) home of the deceased. Each day thereafter, until the end of the mourning period, family members, neighbors and friends come together at this place to pay their respects. Nelly, however, explicitly expressed the wish to minimize the number of these visits. Yet people did come. Every day and night after Lando's death dozens of mourners showed up to express their condolences. The way these wakes elapsed caused friction within the family.

Various members wanted more privacy, which at a more abstract level points to processes such as privatization of death and interiorization of mourning (cf. O'Rourke, 2007; Seale, 1998; Walter, 1994), while Nelly also worried about the expenses that passed on to her household. Others were discontented with mourners making a social event of a sad loss. Lionel expressed his inner struggle aloud. He felt that it was inappropriate to rejoice at his brother's death by facilitating notorious *dede oso alata*.⁴ At the same time he was convinced that 'the final return' had to be celebrated the way it was prescribed, namely by arranging '*wan èkte brokodei tot bam* [a real wake *bis am morgen*, till dawn]' on the eve of Orlando's funeral.⁵ Nelly in her turn utterly opposed such a ceremony. She demanded that the wake should be 'a fine and decent *singi neti* [night of singing]' lasting till midnight, 'having a *begi* [prayer] without too much *pranpran* [ritual noise].' Ultimately, even if there was no agreement, Nelly announced that the wake would finish at midnight.⁶ Slowly but surely a clash of opinions surfaced, which had to be negotiated time and again in the course of the ritual preparations and performances.

Voices of authority versus personal aspirations

The bereaved clearly differed in their beliefs about the way Orlando should be commemorated and how one ought to mourn. Some complied with prescribed *kulturu* traditions that a death should collectively be honored by means of a well-attended, lengthy and joyful wake, and thereupon a *bigi beri* (big, good funeral). These mourners relied on authoritative cultural voices (cf. Heelas, 1996: 7, 9), referring both to abstract notions as 'tradition' and concrete persons within the family and community, like the *bigisma* (respectable, older people) and *singiman* (song leaders) who came to ritually guide the wake. Others opted for a sober mourning gathering and private space to express personal grief. Their more idiosyncratic aspirations (cf. Heelas, 1996: 7) were inspired by sad notions of tragic death; an unwillingness to share the loss with 'vague others' (Hetty); a fear of Winti-associations; and a preference for non-*kulturu* scripts to commemorate Orlando.

Eventually, Orlando's *dede oso* came to a compromise in which diverging demands and desires coexisted, and ritual participants carefully chose from

various scripts. Nelly had invited, for instance, two well-known ministers of the Moravian Church who were expected to read the Scriptures and lead the singing of Christian hymns. They were accompanied by five *singiman* I had called in at the urgent request of Lionel. These singers were responsible for the *kulturu* performance of traditional *trowstu singi* (lamentations) and *anansi tori* (fable stories). Together with the clergy they functioned as the ritual leaders of the ceremony. Further, despite serious resistance, Aunt Es had erected a *kabra tafra* (spirit table) consisting of a sacrificial meal for the spirit of the deceased and the ancestors. ‘*Tante e wani, a ben regel a sani dati* [Auntie wants it, she’s arranged this thing],’ was the somewhat stealthy explanation. The table was put at the very back of the premises, out of sight of the visitors of the *dede oso*.

While it can be reasonably argued that the wake was a typical Creole *dede oso* expressing family ties, celebrating traditional values and honoring the deceased, the mourners harbored totally different feelings, even struggling to identify with the ‘whole event’ (Hetty). Prescriptive *kulturu* codes and moral obligations (rituals for the dead) failed to meet private needs (rituals for the living). Carla for example had loathed the crowd on the premises (over a hundred people) showing loudly its enthusiasm for the *trowstu singi*. Unlike Lionel and Aunt Es, who openly supported this ‘tribute to Lando,’ she and her sisters had not appreciated the *dyugudygu* (hullabaloo) in which the wake became ‘depraved,’ to use Hetty’s word. They had instead preferred a straight Christian performance, *kerki begi nanga singi* (church prayer and hymns), and more room for personal consolation. Dalia and Lynn had great difficulties in fitting in with either *kulturu* or Christian scripts. Lynn silently accepted the given liturgy and rituals, hoping that ‘everything would be over soon,’ so that she could organize her memorial service for Orlando ‘back home in Toronto.’

The controversies were fuelled further by the competition among family members with different backgrounds and spending capacities for control over the organization of separation rituals and funeral funds. Fissures erupted inevitably when overseas relatives were faced with an increasing pressure to spend money and to concede to certain ritual duties and expectations (cf. Geschiere, 2005; Jindra and Noret, 2011).

Separation (consuming): Bad death producing a good farewell

The morning after the *dede oso* the principal mourners gathered at the morgue of one of the main hospitals of Paramaribo to *teki afscheid* (take leave). Aunt Es awaited the bereaved family. Together with six *dinari* (ritual specialists) she washed the corpse with special herbal essences and rum, and guided the mourners in the *prati* (ritual parting). Relatives, supported by the *dinari* chanting *trowstu singi*, had their last words with Orlando. This tense moment was intensified by the pressing words of the *gran brada* (grand brother, head of the *dinari*): ‘*A dede so takru, so pran, unu mus’ mek’ en bun . . . makandra!* [This death, so bad, so tough, you have to make it good . . . together!]’

The family had brought farewell presents, like fine embroidered handkerchiefs, some of Orlando's personal belongings, clothes and bed linen that would be buried with him. Lynn put a special piece of blue-black cloth in the coffin that was placed close to Orlando's body. Earlier that day she was said to have used it to wipe her armpits and genitals. The cloth with Lynn's smell was thought to be a way of tricking Orlando's *yorka* (spirit) into believing that his wife was still with him, preventing troubles in the future (e.g. Lynn being haunted by Lando's spirit wanting to have sex with her). 'To protect herself,' Lynn was also instructed to wear a piece of cloth in her underwear for six weeks, the period after which the *yorka* definitively leaves for *dedekondre*. Although Lynn received some vague instructions, nobody explained the reasons behind it. I had to inform her about the use of this particular custom and other *kulturu sani*.⁷ My explanation caused great hilarity, but little by little Lynn and her sister showed aversion too, and even found it a bit scary. Their Trinidadian Baptist background told them not to interfere with 'that Voodoo stuff,' as Dalia called it. 'Out of respect,' however, Lynn decided to comply with 'the family's wishes.'

So far I have argued that there seems to be either coexistence or clash between different desires and scripts. However, tacit resignation and trade-off are, at particular stages of the ritual process, part of the dynamics too. Since liminal phases are known for their insecure and even dangerous conditions, surviving relatives do not always pursue their own needs. They rather concede to customary rules and unacceptable claims to avoid disputes. As illustrated above, in Creole *kulturu* it is considered of utmost importance to prevent tensions among relatives during separation, while conflict might lead to a disrupted departing of the deceased causing future (spiritual or worldly) problems within the family. Relatives from abroad may experience extra dilemmas and pressure. Hetty and her husband were, for instance, skeptical about the importance of a '*traditioneel afscheid*' (traditional leave-taking), refusing to fund lavish ritual spendings. Nevertheless, they were expected to donate. In terms of financing the funeral they ended up covering most of the costs. 'They think we have well-paying jobs over there in *P'tata* [the Netherlands] and thus the money. I don't want any problems, whatsoever, so we paid,' Hetty explained regarding her large contribution. The latter points to a growing trend that migrants are often the main financers of transnational funerals, bearing huge economic burdens (Arhin, 1994; De Witte, 2003; Gardner, 2002; Mazzucato et al., 2006; Nieuwenhuys, 2004).

A transnational funeral

Orlando would be buried at Marius Rust, the cemetery of the Moravian Church. Although this burial ground has its own chapel, the memorial service was held in the auditorium of the nearby university hospital as some family members thought this place was more sophisticated. Just like the *dede oso*, the performance of Orlando's burial and the service prior to it was the result of delicate negotiation, in which ritual participants searched for a balance between 'decency and style'

(Nelly), a 'respectable modern funeral without *babari* [noisy song and dance]' (Hetty and Carla), and '*wan èkte traditonele bigi beri* [a real traditional big funeral]' with all *kulturu* frills possible (Lionel).

The deliberate choice for the classy auditorium, highly appreciated by Lynn and Hetty, instead of the plain cemetery chapel was just one expression of this search. Lionel, supported by Aunt Es, had made some productive negotiations. He arranged a detour for the funeral procession so that Orlando could be driven past particular spots, like his birthplace, parental home and once favorite *winkel* (drinking-shop), to take leave and, according to some people, prevent his spirit from returning. Not all mourners were convinced of the need of this roundabout route, but they could do nothing but follow. Furthermore, Lionel had organized a *bazuinkoor* (a group of brass players) that escorted the *dragiman* (pallbearers) who marched and 'danced' Lando to his final resting-place, a pricy *kelder* (tiled tomb).⁸ Many mourners appreciated the pallbearers' dramatic action and participated, but especially close kin, some feeling embarrassed with the situation, stayed on the sidelines awaiting patiently 'the show.'

Apparently, the parting included typical elements of a 'traditional' Creole farewell. At the same time 'modern' aspects were cautiously negotiated and incorporated. According to the general opinion, the Bakgast family produced a good and 'unforgettable' farewell, not being devoid of hints of conspicuous consumption. Burying Orlando with grandeur through a careful balance of material and symbolic consumption contributed to the status of both the deceased and the bereaved family (cf. Bonsu and Belk, 2003; Bonsu and DeBerry-Spence, 2008). Yet the 'big funeral' also met with disapproval. According to some of the mourners, it was not meant to express grief but rather to show off (cf. Van der Geest, 2000). Such criticism can be related to the well-rehearsed argument that families, especially families with overseas relatives, often spend more money on funerals of the dead than they do on care for the living. In his research on funerals in Ghana, Sjaak van der Geest even argues that '[t]he person and life of the deceased are of secondary importance' (Van der Geest 2000: 123). His observation concurs with my research findings (see Van der Pijl, 2010, 2012) and helps one to understand the cynicism of various persons present at Orlando's funeral disapproving of the 'showing off' and the 'success' of the burial.

This success, then, was largely enabled by funds of migrants (abroad). Through financing the 'traditional' parting they fulfilled their ritual duties, simultaneously displaying their social status and in some cases their 'modernity' (cf. Salih, 2002). However, their contribution did not *a priori* imply that they would continue to remit or remain involved, as Mazzucato et al. (2006) and others suggest. Although funerals, like other rites of passage, might function as important homecoming or homemaking events (e.g. Al Ali, 2002; Mazzucato et al., 2006; Olwig, 2002), again we must question whose home is at stake and what home means for the various participants. Many family members residing in Suriname considered – one way or another – 'a good funeral at home' of great importance. Relatives overseas invested in the ceremony, yet harbored different feelings about this taken-for-granted home.

They had no bond with Suriname (anymore) and were not interested in tightening ties. They also questioned Orlando's feelings of belonging. He had left Paramaribo 30 years earlier and, despite his intentions to return, he considered himself Canadian, a 'true Torontonionian' too. Plans to move after retirement were not exclusively directed toward Suriname. Toronto would remain the home base of Orlando and Lynn (since they had their respective children there); besides, they intended to spend part of their old age in Trinidad as well – so was Orlando really homeward bound?

The transitional rituals clearly demonstrate how social obligation, collective representation and prideful public display easily conflict with individuality, personal beliefs, desires and expressions. Besides the spatial dimensions and issues of belonging mentioned above, the negotiation of which aspects of meaning to project and which to restrain in death ritual consumption furthermore relates to particular views about bereavement and commemoration. Regarding the latter, it is argued that attempts to bring order to 'the emotional chaos of grief' (Holst-Warhaft, 2000: 18) only succeed if there is some shared understanding of the scripts and rituals to be followed. This became most tangible in the final phase of the ritual process, its closure.

Purification and closure (returning to normalcy): But for whom?

A week after the funeral a second *dede oso* gathering was planned: the *aitidei* (eighth day). Traditionally, this ceremony marks the passage of the deceased to *dedekondre* and – as a counterpart – the closure of the intense mourning period (*zware rouw*) for the living. Such a view, however, easily overlooks whose closure is in question or whether the transition rituals simultaneously reflect each mourner's need and grief (cf. Straight, 2010: 134ff.). From a classic perspective 'mourning rituals are not intended as an arena for the open expression of grief but, rather, as a means of controlling its expression' (O'Rourke, 2007: 397). The ceremony organized after Orlando's burial certainly aimed for control, shaping passions, and with this closure. But in so doing, ironically, it turned out to be a failure.

On the eve of the ceremony the family had planned, in private, a *wasi prati* (wash-separate), a ritual bathing that aims at purifying the 'heavy mourners' and separating them from the deceased. The *wasi* was in command of a cousin 'who knows things.'⁹ On the premises of the parental home, he washed Orlando's closest relatives, dressed only in a *pangi* (wrap-around cloth; loincloth), with a solution of *w'wiri watra* (herbal water). By spewing swigs of rum over the ritual participants, he urged Lando's *yorka* to let go of his beloved ones. The same ritual had to be repeated the next morning, after which the separation could be made and the intense mourning could be closed by the *aitidei* ceremony. This second *wasi*, however, failed in its effects: Lionel was, to his own frustration, not able to partake; Hetty refused to participate any longer, because of her aversion

to ‘that hocus pocus;’ Lynn, horror-stricken by the first *wasi*, left her ritual duty to her sister Dalia. As a result, the coming *aitidei* took place in an already tense atmosphere.

Usually the *aitidei* has the same content and course as the wake preceding the funeral, except for a greater inclusion of entertaining elements, like the telling of jokes and fables, in order to amuse both the living and the dead. The Brana-Shutes (1979: 74) therefore named the *aitidei* of all rituals ‘the most therapeutic communally.’ Despite present efforts to detraditionalize or privatize *dede oso* gatherings, the *aitidei* is still known for its high spirits, long duration and large number of participants. Increasingly, families even minimize the liminal period and compress the various ritual stages (cf. Suzuki, 2000), so that relatives from abroad are able to attend this closure before they leave the country. Nelly and Carla decided, however, to organize their closure as a sober performance, led by Carla’s devout daughter Ruth, without any *grappenmakerij* (drollery), *dyugudyugu singi* (songs causing sensation) or obvious Winti innuendos. Since Lionel already had left Paramaribo, the sisters were not obstructed in their desire this time.

Prior to the concluding *aitidei* Lando’s surviving relatives attended a memorial service in their neighborhood church, whereupon some 30 people joined them in the closing ritual at the house of mourning. At that place, some visitors started typical *trowstu singi*, but without the participation of *singiman* these initiatives failed. *Bigisma* complained about the impassive atmosphere, which was, according to Aunt Es, ‘*te stichtelijk* [too devout], not inspiring the people nor amusing the dead!’ Despite requests for ‘real’ lamentations, Carla’s daughter promptly brought the evening, at a very early stage, to an end, concluding with a stiff Lord’s Prayer. Carla and Nelly were relieved: ‘We had our *begi* [prayers].’ However, they had also noticed the discomfort of the mourners present (and maybe the ancestral spirits?) and dreaded, therefore, possible future problems within the family.

Hence, this final ceremony might have served as a mechanism of transition for some, but obviously not for all participants (dead or alive) involved. Both cohesion and restoration of normalcy – considered as important elements – were hampered. Hetty’s frustration about the so-called closure speaks volumes: ‘I’m finished with this make-believe! I’ll go back to Holland with my sorrow.’ Lynn found some comfort in church, but explained afterwards: ‘I felt lonely, it’s not over, it is just beginning.’ Clearly, the *aitidei* as a culturally prescribed mourning ritual had not been open for the expression of personal emotions. Nor was the ceremony successful in its supposed aim of communal (‘therapeutic’) closure. It did show unintentionally that mortuary rituals, especially within a heterogeneous and antagonistic context, are vulnerable to failure too, ‘not just order and closure’ (Straight, 2010: 128; cf. Huntington and Metcalf, 1991: 6; Kwon, 2006: 16). Nonetheless, formally the *aitidei* had brought things to an end: ‘*A kaba* [It’s over]... *no siksiwiki* [not a sixth week],’ Nelly sighed when she had changed her mourning clothes.¹⁰ The next day Lynn and Dalia would return home, respectively to Canada and Trinidad, and Hetty would soon leave for the Netherlands; life was to return to ‘normal’ again.

A kaba? Aftermath

The following morning Lynn and Dalia were brought to the airport. They had been part of a ritual process succeeding the 'crisis' that Orlando's sudden death had caused. Now, according to Creole custom, there ought to be a reestablishment of normalcy: Lando was buried in 'his homeland' and incorporated into the world of the dead; the bereaved could return to everyday life and social routine. The mourning period had come to closure, life was going on: *A kaba*, as some ritual participants declared in conclusion, using the lyrics of a popular *trowstu singi*. But was it really over?

Hetty went back to Amsterdam with mixed feelings: 'I'll certainly have some problems picking up daily life.' Other relatives and friends abroad organized small commemorative get-togethers. Certainly, the final rituals did not mark closure for Lynn. There would be another memorial service 'back home in Toronto, *his* home too!', Lynn had stressed several times. Most of the transitional rituals had not comforted or helped her to bear her new identity as a widow. On the contrary, some ideas and practices had been extremely frustrating, even alienating and scary. The first thing Lynn did when she went through customs, she told me later by telephone, was to free herself from the 'spooky cloth' she had put in her underwear. 'Get rid of the Voodoo stuff as soon as possible,' her sister had advised her in a laughing though decisive way.

'In making sense of loss, mourners need to memorialize the deceased for their own sake,' Lohmann (in Straight, 2010: 138) asserts. In Suriname, obviously, Lynn had experienced little space to control the ritual process, its memorialization practices, and thus her relation to the loss. In Toronto she finally found room for grief and 'memory management' (see Straight, 2010: 138). Back home she was, furthermore, surrounded by reminders like photographs, clothing and personal belongings, which she cherished in order to *continue* her bond with Orlando. Much later, Lynn chose to give up particular mementos and thereby to lessen her attachment to Orlando. Although she could not control the way Orlando was taken away from her, she could control the way she separated from the material objects that were associated with him (cf. Miller and Parrott, 2009). Well over a year after Orlando's death, Lynn sent (after several requests) a huge parcel to the Bakgast family 'with most of his clothes, et cetera and whatever could fit in,' she wrote to me in a letter, followed by the bitter words: 'They never called until about a month after they had received [it].' It happened that also in the aftermath of Orlando's death relationships remained sensitive. Despite earlier intentions, now, Lynn wrote, 'I decided not to go to Suriname – and I do not think that I will ever go again.'

Coda

In causing both social rupture and personal shock, death demands a response that provides for cohesion, restoration or relief, but it may easily occasion social cleavage, friction and failure too (Huntington and Metcalf, 1991; Kwon, 2006;

Straight, 2010). Although structuralism as well as functionalism is not very fashionable anymore, it appears that certain people (including scholars) do comprehend mortuary rituals as necessary in some sense to restore order after disruption, and expect rituals to express and reinforce communal ties and cultural values. The rituals and ceremonies described in this article, obviously, served for various bereaved as mechanisms of transition, and vehicles of restoration and closure. I concur therefore with Robben (2004) and others that classic approaches of rites of passage are still fruitful and, following Miller and Parrott (2009: 503), I suggest that functionalism in some way might be 'regarded as an *observable response* to loss' (emphasis added). The latter explicitly leaves room for the dynamic nature and contentiousness of mortuary rituals, referring to a reaction or desire of *particular* participants rather than an all-embracing Durkheimian theory.

Stressing the significance of rites of passage as a useful analytical framework and relevant site of ethnographic research (cf. Olwig, 2009), we must understand, however, that the function of mortuary rituals cannot simply be reduced to 'ritual therapy' for the sake of solidarity in bounded social groups. The context of a 'rich, vital and extremely effective Creole culture,' as portrayed by Brana-Shute and Brana-Shute (1979: 79), in which people know what to do when someone dies, may continue to offer various (retraditionalized) means for repairing the social fabric after a death, but it cannot hold its thesis of familiarity anymore. On the contrary, in the absence of a tight-knit socio-cultural collective where mortuary rituals are conventional and more or less unchallenged, survivors constantly have to reassess, reinvent and negotiate attitudes toward death, mourning and grief (cf. Holst-Warhaft, 2000: 10), at which some bereaved are rather 'willing to let the fabric unravel or are cut from another cloth altogether' (O'Rourke, 2007: 396). Especially when people settle abroad, and contexts of life and death include more than one locality, questions arise whether transitional rituals continue to function as self-evident bearers of meaning, important sites of cultural construction or belonging, and homecoming events drawing people closer together and (re)producing solidarities, as numerous studies on transnational migration suggest.

To focus attention on these questions we should expand the kind of constitutive approach Fabian (1972), Danforth (1982) and Robben (2004) respectively called for, preventing us from a persevering parochialization of death and engaging more with multiple, crisscrossing modes, scripts and tellings. I therefore elaborated an approach that focuses on varying interpretive frameworks of death, and analyzed how these are manifested in the ritual organization. The ethnographic analysis of the death in the family reported here showed that within a glocalised ritual setting the morality of death, and especially its place-centered understanding, is highly ambiguous, affecting the separation from and commemoration of the deceased. Orlando's sudden death was both praised as good (at home, surrounded by loved ones) and regarded as bad (out of place and time), which makes the conceptual polarity of death problematic. Consequently, against the background of transnational migration, multi-territorial belonging, diverging cultural understandings

and individual self-making, the morality and spatiality of death are relative to the various conditions and ideas of the ritual participants involved – whether dead or alive.

Therefore, as a corrective to the conceptual polarization of death modes, and the sometimes limited focus on death rituals as mere occasions for reaffirming ties, belonging and restoration, we have to approach death as a multifaceted accumulation of (personal) grievings, beliefs and practices, and mortuary rituals as a sensuous arena of negotiation in which ‘uniformity has been replaced by eclecticism and public agreement has been replaced by contentiousness’ (O’Rourke, 2007: 388). This shows how rituals can be events that express controversy and conflict as much as cohesion and relief. Furthermore, it calls attention to the fact that we should not overlook the uncertainty of outcomes (cf. Huntington and Metcalf, 1991: 6). The examination of Orlando’s death proves that mortuary rituals cannot be reduced to simple instruments of order and control. Nor do they necessarily coincide with personal processes of grieving. It is apparent that while the performance of death rites might be relieving for some, it may be of no help for others – only another burden to bear.

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Notes

1. Please note that all personal names are pseudonyms.
2. Soon after Lando’s death, I started to act as Lynn’s interpreter – not only because of my command of the English language, but because of my knowledge of Creole death culture and, in particular, *kulturu sani* (cultural stuff). In the course of the ritual process Nelly,

being Lynn's hostess and one of the most important ritual participants, even made me instruct and guide Lynn concerning 'her ritual duties.' Slowly but surely it became clear, especially in cases of taboo-subjects, that Nelly and other family members felt too uncomfortable and even ashamed to instruct Lynn themselves. I turned out to be the ideal 'innocent anthropologist': besides instructing Lynn, I was asked to *regel* (arrange) ritual specialists from my network to participate and help in the different stages of ritual parting. It appeared to be the perfect way to mute delicate matters within the family, and safeguard particular family members from much feared prejudices and insinuations within the Creole community. At the same time, it defined both the openings and boundaries of my field, 'a place both proximate and intimate [...] as well as forever distant and unknowably "other"', as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1993: xii) so rightly puts it. Hence, my roles and mediations must be taken into account in the reading of this death in the family – a death drawing upon multiple stories and understandings, including mine.

3. Winti is the African-Surinamese folk religion stemming from different West African, indigenous, and Christian beliefs and practices. Winti has, comparable to other African-Caribbean religions, strong magical aspects in which spirit possession and ancestral worship play a central role. It also refers to a cultural lifestyle, worldview and traditional cure, and is then usually called *kulturu* (culture), a rather euphemistic term.
4. *Dede oso alata* (rats attending a wake, profiteers) refer to mourners who only come to eat, drink and feast.
5. *Brokodei* (daybreak) refers to wakes that last till six o'clock in the morning, and is often associated with Winti beliefs in (ancestral) spirits.
6. Nelly appeared to be the most decisive member of the family. She used my laptop to write and print the death announcement, including dates and times, which she personally brought to the radio station that broadcasted three times a day Orlando's death, time and place of burial and the preceding wake. Note the difference in choice of words: Nelly carefully chose the neutral term *singi neti* instead of *dede oso* or *brokodei* to avoid associations with 'heathen' Winti practices.
7. *Kulturu sani* (cultural things) usually refers to Winti practices. It became clear that the Bakgast members felt too uncomfortable, even ashamed, to instruct Merlyn. They made all the arrangements without really consulting her, leaving the explanations concerning her 'ritual duties' to me.
8. Creole *dragiman* do not simply carry the coffin – they march, following the *kripsis* (fore-runner) who beats time. Often under musical guidance of brass players, they make jerky steps sideways and backward while their tempo alternately accelerates and slows down. They sometimes stop abruptly, marking their steps at one spot. Some people claim that this 'dancing' is intentionally practiced by the *dragiman* to 'confuse' the spirit of the deceased or 'just for the show.' Others believe that the spirit causes the movements, indicating where he likes to stay or move away.
9. 'To know things' (*sabi sani*) is a euphemistic reference to *duman* (ritual specialists) who guide Winti rituals and have healing powers by 'working with spirits,' using magical forces and medicinal herbs.
10. Traditionally, a *sikswiki* (sixth week) ceremony follows the *aitidei*. It is then believed that the spirit of the deceased fully incorporates into *dedekondre* six weeks after the funeral. A year after the burial a final gathering may take place to close the mourning period 'for good.' The Bakgast family, however, fits in with the current trend to shorten the liminal period and close mourning eight days after burying the deceased.

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